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Exploring the Absurd and the Quest for Meaning in Albert Camus's "The Stranger and The Plague"

Rehan Aslam Sahi

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Gujrat

rehan.aslam@uog.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The novels of Albert Camus, The Stranger (1942) and The Plague (1947) play out human conflict with a meaningless universe. Both works are illustrations of the theory of the absurd, the confrontation of the personal desire to achieve meaning and the silent apathy of the universe, as well as they are based on the tradition of the entire existentialism. The present paper has summarized the literature on the philosophy of the absurd by Camus and its corresponding philosophers (such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre) and demonstrated how these approaches can be used to understand the different characters and the action of The Stranger and The Plague. The impersonal narration and the trial of Meursault in The Stranger have been evaluated as existential tableau whereby the social essences fail before the revelation of the absurdity. Researchers have observed that the eponymous epidemic in The Plague serves as an absurd phenomenon to which people react differently, denial and hope, revolt, and solidarity. According to critics, Camus's protagonists eventually cut out meaning in action: Dr. Rieux and Jean Tarrou have a purpose in compassionate resistance, whereas Meursault attains a painfully won tranquility by living in the present. This review is a synthesis of recent scholarly articles that argue that stage philosophical dilemmas, suicide, faith, rebellion, confronted by his characters, and these means of narrative are directly connected to existentialist and absurdist philosophy.

Key words: Absurd, Quest, Albert Camus's, Stranger, existentialism, Meursault

Introduction

The Stranger by Albert Camus and The Plague are commonly referred to as literary expressions of the absurdity of the notion that human beings are constantly in search of inherent meaning in life even though the universe is unwilling to grant them any. The only serious philosophical question proposed by Camus himself was whether life is worth living in a meaningless world. The protagonist Meursault in The Stranger leads an emotional, indifferent life until a meaningless murder brings him to a courtroom that ends up convicting him more because of his lack of emotion than the crime itself. The Plague narrates about an outbreak of the Algerian town of Oran where various characters were forced to deal with the arbitrariness of misery and the silence of death. Both plots are summations of conflict between human desire to trace sense and insensible, unloving reality.

Camus rejected the term existentialist, yet his novels are like the existentialist thinkers regarding the freedom and responsibility in meaning making, the disruption of religious absolutes, and the horror or angst of facing the contingency of life. The leap of faith of Kierkegaard to commit to a personal truth that is objectively absurd, characters in the sermons of Father Paneloux the Plague, and the proclamation of the death of God, coupled with the

demand to will our own values, are echoed in the Revolt and the affirmation of life of Camus. The dictum of Jean-Paul Sartre according to which existence comes before essence, according to which we define ourselves through our decisions, resembles such characters as Jean Tarrou or Raymond Rambert, who are forced to decide in front of the plague or faced with injustice. In this paper, Camus has placed his novels within these philosophical contexts. It discusses the way scholars have interpreted *The Stranger* and *The Plague* in terms of absurdism and existentialism, with the emphasis on how the characters and their destinies fulfill the ideas presented by Camus.

Late works emphasize the fact that the fiction of Camus is not just a dramatization of philosophy, but a searching out of its implications as practiced. The critics observe that *The Stranger* and *The Plague* represent the various sides of the absurd state: the first one focuses on the confrontation of a person to meaninglessness, and the second one on the collective reaction of the society to the unreasonable suffering. This literature review is therefore the beginning of how Camus has conceptualized the meaning of the absurd and its existentialist context and then the way that these theories are exhibited in both novels. *The Stranger* focuses on the alienation of Meursault and how the novel exposes the absurdity of the social essences. In *The Plague*, critics comment on how the characters are used to portray the insistence of Camus on revolting and grouping up despite being in an indifferent universe. When combined, these works have presented a consistent picture: the absurdist philosophy created by Camus, even though not directly affected by his contemporaries in existentialism, is the language he uses to create his narratives and hints that meaning is created by humans, as opposed to being found in the universe.

Literature Review

Camus's Philosophy of the Absurd. The Philosophy of the Absurd of Camus. Camus made the absurd be the focus of his thinking where he termed it as the contradiction of the meaning seeking by humans with the silence of the world. He eminently opposes our own insatiable desire to enquire about the purpose of life in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) by juxtaposing the purpose with the unreasonable silence that we face. According to the scholars, Camus does not hold that the absurd is an intrinsic quality of the real world but emerges in the collision of what the mind requires and how life and space are indifferent. According to Aronson (2022), Camus has suggested that when human beings acknowledge the realization that existence itself does not have any purpose we should learn to live with an empty nest that cannot be resolved. This insight is the foundation of both novels, and characters in the end must come to terms with the fact that nothing in the world is externally justified by silence.

