

Absurdism in “The Outsider”

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ABSTRACT

Absurdism is a milestone in the history of philosophy. When it is studied, Albert Camus can't avoid being mentioned, who is a representative of Absurdism. Literature leads mankind to concretely experience abstract philosophy. Camus's literature is the specific manifestation of his Absurdism. Among all his works, “The Outsider” is the most recognized one, in which the absurd world and characters are vividly depicted to show his contemplation about life and living. Based on the analysis of “The Outsider”, this paper will discuss the core concept of Camus's absurdism and how it is revealed in “The Outsider”.

Keywords: Absurdism, absurd, revolt, fight, The Outsider

1. INTRODUCTION OF CAMUS

Albert Camus was born in 1913 in French Algeria, who spent his childhood in a poor neighbourhood, where the tolerant spirit had influenced him. In his whole life, he contributed a lot to existentialist literature. Academia generally categorized his works into “three cycles”. “The Outsider” analyzed in this paper belongs to the “first cycle”, whose main topic is absurdity and meaninglessness[2]. In this period, Camus worked for the leftist newspaper—Alger républicain, in Paris. It was this experience that provided him with lots of ideas to write his “first cycle” of work. The real-life prototype of the protagonist, Mersault, in “The Outsider”, was his senior and friend in the Alger républicain. Soon after he began his work in Alger républicain, the second world war started to affect Paris, which greatly influenced Camus's philosophy. The second world war was a significant event in Camus's life. He was in Paris when the Germans invaded France during World War II in 1940. Camus tried to flee but finally joined the French Resistance where he served as editor-in-chief at *Combat*, an outlawed newspaper. During the second world war, he finished his “second cycle” works with the core concept—revolt. The representative works in this cycle are “the Plague”, “the Rebel” and “the Just Assassins”. In the post-second world war, his works of “third cycle” came up, with the motif of love, which includes “Nemesis”[8]. After the war, he was a celebrity figure and gave many lectures around the world.

Table 1 Works of Camus by genre and cycle[8]

Year	Pagan myth	Biblical motif	Novel	Plays
1937-42	Sisyphus	Alienation, exile	The Stranger (<i>L'Étranger</i>)	Caligula The Misunderstanding (<i>Le Malentendu</i>)
1943-52	Prometheus	Rebellion	The Plague (<i>La Peste</i>)	The State of Siege (<i>L'État de siège</i>) The Just (<i>Les Justes</i>)
1952-58		Guilt, the fall; exile & the kingdom; John the Baptist Christ	The Fall (<i>La Chute</i>)	Adaptations of The Possessed (Dostoevsky); Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun
1958-	Nemesis	The Kingdom	The First Man (<i>Le Premier Homme</i>)	

This table has summarized Camus's works in his whole life. From it, we can see that his philosophy had been improving, enriching and adjusting through all his

life. In this paper, only the absurdism in his earlier work, “the Outsider” will be discussed.

2. THE BACKGROUND OF CAMUS’S ABSURDISM

The advent of Absurdism is based on the needs of the time. It is a philosophy satisfying human’s demand to answer the question, “how and why should I keep living”, after the second world war. The second world war destroyed the spiritual supports of people. Religious beliefs can not provide support strong enough to enable people to live in such a hopeless world.

Science and technology, which people were once proud of and saw as the result of reason, brought dreadful havoc to people. The atomic bomb and hydrogen bomb destroyed people’s lives and homelands. Consequently, the worship of reasoning, science and technology also collapsed. Moreover, technological development began to mechanizing people, reversed the relationship between people and machines to make people serve for mechanized production and deprived their distinctive characteristics and personalities.

All this above result in unprecedented loneliness, emptiness and powerlessness among people in that period. In another word, facing such an absurd world, people gradually couldn’t find the meaning of their lives and felt vacuous and despairing day by day. A new philosophy instead of religious belief, is desperately needed for people to rebuild their mental world and direct them on how to live. In such a background and under the requirements of times, the Absurdism was born. The absurd philosophy, also called the Absurdism of Camus, aims to answer the question that whether the hopeless life is worth living and how can we insist on living in such a life. The content of his philosophy can be divided into two parts—The absurdity and how to respond to the absurdity. In the following sections, these two concepts will be further explained in the context of “The Outsider”.

3. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SARTRE’S AND CAMUS’S PHILOSOPHY

Sartre and Camus were both extraordinary existentialists in France. They were good friends at the beginning of their acquaintances, but finally became enemies in the academic field, due to their differences in existentialism. Before analyzing Camus’s philosophy in his literature. The philosophies of Camus and Sartre will be compared for a deeper understanding of existentialism.

In the philosophies of Sartre and Camus, the same conclusion that the world is absurd and life is painful was made. They both believed the world full of uncertainty keeps making people anxious and depressed. Therefore, to escape from torments, people tend to put their hope and

faith in others or some metaphysical things. From their perspectives, reflections and questions of lives will bring people confusion and anxiety. However, they play an important role in awaking people.

Though Camus and Sartre had reached some agreements in existentialism, their definitions of the concept “absurdity” and correct responses to absurdity, are very different. In Sartre’s view, absurdity is a phenomenon and mental state. Sartre’s absurdity lies in the contradiction of the real world itself, as what he depicted in his book “Nausea”[7]. Nevertheless, Camus stated that absurdity is a connection and conflict between humans and the world. For him, absurdity neither exists in human nature nor in the world, which is created by the interaction between humans and the world. In the comparison to these two perspectives, Camus’s absurdity theory is more unified.

With different definitions of “absurdity”, the two philosophers chose different ways to respond to it. Sartre insisted on “freedom of chooses”. He held that even if the world is absurd and meaningless, humans can create meanings by themselves. Nothing can decide a man’s life meaning except for himself. There is also no universal meaning or value of life, which can be applied to everyone. Everybody has the equal right to decide what is meaningful and valuable to them. According to Sartre, choosing one’s life meaning freely is the most effective way to live in the absurd world.

As for Camus, when facing the absurd world, what one should do is to revolt. Not as active as Sartre’s responding way, many protagonists created by Camus actually didn’t change their behaviors. However, the core of Camus’s philosophy is that one should keep living after realizing the pessimistic reality. At this moment, Although those protagonists hadn’t made any change, they successfully revolted the absurd world, which will be analyzed later in this paper. But if being evaluated just in the aspect of acts, Camus’s philosophy about how to live in the absurd world is more passive than Sartre’s.

4. THE ABSURDITY IN “THE OUTSIDER”

Absurdity is a feeling, a kind of emotion and condition. Human has lots of expectations and demands of the world. They want certainty and order to make sure they can live in a reasonable world. Rational human hopes to use their reasons to grasp their lives. However, the world is completely unreasonable. There are so many uncontrolled and absurd things in this world so that people can’t get what they want from the world.

In “The Outsider”, Camus’s masterwork, this kind of absurdity is vividly shown through the plot. In this novel, a story once the protagonist, Mersault, read in an old newspaper was mentioned. The newspaper said a man who left his hometown at an early age, came back with a huge fortune. To surprise his mother and sister, he

checked into their hotel without telling them his real identity. However, what he never expected was being murdered by them for his money. After his real identity was unfolded, both his mother and sister suicided. His good motive finally brings an unpredictable tragedy. This story clearly expresses the truth that the world is absurd and can never give people their wanting feedback. The meaning and order they want are always inaccessible. People and the world are always in intensive conflict. The conflict between them gives birth to absurdity.

Based on their demands, people tend to easily believe some kinds of perspectives, values or rules, such as religions, faithfully following them, even attaching incomparable significance in those beliefs. Under this circumstance, if one day, these beliefs are proved untenable, false or useless, or even just are doubted, People's mental supports will face the danger of collapsing and the anxiety will overwhelm them. At this moment, people will suddenly feel that the whole world and their lives are absurd, and then drown in the sense of absurd. Though Camus had shown a more moderate attitude toward religions in his later works, such as "the Plague", he still adopted a critical outlook of religions in his earlier work, "the Outsider".

