



Absurdity and Death in *The Stranger*

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the 20th century, the world has encountered the horrors of death in the forms of two World Wars, civil wars, atomic explosions, famines, epidemics, and inhuman random killings, which are absurd, ultimately jeopardizing our existence in this universe. People became alienated from conventional society due to the catastrophe of human degradation. A few notable authors, including Albert Camus, attempted to focus on "Absurdity" and "Death" in terms of finding a purpose. On the basis of Camus' philosophy, life is essentially absurd, having no inherent meaning, where death is the inevitable truth that stops all of our deeds and the power of thinking and imagining. Focusing on Camus' 1942 novel *The Stranger*, this qualitative research will analyze the concept of death, the core of absurdism, which opens our eyes and reveals the untold questions about our existence.

Keywords: Absurdity, death, killing, philosophy, society, alienation, and meaninglessness.

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INTRODUCTION

The 20th century was the most significant time when science and technology began to flourish globally, especially in Europe. Although the rapid growth of industrialization made life easier and more comfortable, it caused several moral degradations that drove people away from humanity. Thus, the 20th century was not only the time of the so-called newly emerged civilized and developed modern world but also a dark marker of cruelty and insanity in human history. The two World Wars carry the evidence of this dark truth, destroying and killing human beings at random. Humans killed their species brutally, not knowing the purpose, which brought nothing but the emptiness of life.

Moreover, in many cases, Darwin's theory influenced people to deny the existence of God. As a result, life became meaningless and purposeless. T. S. Eliot reflected on this devastated post-war situation of the world in his most complex and critical poem, "The Waste Land," focusing on the elements of modernism – mistrust, deception, degeneration, decay, faithlessness, lack of Christian values, the rapid growth of industrialization, disillusionment, mechanical life, degradation of human dignity, evaporation of love and human emotions, the crisis in Western culture, etc. (T. Talukder, personal communication, October 12, 2020). In addition, the loss of ethical and moral values caused the rise of deception, extra-marital affairs, adultery, and fraudulence. As most people lost their faith in God and were deceiving each other, their spirits degenerated. As Eliot asserted, the entire land of Europe turned into a wasteland. Moreover, three significant points – death, burial, and rebirth are also reflected in the poem in which "death" symbolizes the decay and destruction of the 20th-century modern world.

The two World Wars witnessed destruction and loss of human lives, which compelled people to think about the ultimate purpose of life; more specifically, the artists and the writers found absurdity in European life. Accordingly, some modern authors attempted to focus on the devastating world of "death" in their writings in different ways. For instance, in his novel *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway (1994) showed how the "lost generation" members dealt with their lives, losing hope and finding no meaning in their existence. Furthermore, although society needed mutual help and understanding, people were inclined towards individualism, ultimately leading to disintegration.

Nevertheless, the absurdist philosopher Albert Camus views death differently from ordinary people's eyes. He views it with the essence of absurdity, which involves the idea that life is purposeless, has no inherent meaning, and everything gets stopped by death. This spirit of absurdity compelled him to think that death has a purpose, the reflection of which we find in his 1942 novel, *The Stranger*.

BACKGROUND

Philosophically, absurdism encapsulates the profound struggle of human existence, where one finds oneself a stranger in a universe devoid of illusion, light, purpose, connection, memory, meaning, and hope. The intricate quest for life's purpose and intrinsic value renders human life absurd. Absurdist philosophers such as Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Samuel Beckett, who often delve into existentialism and nihilism, grapple with this profound struggle in their absurd literary genres ("Absurdism", 2003).

Based on the statement of Jean-Paul Sartre, an existentialist, human beings live in great agony because we are sentenced to be free, not because life is dreadful. We are thrown into existence, where we have to be conscious of ourselves besides making choices. Even determining not to choose anything is also a choice. According to Sartre's public lecture in 1945, "existentialism is a humanism," where our existence precedes essence; that is the basic principle of existentialism, which expresses that we have a responsibility for ourselves that can lead us to despair and anguish, even questioning why we are living; and that is what existential crisis is ("Jean-Paul Sartre," 2015).

The two World Wars of the 20th century caused people to become involved in identity and existential crises associated with absurdism. In the 19th century, a Danish philosopher named Søren Kierkegaard introduced "absurdity" in his journals, Concluding Unscientific.

Postscript, and Journals of Søren Kierkegaard. He believed "the meaninglessness of existence is filled with anxiety and despair, a sense of hopelessness and deep depression." According to his philosophy, although we want to escape anxiety and aimless depression in search of happiness, we cannot escape, no matter how much we try to forget the truth, making life easier and more comfortable (Lavine, 1984, pp. 322-323).