According to Camus, the absurdity was the human plight of modernity. There is a famous example when he referred to the picture of Sisyphus pushing his rock uphill and downhill as an analogy of our situation, we continue to ask and work to find answers but watch it roll back down the hill. By taking this ridiculous position, Camus argued, suicide is a kind of concession and ideology (leap of faith) is self-deception. Rather he suggested revolt, a day-to-day, aware rejection of despair, as the only true answer to meaninglessness. This Dr. Rieux

expressed in *The Plague* in a very concrete form: the way he takes care of the victims is his constant effort to rebel against the absurd. Najee (2024) emphasizes that this concept is dramatized in later novels by Camus: only people who accept the absurd and struggle against it at the same time will be able to find a way out. His fiction therefore dwells upon the practical implications of absurdism: *The Stranger* and *The Plague* portray people faced with emptiness and with the option to either flee or to fight.

The philosophical project by Camus is usually talked about concerning other existentialists. Kierkegaard (the predecessor of existentialism) believed that only authentic faith involves a leap into the irrational - personal commitment beyond reason. Camus reiterates the words of the absurd, nevertheless, he denies the response of Kierkegaard. In fact, Camus would call religious faith a kind of philosophical suicide, since it evades the basic issue as to why life is life-worthy. Finally, in *The Plague*, Father Paneloux is first a Kierkegaardian in his position: he treats the epidemic as the wrath of God and calls upon his congregation to believe regardless of how hideous (the plague is the flail of God). Once such interpretation fails in front of innocent sufferings (the death of a child), Paneloux becomes unsure about it, which shows that Camus is right when he asserts that only irrational faith helps one to defer the confrontation with the absurd.

The impact of Nietzsche is also noticeable. He wrote off contemporary culture as nihilistic following the death of God and demanded new values which were developed by the personnel desire. In the case of Nietzsche, Overman is the one who bravely confronts and even glorifies the harsh and tragic elements of life and who makes their own meanings and values. According to Crowell (2022), Overman by Nietzsche represents a resounding yes to the realities of life. Camus appreciated rebellion rather than passivity: according to Crowell, Camus describes the rebel in *The Rebel* as one who has had unreserved affirmation of human imperfection and suffering: this is a concept that also resembles the idea of *amor fati* which Nietzsche insisted upon. In the stories of Camus, such characters as Dr. Rieux and Tarrou are the embodiment of this perspective, since they refuse to ignore the horror surrounding them; they are involved in this matter, and they assert human decency as the creation of their own.

An existentialist contrast is Jean-Paul Sartre. According to Sartre, existence comes first, essence comes later, so people were born without some sense of purpose, and they must create themselves by making their own decisions. He has notoriously argued that there is no human nature, that we are what we make of ourselves. This is the philosophy that is echoed by the characters in Camus as they must decide how to react to the wayless world. An example is Rambert in *The Plague*, who chooses to remain in Oran and take part in the struggle instead of leaving people alone, which is an act of defining oneself, as it fits the freedom as described by Sartre. Although Camus had disassociated himself with the Sartrean doctrines, critics observe that both philosophers focus on the freedom of humans as the source of meaning. According to Valentine (1996), unlike Sartre, Camus did not deny that he conceived of a common human nature that made it possible to act in solidarity: the rebel asserts free will,

solidarity action possibilities, and inherent value as an end. By that, Camus does not deny that humans have to make sense, yet he is another person who believes in universal human dignity as the basis to revolt against nihilism.

To conclude, it can be stated that scholarship brings out the absurd of Camus as the precise prism of existential disillusionment that is born out of philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre. The fourth thing is to observe the way *The Stranger* and *The Plague* implement these ideas with the help of their characters and plots.

Existential and Absurd Themes in *The Stranger*.

The Stranger has been popularly read as an alienation novel and an absurd confrontation novel. Critics observe that the story of Meursault is representative of atheistic existential tropes, e.g., an absurd life, alienation of self and others, and the inaccessibility of some definitive answer (religious, ideological etc.) to the question of the meaning of life. Valentine notes that Camus prefigures the fundamental inaccessibility of the essentialist responses to the question of meaningful life (such as Christianity). In the first line, there is a phrase, "Mother died today. Or perhaps yesterday" Meursault renounces emotion or illusion. To the scholars, it is an indication that Meursault is rejecting social and religious platitudes. The death of his mother, to give an example, is not typical of normal grieving, and his rejection of lying that he loves his mother and the acknowledgement of God later is a radical honesty with the absurd reality.

The analyses that exist tend to interpret *The Stranger* in terms of the Sartrean imperative of existence/essence. By Part II, society has re-formed the being of Meursault into set forms of being a cold criminal or a monster, but this is foreign to his self-as-project. According to Valentine, Meursault is depicted in two paradigmatic modes, the blind sensualist of Part I, and the accused criminal of Part II. This conflict is reflective of the existentialist perceptions that human beings possess dynamic identities. Critics have noted that moral and emotional detachment of Meursault is the force behind the condemnation of the trial: Meursault is not only condemned by the act of killing an Arab, but he is also condemned by the fact that he does not display the socially defined remorse. This is a manifestation of the unease of society with meaninglessness in absurdist terms. Meursault is condemned because of his failure to feign meaning (or belief) rather than killing. The narrator of Camus goes even further as to fantasize that the executioner tells him, you are guilty and you should have been killed, demonstrating the arbitrariness of these judgments. In the academic readings, therefore, Meursault turns into an absurd hero: he does not need to find comforting stories to deal with reality. He comes to find some form of happiness at the end in accepting the absurdity of life, and this parallels the lesson of Sisyphus in the mountainside.