Such a sense of absurdity is also specifically reflected in "The Outsider". When Mersault first talked with his investigating magistrate, he was asked to confess for God's forgiveness. Mersault refused to do so and said that he didn't believe in God, which brought his investigating magistrate great anxiety, since he insisted that everyone believes in God. If this belief was shaken and doubted by himself, his life would lose all meaning and fall into complete absurdity. This typical example reveals how people come to absurdity and implies the big threat of people in the era when Camus lived, people's religious beliefs collapsed because of the war and their lives falling into complete absurdity. At the end of the novel, the reason that the priest wanted Mersault to confess to God wasn't that Mersault needed it but the priest himself needed it.

Not only those details in books are manifesting the absurdity of the world, but the whole plot of "The Outsider" aims to depict a complete absurd world and a well-rounded absurd protagonist. The protagonist, Meursault, an office clerk in a company who seems like without any ambition or affection, was informed that his mother died one day. He came to her funeral without crying or any sad emotion. After the funeral, he kept on with his normal life. One day his friend, Ramon, invited him to the beach where Mersault killed an Arabian accidentally. In the subsequent endless court trials, Mersault thought himself became the outsider of his case. At last, Mersault was sentenced to death because he didn't mourn at his mother's funeral and seemed cold in his daily life. At the end of this novel, Mersault refused to confess and eagerly waited for his death.

All significant events that drove Mersault's fate were so absurd. He never planned to kill anyone. He met the Arabian because of his friend, and then killed him because he was affected by the dazzling sunshine. The reason why he was sentenced to death was that he remained dry-eyed at that funeral. What is behind this absurd sentencing reason is people's intention to believe in a certain value again, just like the religious beliefs of the investigating magistrate and the priest. People tend to comply with the certain moral value that humans should be full of affection and always show them. Whether crying at one's mother's funeral becomes the standard they use to measure and assess others, instead of taking the matter on its merits. People always fall into the cycle of credulity, hardly get rid of it, and even use it to sanction others.

5. HOW TO RESPOND TO THE ABSURDITY—REVOLT

The core of Camus's Absurdism is combat. Fighting against absurdity is the only feasible way for people to live. How people fight against absurdity can be summarized into three parts.

5.1 See the reality, give up hope

In the view of existentialists, the main difference between men and other animals is that animals do not know they are bound to die, but men know they do[2]. A valuable virtue unique to humans is that they can see their destined pessimistic fate, able to understand that mankind makes no difference in the absurd world. The first step for fighting with absurdity is to face and admit it. When realizing the absurdity, people will find out that it is meaningless to lie to themselves that there is still hope. Hope is just a poison to deceive oneself. When reality is revealed, it will return its followers with an unbearable toll. Mersault's indifference to everything comes from his clear understanding of reality. At first, he still had some illusions, hoping to escape from the prison, just like what he said in the book.

"Of a mad stamped to freedom that would anyhow give me a moment's hope, the gambler's last throw. Naturally, all that "hope" could come to was to be knocked down at the corner of a street or picked off by a bullet in my back. But, all things considered, even this luxury was forbidden me; I was caught in the rattrap irrevocably." *The Outsiders*, p.265.

However, these hopes didn't alleviate his pain but intensified it. It is abandoning hope that has solved Mersault's pain and returned his passion of life again. Only when people don't expect hope anymore, can they gain real freedom. fight means one, realizing the absurdity and absolutely having no hope, still lives to the best of his or her ability.

Mersault and his mother had no hope in each other, which allowed them to gain more freedom and choices. By sending his mother to old people's home, Mersault didn't need to bear heavy maintenance financial and time expenses, which would make his life stressful. His mother also got the opportunity to make more friends in the old people's home, instead of spending all day in a small house without communication, and even received the most precious gift, her loving "fiance". All advantages of this choice owing to the freedom drew by hopelessness.

Before being put to death, Mersault completely accepted his mortality, bravely facing the absurd reality without any hope.

"It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe." *The Outsider*, p.297.

In the last moment of his life, he still believed that he has always been happy. A great man can never be destroyed while his life was destroyed by the absurd world. Mersault used his spirit of never escaping, living in the moment and loving life to successfully prove that one can live magnificently in a world of absurdity. He fought against the world, embraced the world, and finally conciliated with the world.

