

# Tragedy of the "Absurd Hero"

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*"Finished Sisyphus. Three absurd completed. The beginning of freedom"*

A. Camus

**Abstract**—The article analyzes the phenomenon of loneliness in the novel by A. Camus "The Stranger" and in the essay "The Myth of Sisyphus". The authors focus on comparing the reality of the absurdity and the absurdity of reality, arguing that, following Caligula and Patrice, both the protagonist "The Stranger" and Sisyphus not only follow the commandments of the absurd, but also come to the same conclusions — "rebellion" against the truth, "freedom" in relation to the existing "general rules" and "passion" in the love of human life.

**Keywords**—loneliness; absurdity; sense of absurdity; myth; reality; freedom; rebellion; rebellious person; happiness; "illness of the century"

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1939-1940 A. Camus completes the first stage of his creative career, working simultaneously on "Caligula", "The Stranger", "The Myth of Sisyphus" and "Misunderstanding". In the words of the philosopher, this is the "first part" or "the cycle of the absurd," in which the truth of the absurd consists for him in a clear awareness of the tragedy of the human lot. "People dye and they are unhappy," is the truth that Caligula discovers for himself. For young A. Camus, living in truth means living absurd. However, from his point of view, the absurd is not in man, not in the world, but in the aloofness of relations between them, in the clash of the seeker of meaning and happiness, seeking to "understand" the world around him with the silent and irrational wall surrounding him.

"Disease of the Century" is a feeling of absurdity, the hero of "The Stranger" Meursault suffers from it. Far from any philosophy, he nonetheless professes the sending of the Myth of Sisyphus. Following Caligula and Patrice, he not only follows the commandments of the absurd, but also comes to the same conclusions — "rebellion" against untruth, "freedom" in relation to the existing "general rules", and "passion" in love for human life. Unlike their fellow absurdist, Meursault is a "quiet" and "benevolent" person, but he also carries the same pride of rebellion.

## II. "THE STRANGER" IS NOT A REALITY, NOT A FANTASY, BUT A MYTH

At the beginning of his creative career, A. Camus chose his mythopoetic vision of reality. That is why he stresses that "The Stranger" is not a reality, not a fantasy, but a myth. In our opinion, the main difficulty of this work is the presence of two plans in it. On the one hand, the author seeks to show the face-to-face collision of an "ordinary person" with his destiny, from which there is no defense, this is the metaphysical layer of the novelette. On the other hand, while testing the generally accepted values with his negativism, the hero condemns the external lies with his inner truth — and this is already a social plane. This duality is noted by A. Camus himself when he begins work on the "Plague" [1]. He strives to ensure that the energy of the Mediterranean myth feeds his work with a huge primordial poetry of clarity, simplicity and courage, in which absurdity acts simultaneously as a social and metaphysical feeling. The myth of the Algerian as a carrier of absurd truth, included by the philosopher in the situation of everyday life, becomes the usual world view of many people of his generation.

In The Stranger, the author seeks to give the hero's history the universal character of the myth, in which life was originally marked by the seal of the absurd. The reality here is rather a metaphor, necessary for the disclosure of the maximum "bareness" of Meursault, it is given by the hero and is revealed solely through its "negative truth".

The life of a young hero flows quietly and mechanically measured off on the urban outskirts of Algeria. The empty and monotonous service of the small clerk in the office is interrupted by the joy of his returning to the colors of the evening southern sky or to the beaches flooded with sunlight. Under the pen of A. Camus, life is presented here with its "wrong side" and its "face"; it "breathes" with the same double rhythm as its early essay. The very name of the hero Meursault combines two opposing entities of "death" and "sun". The tragedy of the human lot, consisting of joy and pain, here covers the entire life of the hero with the unrelenting law.