However, Albert Camus, a French-Algerian writer and philosopher, believed that life is absurd and has no inherent meaning, which can lead people to despair and end their lives. However, Camus did not appreciate suicide; instead, he had a different approach to the uncertainty of existence. Meaninglessness allows people to free themselves from hope and experience existence entirely. According to his belief, life is purposeless, where all the forms of meaning we try to give are the constructs of the human mind (Einzelganger, 2020). Camus (2018) stated in his philosophical novel *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

I am curious to know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me to know it just now. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms.

Camus's philosophy rejects the notion of universal values or divine plans. Instead, he posits that life unfolds randomly and absurdly, devoid of any inherent meaning or purpose. This perspective underscores the unpredictability of existence, a concept that Camus believed people should embrace rather than fear.

This is how the idea of absurdity has grown evidently from Sartre to Camus. Camus' absurdism gives a clear picture that people can connect with their lives, especially after experiencing the horrors of the two World Wars.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Stranger, Camus' one of the philosophical and absurdist novels published in 1942, consists of two parts. The first part of the text describes the protagonist, Meursault's routine life; the second part explains his psychological journey living in the prison cell. The text carries three significant death-related events, especially at the beginning, middle point, and ending: the death of the mother, the killing of an Arab man, and Meursault's death sentence (Salsabila & Tjahjani, 2020).

In the beginning, Meursault's mother dies because of her age, which indicates a natural death by fate. The setting of this incident takes place at the old home and the cemetery. "Old home" symbolizes how elderly people age, suffer, wait, and count the last breaths of their lives, as no one can fight against time. Moreover, the "cemetery" setting also reminds us of death. However, this occurrence does not put any positive or negative impact on Meursault. Rather, he remains calm and quiet, does not cry for once, and even denies seeing his mother's face for the last time, but enjoys coffee and cigarettes in front of the corpse. All these show his negligence in observing death and the funeral process as something significant, for death is inevitable for all living beings.

The second death event of killing the Arab man occurs at the beach. Meursault's clear-cut statement about shooting him is that the unbearable solar heat on the isolated beach pushed him from behind. His sweating eyebrows made him feel disgusted, and his eyes were blinded by the salty sweat that compelled him to shoot. However, this incident, capturing the Arab man, becomes the novel's turning point. According to Meursault's logic, he did not kill the Arab man but shot the sun to escape from the disturbance, arguably one of the most absurd things.

The third event related to death occurred during the trial by the judge's decision, that is, Meursault's death sentence, which is out of his choice and control. The courtroom's setting obstructs Meursault from neglecting social norms and values. However, despite justifying his criminal activity, the trial judges his different views of routine life without connection with the crime. However, the decision of Meursault's death sentence cannot be questioned, as it is taken by the judge, which forces the protagonist to face death without any alternative (Salsabila & Tjahjani, 2020). Therefore, death eventually leads him towards his consciousness and freedom of choice. This situation fulfils the absurdity in the text, where Meursault becomes the ultimate "Absurd Man" in *The Stranger*.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper will connect the dimensions of death and death-related incidents represented in the notable work of Albert Camus, *The Stranger*. After I go through the text's events concerning absurdity, I will focus on the text's structure from a reader's perspective. This article will concentrate on Camus' idea of absurdity and its characteristics. Besides, the paper aims to analyze death's motive, value, and meaning from the philosophical perspective reflected in the mentioned work. Print and electronic media sources will be used to conduct this qualitative research and reveal death's meaning and purpose.

Absurdism

According to Camus' philosophy, life is absurd, where everything happens randomly. However, what did Camus mean by the Absurd? Did he mean that we, humans, are absurd beings? Or that the world that surrounds us is absurd? He meant neither. Instead, Camus believed that we are rational beings with a strong desire to create order and clarity to give meaning to life. At the same time, we are part of an indifferent universe, and the response of such a universe to the human cry for meaning is nothing more than silence. This confrontation is what Camus called the Absurd (Einzelganger, 2020). However, Camus gives three solutions to absurdism: adopting or creating a meaningful framework, suicide, or accepting the absurd, in which a person submits to any moral or religious consistency by accepting the absurdity of life ("Absurdism in Literature", 2017).

With the essence of absurdity, some absurdist philosophers and authors, including – Camus, Ionesco, Pinter, and Beckett, wrote absurd literary genres, especially during the 1950s' absurdist movement, which followed: the incoherence of conversation or storytelling, satire, surrealism, or the comedic way to focus on existentialism and the human condition (Staff, 2021). In absurdist fiction, the protagonist often suffers from depression and disillusionment with their life, family, society, and religion.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger believed that human beings were thrown into this universe without any purpose, where they have no value or meaning in life, the theory of which is referred to as "existentialism". However, the irony is that, although humans are free to choose, they are given no choice, whereas existentialism believes that not choosing anything is also a choice. It tries to discover the purpose of life and what it means to be a human being and questions the complexities of good and evil. The theory believes that "man is what he does" (Ahmed, 2019).