Many papers have gone into the denial of illusion by Meursault. To illustrate, according to an analysis of the Arab World English Journal (Najee 2024), Meursault is indifferent to the future of a meaningless afterlife and relishes in the present. This is an informal source, but it shows the general opinion that it is authenticity that makes Meursault survive. Other writers have likened him to existential characters: some refer to him as the anti-hero of Camus, as he

has no rationalist statement as to the meaning of life and life by his senses. Such readings are consistent with Sartrean concepts: according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Camus identified such themes as free will, possible solidarity of action, and intrinsic value as human constants even in the case of the lack of meaning in life. Meursault, the man Camus hints, should find any meaning in human values or emotional truths one makes (as in his love of Marie) rather than cosmic narrative.

The other important theme in *The Stranger* is the face of death -the ultimate absurd event. The question that is raised several times in the trial of Meursault is this: why should there be any ending (his death)? Camus deals with this in a very straightforward manner. The novel, as Aronson (2022) makes it clear, reflects the absurd paradox: when one puts the question of the meaning of existence, Camus refuses to answer it. The way Meursault is unconcerned with the chaplain, and his epiphany under the open sky, would indicate that the ability to die at our own costs is one of our uprisings. Those who criticize it usually refer to the famous last picture when Meursault is ready to get all the hate of people. Considering the philosophy of Camus, critics see this as an act by Meursault that life must be lived to the fullest even with happiness although he is aware it is absurd. This, Valentine (1996) observes, is beyond nihilism: it is the lack of emotion that gives Meursault peace, the acceptance of some common humanity of rebellion and dignity, but not any common essence.

Overall, literature about *The Stranger* relates to the opinion that Meursault is a perfect representation of the absurd man: he is not bound by illusions, he is not bound by society, and he has a personal (albeit harsh) integrity in the world that does not care about him. Analogies of existential philosophers have been explicitly drawn by critics in describing the attitude of Meursault. As an example, the fact that Camus thinks that our quest of meaning might be meaningless is equivalent to the fact that Kierkegaard claims that we must accept the existential paradox of faith, but Meursault does not jump towards God. In its turn, he can be considered the representative of raw insubordination: like the Overman of Nietzsche, he faces the world of meaningless suffering without submission. A critical overview of the consensus by one scholar goes as follows: *The Stranger* compels the reader to doubt all common traditions by denuding essences, in the same way that existentialists philosophically do. Thus, the novel puts into action the absurdist knowledge of Camus on the page.

Existential and Absurd Themes in *The Plague*.

According to scholars, *The Plague* is the most overt allegory of the absurd by Camus. Even though it can be viewed as the commentary on the Nazi occupation, more recent criticism has stressed its existential issues: why do people continue existing when life has lost its meaning? According to Najee (2024), the plague as the subject matter is a symbol of the absurd as well - the mindless, arbitrary disaster that carries no meaning, rationality or order. The story reveals the reaction of the citizens of Oran to the plague, at first sight, which is typical of the pre-absurd situation: they ignore the plague and adhere to the norms. As Tarron observes, people lived as though nothing had occurred before rats die by knowing that the plagues can never occur. They construct fences of normality. One of the scholars' remarks on

the description of Oran, who is ugly and shabby and concentrates on the insignificance of details, being symbolic of the modern life that makes people forget about the absurdity that is present at all times. As an illustration, Camus adds a peculiar fact: an old man manages to cope by spitting the cats and it is his everyday routine. This is seen by critics as a sort of absurdist act: it provides that character with small significance (revenge on vermin) when the actual evil is hiding behind the scenes. This information demonstrates that before characters face the plague, they live in illusions, which is exactly what Camus warns to be.

As the epidemic becomes more severe, *The Plague* becomes more of crisis research of the human reaction to existential response. Critics have cited three main reactions, which mimic Camus himself in his taxonomy of absurd solutions: (1) denial/ escape, (2) faith or hope, and (3) revolt (action). These modes are acted out between the characters of Oran. Dr. Rieux and Jean Tarrou are the representatives of rebellion: they do not want to find magic solutions or escape but gather volunteers and combat the disease as one of the human causes. The expression of explicitly existential position was put by Tarrou in a journal: he will not give up on Oran even in a situation where he can do that. Nazeer states that Camus focuses on this way as the only possible and true answer: people should not only accept the absurdity (they should not have any assurances of success) but also struggle against it with solidarity and with sympathy. Rieux repeats the message of Camus that we have to keep going on without any hope of redemption and assist one another merely because it is the right thing to do (to Rieux, there are more victims of the plague than those of war, yet the plague kills all of us and he treats them equally as fellow humans). This is frequently mentioned by scholars as a reflection of the idea of Nietzsche that he advocated about affirmation of life with all its agony.