Meursault does not require much from life, in his own way he is even happy. Following the rules of the street code

of morality, he agrees with his simple life and sees no reason to change it when the owner invites him to think about a career in Paris. In Paris, Meursault has already been. "Dirty. Lots of pigeons, lots of backyards. All people are pale." [2] He does not have the slightest ambition and no hope, because he is confident that life will not change. This or that life, in the end, is equivalent. True, it was not always. After all, at one time, at the beginning of his life, as a student, Meursault, like all his peers, makes plans for the future, but circumstances force him to quit learning. As a result, he very quickly realizes that, in essence, all his dreams have no meaning and sinks into the abyss of indifference, turning away from what he previously thought was important and meaningful. It can be assumed that the personal experience of A. Camus himself, who also had to leave school, give up hope, and, for the first time feeling the horror of death, having heard the verdict of the doctors, played a role here. Not by chance, the original author calls his book "Indifferent" (*L'Indifférent*).

Probably, it is here that the reason for the striking insensitivity of Meursault and the secret of his strangeness must be sought. However, A. Camus is silent about this. And only on the last pages of the novel, in the key scene, when taken out of himself by the priest's harassment, the hero frantically shouts the words of his faith in the face to the church minister: "I was right, I am right now, I have always been right. I lived like this, and could live differently. Did that and did not do it. So what? It was as if I lived in anticipation of that minute of pale dawn, when my truth would be revealed. Everything is all the same, everything does not matter, and I knew perfectly well why. He knows too. From the abyss of my future, throughout my absurd life, the breath of darkness rose in me through the years that had not yet come, it equalized everything in its path, everything that was available to my life — such an unreal, such an illusory life" [3]. So, the secret of Meursault is revealed: at the heart of its truth lies death, an irresistible and senseless fact.

Meursault embodies in "The Stranger" what F. M. Dostoevsky calls "indifferentism to the highest idea of human existence", i.e. to joint belief in the immortality of the human soul. The secret of the "indifferentism" of the hero A. Camus is concluded in the conclusions made by him at the time of the realization of finiteness and the absurdity of life. He wants to just be, to live and feel today, here on earth. He wants to live in the "eternal present", as, according to A. Camus, lives "idiot", Prince Myshkin. Morality, ideas, work, creativity, in a word, everything that connects a person to other people, for Meursault, meaningless and discounted. Because in a social environment a person unconsciously or consciously puts on a mask that disfigures his nature and, ultimately, prevents him from living [4]. In *The Stranger*, the philosopher continues on the path of "undressing" the personality. His hero can be saved if he extinguishes consciousness, ceases to be aware of himself and breaks the formal connection with others. Meursault chooses detachment, separated from society, and he becomes a "stranger." The author makes his hero not to understand the significance of the conventions on which public and private

life rests, to forget about the rules by which the existence of people is arranged, as if they do not exist either for him or for those around him. It seems that his mind is covered with a light mist, and already on the first pages of the novel there is a feeling that the main character is either half asleep or he is mentally underdeveloped. The reception of E. Husserl's phenomenological reduction helps A. Camus to create, in the words of R. Barth, a hero with a "zero degree" of consciousness that does not exist in real life [5]. At the same time, the author himself "hides" behind his character, leading the story from the first person, and at the same time he is paradoxically impersonal. The philosopher consciously supports the emerging impression of a gap between the hero and his life, "between the actor and the scenery," since it is this that conveys to the reader a sense of absurdity.

Throughout the novel, we observe the events of the hero's life as if through glass, which, according to the apt remark of J.-P. Sartre, is the consciousness of Meursault himself. We see what gets in the field of view of the hero, whose consciousness almost without any selection automatically registers a string of impressions. As a result, we get a "torn" story, in which there are only external and superficial facts that create a certain "atmosphere". The ability to create a similar atmosphere A. Camus, apparently, develops through theatrical practice. The inherent remoteness of the theater leads him to an understanding of the need to think over and prepare everything necessary for its creation, replacing the analysis with movement, and using distance to create the desired impression.

Despite the fact that the word "absurd" itself appears in the novel only at the end of the last chapter, the atmosphere of the absurd surrounds the reader from the very beginning of "The Stranger", without ceasing to gather over the whole story. Thus, the formal text of a telegram from a shelter causes bewilderment to the hero, he does not quite understand, does not know how his mother died. Therefore, the sad news and detachment with which it is perceived by Meursault create a gap that inspires a sense of absurdity. The owner gives him a two-day vacation, without hiding his displeasure, since he does not notice any signs of mourning in the suit of the subordinate. And if there is no mourning, then there seems to be no death either. Meursault apologizes, although he is not here to blame. Everything will fall into place after the funeral - then "everything will be over and will take an official character" [6]. Again, we see a gap between the natural feeling of compassion, which is quite appropriate under such circumstances, and completely devoid of its bureaucratic politeness.