Existentialism is connected with angst, stress, consciousness of death, and freedom. Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus, Heidegger, and Fanon are popular existentialists and philosophers who believed

in rationalism and positivism. Existentialism considers human beings fundamentally irrational. It denies the "Western rationalist definitions of 'being' in terms of a rational principle or essence". However, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche were the first to work on the existentialist movement without even using "existentialism". They regarded that the identity and the nature of human beings differ from the principles and beliefs they carry ("Existentialism", 2007).

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the theme of existentialism is portrayed, where the two protagonists called "Estragon" and "Vladimir" are thrown into an absurd situation where they suffer from pains and struggles, but do nothing to bring a change in their lifestyle (Ahmed, 2019), rather they always keep waiting for someone called "Godot" whom they do not know, which is absurd. Although existentialism urges them to do something to give a meaning to life, the characters just waste their time without attempting to do anything remarkable that can change their miserable life.

Existential Crisis: An Example

Living without appeal means living in the present moment with the full awareness of the Absurd and not wanting anything more from a conceptual future. To imagine what it is like to live without appeal, Camus (2018), in his philosophical novel, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pointed to the Greek mythological figure called "Sisyphus", who was the founder and king of Ephyra, and also a pretty deceitful person. He made a mistake to challenge the Greek gods for which he was punished and condemned to push a rock uphill that rolled down every time it reached the top and to repeat this process for eternity. Sisyphus' existence is so meaningless and hopeless that trying to give his repetitive action any meaning is absurd. Living without appeal means that our actions do not need to lead to something better in the future. The meaning lies in the act itself, which is sufficient to be content in a hopeless life. The gods based the punishment of Sisyphus on the idea that there is nothing more dreadful than endless and futile labour. But this simply depends on the position we take towards that. What if we imagine Sisyphus happy? What if one finds joy in despair and refuses to surrender oneself to the misery that life throws at us? (Einzelganger, 2020).

Meursault's Belief in Existentialism:

Existentialism refers to the philosophy that life has no apparent meaning. In *The Stranger*, Camus includes his idea of absurdity in life, how there is no good or bad way of surviving as everyone is going to face death, which is equal for all living creatures. Meursault, in the text, pursues this trait evidently (Fisher, 2017).

According to existential belief, the most significant achievement of an individual is to realize the absurdity of life deeply and to accept it without any compromise. The core of existentialism is "freedom of choice", although some absurd or irrational things exist

without any description. Meursault shows his freedom by doing whatever he wishes to do, such as smoking and drinking in front of his mother's corpse, without showing any kind of emotion. However, unintentionally murdering the Arab man is a very unpredictable incident in the novel. Nevertheless, "individuality" is one of the significant characteristics of existentialism, which we strongly find in the protagonist at the end of the novel, when Meursault wants to die by guillotining, witnessing a large group of people who would cry with hatred towards him.

How society views Meursault:

"Meursault" is an absurd character who does not play the game of the typical society, for which society considers him an "outsider". He lives only for pleasure leading a meaningless detached life. Being an existentialist, Meursault only believes in sensual objects. Thus when his mother dies, it does not affect his mind as a dead body is nothing but a motionless thing, like "Lucy" in Wordsworth's poem "A Slumber did My Spirit Seal", where Lucy becomes a dead object with no feeling at all. However, society requires a man to cry after the death of his beloved, which Meursault denies doing. When a person dies, society appreciates his family members not being emotional, rather they should go ahead without losing hope. At the same time, instead of showing sorrow, if they go forward doing their daily activities, then the same typical society treats them as unsocial beings.

According to Smith (2018), Meursault has both sociopathic and psychopathic traits, but he is more attached to psychopathic characteristics, as he has no remorse for his actions. His unsocial activities at his mother's death show his lack of morality and emotions. The next day after the funeral, he spends quality time with "Marie", watches a comedy movie, goes to the office the following day, does regular work, helps Raymond in writing a letter to punish his mistress, and does not call the police when Raymond beats the woman, kills the Arab man without any reason, and shoots four more times at the corpse. All these represent Meursault as an emotionless and heartless human being in conventional society.

Nevertheless, the protagonist tries to follow some rules and norms as he lives in a society, although he cannot fully digest the whole fragile system. If he did not care about the social norms, he might not have attended his mother's funeral, putting the responsibility to the harborage, but he did attend and shook hands just as social formalities. Moreover, the next day after swimming, he wore a black tie, which is nothing but a social rule. Furthermore, he consulted with Salamano to get his lost dog back, although he did not ask for help from Meursault. In addition, looking at Mr. And Mrs. Messon, he thought of having such a beautiful couple life with Marie.