Father Paneloux is the embodiment of the religious reaction. At first, Paneloux pursues a Kierkegaardian way: he preaches that the plague is a divine justice and the just man has nothing to fear. At the very beginning he tells them that there is a purpose of the epidemic, and it is selected by God. According to critics, this is equivalent to what Camus calls philosophical suicide which is a leap towards faith which Camus considers to be a way of escaping absurdity. In fact, according to Nazeer, Camus himself criticizes the idea of hope and faith as rejections of the absurd (with references to *Myth of Sisyphus*, pp.2034). The novel betrays the sermon of Paneloux: when a child that is innocent dies in agony of the plague, Paneloux has no other way but to disbelieve his theology. In his translation, Nabokov has Tarrou accuse him that the only thing innocent suffering can show is that it cannot be demanded of a person that an innocent person should be sacrificed (he quotes that Paneloux had refused to consent to the fate of the child). This moment has been written about as the criticism of religious meaning-making by Camus: Paneloux himself loses his assurance since faith cannot respond to the core absurdity of arbitrary evil. The philosophy of suicide of hoping that there should be a divine order is thus rejected by examination. In the end, Camus treats this flight into religion as irrational as Nazeer highlights, which leaves religious characters in a poor state to teach them the lessons of the novel.

Lastly, *The Plague* depicts the attempts of people who attempt to continue normal life or gain personal profit. An example of such a reaction, as provided by Cottard, is his response to the plague, initially by plunging into despair (he even tries to kill himself), and secondly by becoming a profiteer. According to critics, this path is consistent with the notion of Camus about the absurd hero seeing meaning in the situation in life, no matter how abhorrent it is. Tarrou notices that the plague has made him proud as the plague provides Cottard with a sense of purpose in the trade of the black market. This is how Cottard creates a meaning, and security, to himself, in this perverse manner. This is viewed by some analysts as Camus demonstrating how even a criminal will express himself to the absurd by creating his own world. The other aspect of meaning-making, in contrast, is that of Joseph Grand, the low-level clerk who is obsessed with working out a single perfect sentence. The pointlessness of Grand in endless toil does not stop him but just shows an attempt of people to hold onto sanity even insanity. Despite the sparse scholarship about Grand, his personality has been connected to the existential frustration: he is a representation of the human impulse to introduce some sort of order into the disorder.

In all these character reactions, we find a consensus of the critics; that solidarity and human decency are the only answers of the day that Camus approves of. As Crowell (2022) remarks, existentialists (and Camus in particular) propagate the notion that it is meaning-giving activity in which we are involved in the world. Here, in Oran, it is a group response: isolation practices, taking care of sick people, and mere friendship turn into the source of meaning. Najee quotes Rieux in letter to his wife stating that he will not surrender to despair since nothing more to complain about life and this is the direct pointing to the acceptance of fate with the adherence to the common good. It is the ending that is noted by scholars, in which the plague has passed, and Rieux is reflecting that there are more deaths today than there were yesterday, but he can go on because that is what life now allows him to find meaning in, love, and personal purpose, rather than metaphysics. That is, meaning is man-made, societal, as opposed to being found, and this is echoed in the Sartrean freedom and the Nietzschean affirmation.

Philosophical Dilemmas and Character Arcs

The plots of both novels are the explicit dramatization of the philosophical categories of Camus. Critics make comparisons between the three evasions of the absurd by Camus (suicide, hope, reason) and major occurrences in the stories. Suicide in *The Stranger* is literal (Meursault at the end is rooting to kill himself) but it is also a figurative meaning: the justice system trying to impose false meaning on his crime (insisting that he is feeling guilty) is like a leap of faith. Meursault does not commit suicide, does not give in to hope, but comes to revolt, he accepts the reality of the world (the indifferent benignity of this world) and lives now. This, according to reviewers, demonstrates the conclusion that Camus comes to in his realisation that we must derive pleasure in our normal life and not in the fantastic ideals.

The skew of the characters in *The Plague* models these alternatives. Physical suicide would literally come out (Cottard attempts suicide by hanging and then when plague is terminated,

he would be prophesied to commit suicide); Camus would look down on it as cowardice, and in fact, it is a sense of despair that causes Cottard to be reduced to opportunism. Religious suicide is evident through the loss of faith by Paneloux. Rieux and Tarrou opt to follow the third route, which is revolt/acceptance. According to a reviewer in the *Philosophy of Medicine* (Najee 2024), these patterns are listed: coping by denial, by false hope or active solidarity. Nazee, who quips Camus, states that only deliberate rebellion, a conscious struggle that entails no illusions is truly authentic. The given pattern is applicable to the present guidance of Camus himself: to live without appeal and to acknowledge the existence of our death but to claim human principles in general despite that (the essence of revolt in Myth of Sisyphus). These abstract dilemmas in the novels have been transformed into literal plot elements: the closing bell of the plague, the last journal entry of Rieux, and the acceptance of Meursault dramatize the Camusian idea that the meaning of life was in its living rather than any cosmic assurance.