Arriving at the shelter, Meursault again does not understand the need to follow the established ritual. Being very tired, he wants to see his mother immediately. "But the caretaker said that I should first see the director. I had to wait a bit, the director was busy. All this time, the watchman occupied me with chatter..." [7]. The hero vaguely feels that he is being condemned for the fact that his mother was in an almshouse. He tries to explain to the director why this happened, but he, "looking in some folder", gives the necessary explanations to Meursault: "You could not contain

her. She needed a nurse. And you get a modest salary. In the end, she lived well with us.” [8]

Everything seems to be correct, but personal data do not reveal the entire depth of the drama that has happened, which we can only guess. This is the drama of hopeless poverty, aging and loneliness. “When mom was at home,” Meursault recalls, “she was silent for days on end, just watching my every move” [9]. And although throughout her life, Meursault had never thought about religion, the director orders her burial according to church ordinance.

### III. MEURSAULT AS A MAN OF ABSURD

In “The Myth of Sisyphus”, listing the signs of a sense of absurdity, the philosopher notes: “People are also a source of non-human. In the few hours of mental clarity, the mechanical actions of people, their senseless pantomime, are evident in all their stupidity. The person is talking on the phone behind a glass partition; it is not audible, but meaningless mimicry is visible. The question arises: why does he live?” [10] The proximity of the mechanical and comic even more strongly underlines the alienation of the “The Stranger” hero from The Stranger world.

In the second part of the novel, the stylistic and spectacular irony acquires an even sharper expression. So, once in a bistro near Celeste, the hero dines next to the “female automaton”, which mechanically absorbs food and at the same time, with the detachment of the clockwork doll, emphasizes the program of radio programs. The grotesque of these manipulations stuns Meursault, who refuses to understand such automatism. It is not by chance that in the future the “female automaton” will take its place among the spectators in the court, where the servants of the law will also soullessly repeat the stamps they have learned.

However, Meursault’s detachment is selective. If his consciousness does not perceive social rituals, then in relation to nature it is completely open. Meursault looks at the world around him through the eyes of a poet, subtly perceiving colors, sounds and smells. He is exquisitely accurate in the choice of words that convey his feelings. The state of his hero A. Camus conveys through the game of light, landscape, a separate part of The Stranger world. Intending to hold his mother on her last journey, Meursault eagerly examines the morning landscape: “I looked at the landscape around. I have seen rows of cypresses rising to the sky above the hills, a copper and green valley scattered in it, clearly visible houses — and I have understood my mother. In the evening, this picture, maybe, must evoke a feeling of quiet sadness and peace.” [11] Landscape mysteriously binds mother and son and he understands the mother's affection for favorite places to walk. Nature establishes a relationship between people that inexplicably disappears in everyday life.

The day after the funeral Meursault goes to the port, to swim. There, “in the water” he meets Marie. They swim together, and then rest, lying on the float. “Before my eyes, I had sky, blue and golden expanse. With my head, I felt Marie breathe, how her stomach slowly rose and fell. For a long time we lay like this, half asleep” [12]. Marie, part of the nature that “entered” in Meursault; between them there is

no barrier, they both are rocked by the sea, and they are dozing under a cloudless sky. Soon Marie will ask if Meursault loves her? He will answer that “words have no meaning, but it seems that he has no love for her” [13]. The word “to love” belonging to the dictionary of formal ethics does not make sense for the “The Stranger” hero, since abstract feelings for him do not exist, he is extremely “grounded” and lives with a concrete feeling of the present, quickly current time. Later in “The Myth of Sisyphus”, A. Camus will say: “We call love what connects us with others, in the light of a socially determined way of seeing generated by books and legends. But I do not know any other love, except for that mixture of desire, tenderness and intellect that bind me to this particular being. For another being, the composition of the mixture will be different. I have no right to use the same word for all cases, which would allow me to always act in the same way.” [14]