5.2 Refuse to suicide, live with passion

People generally have three attitudes toward absurdity—suicide physically, suicide philosophically and live passionately to fight against absurdity. Some people can't stand the absurdity, considering their lives totally worthless, which makes them choose to end their lives. Under this circumstance, they surrender to the absurdity, completely deny themselves, and use the easiest way to perpetually escape from absurdity, which is what Camus opposed.

Suicide philosophically is opposed by Camus as well. Suicide philosophically means putting all hope on the religion and the other life, and believing that life is empty[3]. This attitude is clearly exemplified in the previous two examples of the magistrate and priest about religious beliefs.

Different from the two negative attitudes, the attitude advocated by Camus is to actively fight against the absurd life, just as what Sisyphus did in "the Sisyphus Myth". Undoubtedly, Sisyphus can never push the stone to the peak, having no chance to subvert the force forever. What he can only do is repeating his arduous work day by day. However, in such desperation, Sisyphus never considered escaping from his work through suicide physically or philosophically. He passionately embraced his work, using his strong and fearless spirits to fight against absurdity[4]. If it is impossible to overthrow the tragic

fate endowed by power or the world, it is also a kind of confrontation to accept this absurd fate and fight absurdity with enthusiasm for life.

The spirit Mersault got is exactly the same as that of Sisyphus. What under his seemingly cold behavior is his incomparable love and passion for his life. He said he didn't love his girlfriend, Mary, and had no desire to get married to her. However, he actually wanted to get married to her, when seeing her talk with his friend's wife. When he saw her in prison and court, he always praised her beauty in his heart. Mersault can eliminate his boredom by recalling those objects in his room, remembering every detail of them, and even felt happy by doing this. He kept every happy moment in his heart, admitting that he loved this city and went through countless satisfying moments in his life.

"I recognized, echoing in my tired brain, all the characteristic sounds of a town I'd loved, and of a certain hour of the day which I had always particularly enjoyed." *The Outsider*, p.236.

"Yes, this was the evening hour when — how long ago it seemed! — I always felt so well content with life." *The Outsider*, p.237.

The cries of newspaper sellers, the singing of birds and the sound of trams running, all these slight elements always made him satisfied in the absurd world, enabling him to claim that,

"To feel it (the world) so like myself, indeed, so brotherly, made me realize that I'd been happy and that I was happy still." *The Outsider*, p.297.

5.3 Live in the moment, believe in concrete things rather than metaphysics

Camus held that it is not possible to escape the absurdity with untenable beliefs, metaphysical things, nor with hopes, imaginations or illusions beyond human control. What can actually help people to fight with the absurdity is to seize what they can at the moment. Living in an absurd world, human will often live their lives on groundless imagination. However, the unreasonable world can never realize their imagination. Consequently, it is wiser to devote oneself to concrete things rather than metaphysical things, focusing on the present rather than the past or the future. Mersault didn't mourn his dead mother, because he knew that was in the past and his mourn couldn't change anything. He always focused on the present.

When his boss offered him a bright prospect, he rejected without hesitation, claiming that life is the same wherever. His rejection wasn't a manifestation of his unambitious personality, but a wise choice to not take comforts from metaphysical things or imaginations. The only life Mersault can imagine and expect is the life he lived in the moment. He rebelled at the priest's pray

because he knew the priest was not qualified. Compared with the priest who based himself on groundless religious beliefs and considered himself pretty sure of life, Mersault turned out to be the person who really seized his life, just as what he said:

“ Living as he did, like a corpse, he didn’t even be sure of being alive. It might look as if my hands were empty. Actually, I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he; sure of my present life and of the death that was coming.”[1].

Mersault never believed anything ambiguous or metaphysical, which is also Camus’s attitude to the absurd world.

6. CONCLUSION

As a literary work, “The Outsider” plays a good role in showing the abstract Absurdism specifically and arousing people’s resonance for it. This book also established Camus’s incomparable position in the literature world. The protagonist’s experience reflects the absurdity of the world, and teaches people how to respond to the absurdity at the same time. “The Outsider” represents the generation in the war and their spiritual needs. This work has eternal value, not only because it satisfied the mental demand of people in war, but also the Absurdism behind it reveals the essential state and survival dilemma of humans all the time.

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