The last connection that can be highlighted in both works by scholarship is that the meaning as proposed by Camus is solidarity. According to Valentine, to Camus, the most important thing is to assert that I rebel, therefore we are. The sanitary brigade of Oran, the momentary affection of Meursault to Marie, and the ritual of ringing the plague bell of the townspeople are symbolic of the fact that the human bond is our only stronghold against the absurd. Briefly, reviewers find that in *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, life can be objectively meaningless, but people are able to generate subjective meaning by affirming life in defiance of it, through love, through struggle, through community.

Taken together literature creates a consistent image: the novels of Camus are used as case studies of absurdist and existentialist thought. Critics point out the ways that Camus utilizes and overcomes his sources by comparing the decisions made by every character to philosophical models. The leap of Kierkegaard is found in Paneloux but fails in the presence of Camus; in Rieux and Tarrou the revolt and the freedom of Nietzsche are proclaimed as noble and presented as noble, and in Sartre we read about the necessity of defining oneself and valuing each other in spite of the unreasonable silence. Nothing comes across in any research that Camus provides a transcendental meaning to these novels. Rather, they always discover that meaning has to be created in the absurd through human decisions and Camus's fiction merely exquisitely dramatizes this lesson through captivating storytelling.

Overview of Academic viewpoints. To conclude, current criticism places *The Stranger* and *The Plague* squarely in the context of absurdist philosophy that Camus held and the larger humanist existentialist movement. Camus is depicted as a philosopher who believes that the absence of meaningfulness in life is not a reason to despair, but instead a reason to face squarely and lead a brave life. Valentine (1996) and others demonstrate how *The Stranger* is a perfect illustration of the novelistic vehicle of this conception; the existence of Meursault cannot conform to predetermined “essences and the society have to confront the absurd. Meanwhile, critics observe that Camus has contexts (postwar disillusionment, rejection of totalitarianism) that provide the absurdist theme with a particular urgency: *The Plague* is

raised to an ethical parable concerning the solidarity of man in face of arbitrary loss. In the analyses, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche emerge as intellectual opposites, faith and nihilism fail Camus, who, in his turn, discovers a compromise between rebellion and rebellion. The self-definition of the characters is supported by Sartrean freedom.

This literature all leads to two conclusions. To begin with, the novels written by Camus dramatize the absurd situation characterized in his essays the inherent contradiction between the state of longing and state of emptiness. Meursault and Rieux experience this at first hand. Second, they demonstrate the response of Camus in a deed: rebellion by way of true life and human decency. The same message that the scholarship is trying to drive home is that *The Stranger* and *The Plague* reflect the philosophy of Camus: there is no illusion of meaning, nor failure to hope, but that it is our one and only job to love, to suffer, and then to die, and that each man must figure out his own reasons to exist like that. The absurd and existential paradigms therefore offer a well-rounded context of the novels, and the critics as a whole agrees that the characters of Camus live out the dilemmas brought forth by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus himself in a quest to find the meaning that is manly created.

The Absurd and the Search for Meaning in Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and *The Plague*

The Stranger (1942) and *The Plague* (1947), the novels by Camus, are vivid dramatization of his belief of the absurd, the conflict between the need of man to know and the silence of the universe. Philosophically, Camus puts across that the Absurd is a result of the human wish to meaning and the indifferent, absurd world. He demands to face the absurdity of life not to despise or even to commit suicide but to revolt to still affirm the value of life despite the meaninglessness. An example is *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which Camus employs the boulder that Sisyphus is relentlessly pushing as a metaphor, which he concludes to bring no happiness in the end. In both *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, Camus incorporates this structure into story: his characters are faced with a world that does not care about them, but some of them react by taking genuine action and establishing their meaning.

Absurdism of Camus Revolt, Freedom and Creation of Meaning.

The main idea of the philosophy of Camus is that the universe does not have any meaning; on the contrary, humans cannot but need a sense. This is the absence of one thing (the basic contradiction) of human desire and cosmic alienation which is the absurd state. Camus points out that our search of meaning in life will never be attained, but we should go on without falling into nihilism. The proper answer is to rebel - not politically, but in a personal manner. Camus refers to a constant disobeying by rebellion: living authentically and completely even when things do not make sense. He even says that even in an absurd world, humans have some freedom to think, act and to make their actions personally created value. Practically, this involves disbelieving in false consolations (e.g. religious and metaphysical escapes) and instead perceiving reality as it is. According to a conclusion made by Arinze and Onwuatuegwu: man can stand outside of the absurd because he is free not to be brought down to the level of the absurd or the senselessness of life... he is free, and in that freedom man must... provide some form of meaning to his existence.