Detached and sensual, Meursault wanders through life thoughtlessly, without knowing the goal, looking at her like an absurd man, “without the short-sightedness of love.” However, in “The Stranger”, the author sets himself the task of turning the “bare” hero to society, confronting the values of Mediterranean pantheism that are dear to him with the social ideals of automaton people. As an artist, A. Camus, of course, understands that the hero will inevitably face insurmountable obstacles in the implementation of his blind life instinct. And Meursault commits the fact that society is regarded as a villainous crime, but he is dear to the author as the bearer of “negative truth.” That is why the killing of an Arab is “disinterested action”, which in the everyday sense is absurd. A. Camus needs a character whose “innocence” would accuse his judges. Ultimately, the very elements that he worshiped led Meursault to prison.

That Sunday, when his usual life ends, Meursault, as well as on the day of the mother’s funeral, felt bad, according to Marie, he had a “funeral appearance”. At first, the morning sun and the cool sea water give him blissful sensations, and bathing with Marie reminds of the wedding feast. However, after noon, the states of nature, as well as the internal state of the hero, change. “The sun's rays fell on the sand almost vertically, and the sea glittered just unbearably ... From the hot stones that littered the ground, drawn with heat” [15]. Meursault feels trapped under the heat of the sun beating on all sides. Overheated sand seems “red” when two Arabs appear on the beach. After the fight, blood remains in the sand, the Arabs are removed, and Meursault and Marie remain “nailed by the rays of the sun.” The hostile element creates an atmosphere of fatal violence, sucks the victim into its abyss and incinerates her body and spirit.

The scene of the Arab murder is a turning point in the composition of the “The Stranger”; she divides the novel into two equal parts. The first part is the story of Meursault about his life before the meeting with the Arabs on the beach, and the second is the story of the hero about his time in prison, about the trial and the investigation. The facts familiar to the reader from the first part are included in the second; however, in the interpretation of the servants of the law they become so distorted that Meursault does not recognize them. The second part is a crooked mirror, beyond recognition that



distorts the truth of Meursault. There is a gap between these two parts, causing a sense of absurdity in the reader. Disproportion, while Meursault sees his life and how judges perceive it, becomes the leading asymmetry in the novel's artistic system.

In the second part of the novel, the author tears the hero out of his usual living space and turns him to face the judges. And although during the investigation, Meursault only answers questions, it seems that he is gradually returning from his lethargic sleep. Both the lawyer and the judicial investigator are seeking to somehow qualify his case. Truthful confessions of Meursault do not fit in the minds of representatives of the law. Unaccountable refusal of the hero from any kind of pretense causes bewilderment, grin, and then the malice of officials. Meursault does not follow the rules of the game adopted by society; hiding nothing and not exaggerating, he is not seeking salvation in a lie. The fact that he is from the world of nature turns against him. Meursault's meeting with the judicial investigator is a confrontation with the very personification of society. With his hidden and organized violence.

The ritual of justice performed over Meursault is also marked by the seal of the absurd. The jury attentively considers the defendant, whom it seems that in front of him "tram passengers sit on the bench and all these obscure people with unfriendly curiosity look at the newcomer to notice some strange things in him. I know well that it was a foolish thought: it was not oddities that were discussed here, but crimes. However, the difference is not so great." [16] It is in this absurd scenario that the comedy of the court will continue to play out: the strangeness of the hero will be imputed to him in a crime. Of the patches of past Meursault, the judges make up the image of the inveterate villain they need.

And the less the judges feel that they are right, the more fiercely they accuse Meursault. The prosecutor is particularly annoyed that the defendant "has never once expressed regret," he feels that he is not a felon, but a "The Stranger". In order to preserve the unshakable habitual order of life, society must exterminate the dissenter.