Revolt, freedom, and passion are some of the main aspects of the absurdist solution by Camus. Milling these to an absurd life, Camus clearly connects them in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: like Sisyphus, the absurd hero can still be content with the struggle, has free choice, and lives passionately, although he is aware of the absence of a final rationale. This school of thought will inform our interpretation of *The Stranger* and *The Plague*: both novels depict the absurdity and how their characters either submit to it or revolt by forging their meaning.

The Stranger: Personal Insignificance and Irrelevance.

In *The Stranger* Camus, the author examines the topic of absurdism through the character of Meursault who lived his life as a sequence of events that have no purpose. The novel revolves around the idea of ridiculousness and lack of meaning in life, and the existence of Meursault is the reflection of this philosophy. He does not find purpose in conventional values and societal practices. To illustrate, the actions of Meursault to initiate an affair with Marie, write a letter to his neighbor, and finally kill an Arab on the beach are made without clear motive or morality reasons. These acts point to inconsistent universe: things just happen to Meursault, and he reacts with neutrality, that is matter of fact. However, society cannot afford this lack of order and in the process, when Meursault is brought to trial the prosecutors and defense lawyers are busying themselves to give rational explanations. It becomes even more absurd with their pathetic efforts to give causal explanations (they imagine paranoia, mental illness or religious motives that turned him into a murderer) to his situation: the human system of meanings has no hold over the reality of Meursault.

The attitude of Meursault to himself is also an example of absurdism. He is emotionally detached to all the social conventions: he does not feel remorse or grief at the death of his mother and responds to love and death with equal composure. He does not believe in gestures such as mourning or existential contemplation: when weeping, the trial, he refuses to pretend that he has a religious belief and simply tells the chaplain that God has no significance in his life. Rather than inner turmoil, the sensibilities of Meursault are based on the world of the senses, sunlight, heat, tastes of cigarettes, and not meaning. These sensory descriptions are used by Camus to stress that Meursault views life in terms of coincidences and perceptions and not as a moral drama. Concisely, he does not have a grip on the traditional sources of meaning (family duty, patriotic feeling, religious faith) and life is just the way it is, in the sheer brutality of immediacy, and Meursault perceives it in its passive form.

Despite this passivity, the root of the novel ends up showing the rebellion of Meursault himself. Meursault comes to face with the absurd at last when he is about to be executed. When he comes to his last soliloquy, he comes to the vision of the universe as an extension of his own indifference: "I opened myself to the soft indifference of the world. This well-known quote is the epiphany of Meursault: he realizes that the world (as well as he himself) will meet his demise with indifference. Rather than hopelessness, he has an odd companionship with the universe, the universe seeming to him far too like himself, too like a sibling, really, and happiness starts to come to him again. This realization of Meursault is a quintessential Camusian thesis that in acknowledging the absurd instead of trying to deny its

existence, he goes beyond alienation. At this point, Meursault, as SparkNotes puts it, has fully learned the absurdist concept that the universe does not care about human life and that nothing about life has a rational meaning to it, and is blissfully contented to understand it. Summing up, *The Stranger* is a play that dramatizes the encounter of the strange person and the absurdity: Meursault can experience personal meaning not until he recognizes that life has no meaning and takes responsibility on his freedom in the face of the absurd.

This reading is reinforced by major characteristics of *The Stranger* that tend to be brought out in scholarly criticism:

- **Absurdity and Irrationality:** Meursault exists in the world of no obvious cause and effect. His violent action in the beach, e.g., does not seem out of rationality but rather an occurrence of improbable circumstances (the blinding sun and a lost contact lens). Camus demonstrates that occasionally things occur due to no reason and the characters (including readers) struggle to accept this disturbing reality.

Meursault is not interested in meaning in conventional stories. He laughs at the efforts of other people: when the chaplain begs to save his soul, Meursault answers that life means nothing - just a simple verdict of indifference to the cosmos. Camus therefore dramatizes the fact that there is no redeeming meaning or purpose in human life other than death.

Indifference and Passivity: The lack of the reactions of the protagonist emphasizes absurdism. He is emotionally unemotional at the funeral of his mother, which is subsequently explained by the rudeness of the sun, rather than sorrow. His detached, factual account (e.g. meal description or banal life in prison) tells us that this is a character who does not despise or idealize life.

- **Focus on the Physical:** Meursault is more influenced by the feelings than the abstract concepts throughout the novel. His delights and sufferings are physical (cold, heat, hungry, fatigued) and the meaning that he can discover is in the immediate, physical experience and not in history or in philosophy.

Chance: In many instances, Meursault mentions that the events of life are equally arbitrary as events in nature. His most important relationships (e.g. with his girlfriend Marie) appear to be replaceable by any other possibility, and this point also supports the idea that Camus presents in his work, people are isolated under the sun and their actions are accidental.

These combined factors create the picture of the world where the traditional values and logical thinking cannot be applied to the situation, making the readers face the question of the meaning of their own lives in the cold universe. The personal search of Meursault is not that which seeks the outside meaning; he simply notes the nothingness. Ultimately, it is the gesture of receiving and even admitting such an absence that grants him a sort of sense, the sense of authenticity and sincerity amidst meaninglessness.

The Plague: Massive Absurdity and Rebellion.

In *The Plague*, Camus enlarges the field of solitary existence of Meursault to a besieged town, yet the importance of absurdity and uprising stays the same. Oran is the city where the novel

takes place and which suddenly becomes a victim of bubonic plague. This outbreak that comes to both rich and poor randomly becomes a distinct representation of irrational anguish. According to Karpouzou the bubonic plague in the novel symbolizes the suffering and death of man marked in a random manner, which is one of the ugly sides of the world. There is no moral justification in the disease, and it just strikes without any notice just like the misfortune in the real world. By doing so, the plague is an absurd, a nonsensical calamity that is forced to be imposed on normal existence.

Camus also intentionally presents the plague as an existential crisis to people. The readers tend to see the novel as a kind of an allegory - against Nazi occupation or any totalitarian disaster or against human suffering in general. More essentially, it is an absurd parable. To start with, the citizens of Oran respond as though normalcy will somehow prevail: the government is squabbling around about petty things to do, and the population underestimates the danger. However, when the number of deaths grows, the crisis makes all people face meaninglessness. Others hold the plague in common ways: Father Paneloux, in this instance, preaches that it is a punishment. In the first sermon he preaches, he says, plague is the flail of God and the world his threshing-floor and calls upon the faithful to take it as the test of God. Such religious framing is what Camus would refer to as a philosophical suicide- abandonment of the absurd reality by giving in to supernatural answers. It gives emotional solace to a few, yet the actual issue is avoided the indifference of the world.

A revolt that is Camusian is depicted through other characters. The narrator, the most outstanding character, is Dr. Bernard Rieux, who goes directly against the absurd by doing something. He has a clear picture of how the plague is absurd and scary, but he cannot give up and run away. Rieux instead plunges into hard labor: curing the ill, mobilizing medical assistance, and subsequently setting up quarantine and hospital departments. According to one of the most important critical evaluations, Rieux, although he understands the menace of the plague and the existential absurdity of human beings, resists capitulating in despair or finding some consolation in religion, instead choosing to fight back. Rieux rebels against the absurdity in Camusian language by opting to stand by and work hard. He does not seek pleasure in the confidence of philosophy, but in good acts to others - in his activity seeking a purpose as he experiences fatigue and defeat. It is one of the major patterns: Camus believes that the real heroes are the ones who embrace [the absurdity] and continue struggling with it. In the same way, Jean Tarrou is an example of rebellion in *The Plague*. Tarrou is an outsider caught by quarantine, who, acting out of conscience assists Rieux to organize sanitation teams and documenting the number of people dying each day. He is also of the same mind as Rieux that all the sufferings are inherently unfair and he is trying to find his moral standing in solidarity. Raymond Rambert is a journalist, and his first desire is to leave the inexplicable nightmare and meet his lover in Paris. But the crisis prolongs itself and the experiences undergo a metamorphosis. He eventually makes a choice of not abandoning his fellow townspeople and to remain in Oran to aid the rest in the struggle against the plague. The

choice he makes highlights one of the points Camus makes: meaning usually comes at the cost of human bonding, instead of self-flight in the face of an absurd world.

In comparison, the Cottard and other lesser characters depict other less noble responses to the absurd crisis. Cottard is a smuggler and at the beginning of the epidemic, he attempts to commit suicide due to his paranoia. However, when he is aware that the plague puts fire and brim on the entire world, securing his hands off the law, he transforms fear into greed - he lives on black-market trading. According to one scholar, the confusion of the plague gave [him] hope, and when the order and regularity came back, his momentary hope was ruined by the cessation of the plague. That is, the only meaning and security that Cottard has is through the disorder, which dissipates as soon as the absurd crisis is over. This shows how Camus has been cautioning out that seeking meaning in arbitrary benefit or superstition is empty. Such false meanings fall apart when the ridiculous event takes place.

These ideas are supported by some major themes in *The Plague*:

- **Random Suffering and Solidarity:** The randomness of the plague challenges all the characters with the concept that misfortune does not follow any order. To this, Rieux, Tarrou, Rambert and others establish a network of mutual assistance. They establish soup kitchens, take care of orphans and ambulances. Despite the summaries provided by Karpouzios, the novel emphasizes the acts of heroism and rebellion as the characters fight against the plague altruistically. This unity is defiant of the absurd: through loving and laboring they give human definition to a meaningless disaster.

- **Exile and Isolation:** Physically, the epidemic alienates Oran with the world and puts people into quarantine. Morally, it alienates characters emotionally where each one deals with the plague differently. This situation, in turn, is a symbol of existential absurdity: everyone is incarcerated in his point of view. Tarrou and Rieux are examples of those who cope by sharing their troubles, some only cope, some do not cope at all.