Surrounded by the prison walls, Meursault retains the intensely manly gaze of a man of the absurd. He refuses to "schedule" the meeting with the prison priest, because he is not interested in talking about God. He just does not have time for this. He is far from despair and loyal to the land, beyond which nothing exists for him. The hero is convinced that he still lives, as well as that he will soon die "all without a trace." Meursault sits firmly in the cage of his truth, in the light of which the faith of the priest is not worth even "one female hair," because the clergyman lives like a dead man. "What is to me is the death of "our neighbors", maternal love, he shouts, "what is to me a god, this or that way of life, which people choose for themselves, the destinies chosen by them, since one and only fate should have chosen me, and along with me, billions of other elects, even those who call themselves, as Sir Cure, my brothers" [17]. Senselessness reigns in life; no one is to blame for anything, or everyone is

to blame for everything, "... at least I know," he declares, "that this is the real truth. And I do not run from her." [18]

The philosopher raises his hero to the stoic majesty of a man of the absurd - the ability to welcome life, even suffering. Meursault is a part of the world, somewhere lost, but returning to the bosom of its mother nature. "... looking at this night sky, dotted with signs and stars, for the first time I opened my soul to the tender indifference of the world. I grasped how he is like me, fraternally alike, I realized that I was happy and still can call myself happy "[19]. Just as happy Sisyphus of A. Camus, for whom "happiness and absurdity are the creatures of the same earth. They are inseparable." [20] The fate of Meursault, the rest of his life belong to him. From the depths of his "underground," like a testament leaving into oblivion, the hero says his last words: "To complete my destiny, in order for me to feel less alone, I can only wish one thing: let many viewers gather on the day of my execution and may they meet me with cries of hatred" [21].

However, the reader is hard to believe in such a "happiness" of the condemned man. A lonely prisoner, stubbornly going toward death, still sees the guillotine before his eyes. The author remains faithful to the psychological truth: the feeling of "happiness" is replaced by bitterness and blood insult to those who proudly execute the judgment on the living soul.

In the finale of the novel circle of bitterness closes. The Stranger, hunted by the omnipotent mechanics of lies, remains alone with his truth. A. Camus, apparently, wants every open-minded reader to believe that Meursault is not guilty, although he killed a stranger. And, sending him to the guillotine, the society commits an even greater crime. Life in society is organized inhuman and unrighteous. Therefore, the philosopher in every way seeks to instill confidence in the negative truth of his hero. We feel all the absurdity inherent in the fate of Meursault: young and in love with "earthly food", he could not find anything but senseless work in some office; a son, deprived of funds, and forced to put his mother in an almshouse; after the funeral, he is forced to hide his joy from intimacy with Marie; he is not judged for what he killed, but for not crying at his mother's funeral; and, finally, on the verge of death, he who does not believe in God is forced to appeal to him. At the same time, the author of "The Stranger" cannot be denied the vigilance and accuracy of criticism, which destroys the Pharisee foundations of public life.

However, going beyond the concepts that the author needs to create an existentialist type of an "innocent" hero, we inevitably face the question: is it possible to justify the murder only because it was made by chance? The concept of the absurd does not in any way relieve the hero A. Camus from his inherent flaw in moral indifference. In the essay "The Rebel," the philosopher will strictly evaluate what he has to overcome over time: "When you try to extract the rules of action from a sense of absurdity, it is revealed that thanks to this feeling, murder is perceived as indifferent at best and therefore becomes acceptable. If you don't believe in anything, if you don't see the point of anything and you

can't claim any value, everything is legal and nothing matters. There are no pros, no cons, and the killer can neither be condemned nor justified. That burning people in gas stoves, devoting one's life to caring for lepers is no difference. Virtue and malice become a matter of chance or caprice." [22]

In "The Stranger" A. Camus tries to stand up for a person. He frees the hero from falsehood, because for him freedom is "the right not to lie." And in order to express a sense of the absurd, which the philosopher himself achieves supreme clarity, he creates a typical image of an era of anxiety and disappointment. However, at the same time, Meursault is also the freedom of a rebel who has closed the universe on himself. The final authority and the judge remains a detached person, for whom the highest good and truth is life "without tomorrow". Struggling with formal morality, A. Camus puts the Algerian clerk, like Caligula, "on the other side of good and evil." He completely deprives his hero of a sense of human community and living experience.

#### IV. TRAGEDY OF SISYPHUS

The Myth of Sisyphus, completed by the philosopher after *The Stranger*, is an attempt to justify, this time speculatively, the same life stance, at the same time giving it the appeal of harsh asceticism consonant with the spiritual climate in France immediately after the collapse of 1940 [23]. On the last pages of this "essay on the absurd," pulling together the threads of previous calculations and crowning them with an ancient legend, A. Camus recalls the eternal worker Sisyphus.