The *Plague* also criticizes escapism. The sermons by Paneloux provide a way of faith (the just man need have no fear), whereas Paneloux himself in the future doubts this naive attitude when he observes innocent suffering. Conversely, such characters as Rieux clearly deny dependence on God or ideology. Rieux is mocking Rambert by simply saying, that in case I believed in the power of an all-powerful God, I would stop curing the sick and leave it to Him. He says that human effort is a thing that gives hope and not miracles. Camus points out that denial is not the answer but knowing what to keep an eye on.

With these aspects, *The Plague* dramatizes the reaction that a community can show in the face of absurdity, with mass insurrection. The story reveals that by the time the plague eventually subsides; it is neither the fate nor a God who kills it but human spirit (along with a new trial of the serum). Afterwards, Rieux remarks that he wrote the chronicle to demonstrate that even in the crisis, people are better than evil. In a way, Camus is using the plague to prove his hypothesis that despite the depths of being abysmal and the lack of concern, man can still help one another, and he must.

Search for Meaning in an Absurd World

So, what does Camus say about the search of meaning using these novels? More importantly, Camus refutes that meaning is found through transcendental means or rational assurances. Rather, his writings depict that meaning is produced by the way of life. Those in both *The Stranger* and *The Plague* fail to discover some latent cosmic intentions. Meursault never discovers any other mysterious truth other than himself and Rieux never sees the plague as an explanation other than as a chaos. However, some sort of a meaning can be found in both. Meursault, in his turn, finds meaning in sincerity and acceptance. Towards the end of *The Stranger*, he renounces all delusions: he is not afraid of death or even fakes that he cares about the opinions of the society. By so doing, he shows the concept of the absurd hero by Camus: he does not even want to live towards an afterlife or a social endorsement. His point is that he will live his life to the fullest in every moment despite its length, which may be a long, “dumb” prison sentence. It is the realization of some easy comradeship with being that gives him the joy he feels when he is on the scaffold. To put it in another way, what Meursault wins is the fact that he does not believe in false expectations and, like Sisyphus, he is satisfied with the essence of life itself.

Solidarity and moral action are where meaning can be found in *The Plague*. Rieux and Tarrou get a sense of purpose in taking care of fellow human beings. Their devotion, to assist the dying, console the mourners, marshal the defences, is their solution to the ridiculous suffering. They create communities of care and so subject to a human order where none is naturally present. What Camus is implying is that human connection and resistance provide meaning: to rebel is to claim that what we choose is not useless even when it may appear like the universe does not care. According to one of the commentators of *The Plague*, such characters as Rieux do not want to find any comfort in religion or death but revolt as Sisyphus-like against the world where the meaning cannot be guaranteed.

Both the novels, in the language of Camus, represent the answer he provides in his essays: living the absurd without contemplating resignation. It is not that life is easily and meaningfully good on some timeless scale, but that an individual can continue to live fully and proudly despite the absurdity. It is not a question of what is the meaning of life (which to Camus does not make sense in existence), but rather a question of how should one live in the light of that? The responses that Camus provides are reflected in the answers his characters give (Meursault has the freedom to hate or forgive how he pleases, Rieux his tireless compassion, town uniting against the plague).

Conclusion

Albert Camus in *The Stranger* and *The Plague* takes the abstract idea of the absurd and makes it alive and well in the form of human lives. We get to view the very essence of the absurdist paradox through the detached quest of Meursault and the ordeal of the people in Oran, in a world devoid of meaning. But despair is not the end of Camus. Both the stories emphasize the fact that rebelling against meaninglessness is not only possible, but also necessary. Meursault derives some fulfillment in the indifference of the universe and insisting on his truth. Dr. Action is something Rieux and his friends can find meaning in: by taking care of

others and continuing to struggle with meaningless death, they find human meaning in the nothingness.

Finally, Camus also invites us to understand that meaning is acquired but it is created. The choices of the protagonists depict his disjunction that people should provide some sort of meaning to their lives by means of freedom and revolt. They do not give in to nihilism but instead proclaim the virtues of life per se, not because the world requires it, but because they do. Towards the endpoint of *The Stranger*, Meursault visualizes a multitude welcoming him to his death with animosity: the image gives him an immense feeling of life and communion, even in hate. And at the end of *The Plague*, Rieux writes that not even an absurd disaster can wipe out human love, but love will do it and the implication here is that compassion is a man-made response to the absurd.

Through a combination of narrative, character, and philosophical insight, Camus demonstrates to us how to live in the absurd world best. The novels of his do not offer to answer the ultimate question; they model a way of living which is highly human. By confronting the absurd directly, unillusioned, fearless and united Camus characters show that we can have some sort of meaning even in an apathetic world. When it all comes down to it, both *The Stranger* and *The Plague* leave us with a paradoxical hope that having accepted the absurdity of life and having considered each other first and foremost, we would create a meaningful life of our own design.

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