Sisyphus, another "absurd hero" in the work of the thinker and in his predilections, and in his torment, he despises the gods, hates death and longs for life. For all these earthly passions, he is doomed by gods to useless and hopeless work — to always roll a huge stone to the top of the mountain, which plunges down from there under its own weight. And each time Sisyphus descends into the valley in a heavy but steady step, towards endless agony, thanks to which he becomes stronger than stone and elevates his spirit over his destiny.

According to A. Camus, the tragedy of Sisyphus lies in his clear mind, completely free from any hopes and illusions of any kind. "Today's worker lives his whole life, and his fate is no less tragic. But he himself is tragic only in those rare moments when consciousness returns to him. Sisyphus, the proletarian of the gods, impotent and rebelling, is aware of the infinity of his sad lot; he thinks about him during the descent. The clarity of the vision, which should be his agony, turns into his victory. There is no fate that contempt would not have overcome" [24]. It is worth Sisyphus returning to the memories of the former earthly life and heartfelt sorrow, as victory will be beyond the stone, and the worker of the netherworld will turn into a stone. "It's too hard to bear the immense burden of grief. These are our nights in the Garden of Gethsemane, but the truths that crush us recede as soon as we recognize them." [25] And once again the philosopher recalls the "old as human suffering" words of Kirillov from "Demons", said before the fatal shot: "all is well". These

words mean for him the stoic acceptance of life, to which the hero of Sophocles Oedipus comes at "The Myth of Sisyphus", who at the end of his life finds the formula "the victories of the absurd": "I admit that all is good". It is in these words, according to A. Camus, that ancient wisdom merges with the newest heroism, and fate turns "into the work of human hands, a matter that should be decided among people" [26].

Sisyphus is the master of his days, and this is his silent joy. The man of the absurdity silences "all idols." "In an unexpectedly quieted universe, there is a whisper of thousands of subtle delightful voices rising from the ground. This is an unconscious, secret call of all images of the world — such is the seamy side and such is the price of victory. There is no sun without a shadow, and it is necessary to become acquainted the night. An absurd person says "yes" and his efforts no longer have an end" [27]. Hero A. Camus remains faithful to his truth, and his non humility helps him lift a stone. He also admits that all is well. "This universe, now devoid of a ruler, seems neither fruitless nor insignificant. Every bit of stone, every glint of ore on the midnight mountain makes up a whole world for it. One struggle for the top is enough to fill a person's heart. Sisyphus should be considered by himself as a happy" [28].

Pathos "Myth of Sisyphus" is a spontaneous humanistic aspiration of its author. Called during the years of the fascist occupation for a "useless feat", Sisyphus becomes an example of tragic optimism. A. Camus wants to believe that the clarity of mind and the fearlessness of the spirit are able to overcome evil. In the situation of surrender, characteristic for France of 1940-1941, the "absurd" stoicism of Sisyphus turns out to be consonant with the moral climate of the country subjected to disgrace. The "rebellion" of Sisyphus sanctified the intrinsic value of an unmitigated consciousness, helping to overcome despair, at a time when it was still far from a turning point in the war. But now, after the completion of the "cycle of the absurd," the philosopher needed super-personal values that would give Sisyphus, like millions of his compatriots, a sense of solidarity in the fight against fascism [29].

#### V. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the texts of "The Stranger" and "The Myth of Sisyphus" reveals the philosopher's hard work on the "Mediterranean myth" and the stylistics and creative method of "polarity" dictated by him. This is where A. Camus's game affects two registers - tragedy and the happiness of being human. Here are the sources and meaning of the tragic pathos of the thinker, his hopeless thirst for happiness and his enchantment with death, which has the power to retrospectively make senseless of existence [30]. In the texts we have examined, we see the characteristic duality of the artistic depiction of the world and man by A. Camus, two planes in which his creative thought simultaneously works: purely metaphysical and socially significant [31]. The rejection of modern society is translated by the philosopher in a timeless, metaphysical plan and gradually takes the form of a nihilistic rebellion against the fateful "fate" [32].

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