Another point is that if people's lives are valueless to him, why did he follow Raymond when he went to the beach alone? Why did he take the gun from him so that he could not shoot somehow? All these statements make the so-called "emotionless" character of Meursault questionable.

Meursault's Escapism and Killing the Arab Man:

According to the Oxford dictionary definition, "escapism" refers to the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy. In *The Stranger*, Meursault is lonely deep inside; he always tries to escape from the present situation to avoid all kinds of responsibility. Therefore, he tries to finish his mother's funeral as early as possible; he does not talk to Salamano or save the ill-fated dog from him, as he does not want to get attached to anyone. If he had once talked to Salamano, he would have been responsible for searching for and returning the dog to its master. He does not consider Marie matchless; he does not love or wish to marry her, yet he has no problem marrying her if she wants. However, if he gets married, he has to take responsibility as a husband. However, those social formalities do not matter to him. He wants to escape from everything for a while. Therefore, shooting the Arab man can also represent his "escapism" in that, to get relief from the uncomfortable situation where the reflection of light from the Arab man's sword made him feel disturbed, he shoots the person instead of simply leaving the place. Perhaps he did this for self-protection, or his psychoanalytical mind had pushed him to shoot subconsciously. Nevertheless, whatever reasons we try to give are just intuitions. Meursault kills the person for no apparent reason, which concludes the text's core message that life has no meaning (Doyle, 2021).

Meursault's Alienation and Death Sentence:

According to Abdullah and Saksono (2021), when a person is separated from his authentic self and individual characteristics, it is referred to as "alienation". Alienation can be of different types, including – social alienation, crime, psychological weakness, disillusionment, or overall subjective disappointment with the universe. Based on Sartre's Being and Nothingness, alienation includes the concept of ignorance of inter-human relations (Spade, 1995). Alienation occurs when an individual character attempts to change the established norms, values, ethics, rules, and regulations of society with something different, that is absurd.

In *The Stranger*, Meursault, as an absurdist, suffered from complications in searching out the inherent value and meaning of life. However, he failed to find any purpose or meaning throughout the journey until death. Thus, in the first part of the novel, when his mother passed away, he felt that the surrounding people at the funeral procession had alienated him from their community, as Meursault did not look after his mother;

rather he alienated himself from the responsibilities of being a son by sending his mother at the nursing home. Moreover, his actions of smoking and not showing any kind of emotion towards her were disgraceful and contradictory, which violated moral dignity and ethics, especially from social and religious perspectives. Even his existential behaviour and absurd views also break the continuity of traditional social norms. Nevertheless, as Meursault could not control his behaviour himself, he had been caught up in his flaws of showing selfishness and egoism. However, he had no motive to interrupt others' affairs (Abdullah & Saksono, 2021). Therefore, he chose alienation, consciously having no aim in life, where his alienation was strengthened by his attitude of being careless, indifferent, selfish, and, most significantly, absurd. As his indifferent nature goes against the norms of society, he is considered as a soulless monster. Thus, despite judging his criminal activity, his passive attitude towards his mother's death is repeatedly used to portray him as a criminal in the court, which appears to have a significant effect on the observers, which ultimately ends up with Meursault's death sentence.

Meursault's Realization about the Meaning of Death:

Meursault navigates the absurdity of existence with consciousness. Initially, he did not regard death as significant, but he ultimately recognized that it symbolizes liberation. Independence from the myriad challenges and tribulations of worldly existence may only be attained by death, which constitutes the ultimate reality of human life. He contended that individuals' lives lack inherent value or significance. Meursault recognizes that his impending death will hold no significance in this world or in anyone's existence, just as the deaths of others failed to impact him during his life. Consequently, according to Camus' philosophy, Meursault ultimately embraces death as the sole certainty that liberates each individual from a vacuous existence.

Camus' concept of absurdity illustrates that Meursault's estrangement from his relatives, society, and self, along with his incarceration under the death penalty, exemplifies a metaphysical state of humanity that inexorably leads to his capital punishment. Consequently, Meursault, who consistently devalued death during his existence, starts to contemplate life and death when confronted with his impending execution (Salsabila & Tjahjani, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Absurdism is a theory that does not adhere to specific laws or conventions; instead, it evolves throughout time. Consequently, although Sartre and Kierkegaard posited that a ridiculous individual is perpetually absurd, Camus perceived absurdity differently, seeing the protagonist as neither thoroughly socialized nor entirely absurd but rather as existing in ambivalence. In *The Stranger*, Meursault is depicted as a ridiculous figure; nonetheless, he adheres to specific

laws and standards to navigate societal existence. Consequently, despite his ability to forgo attending his mother's burial, he participated in the procession and donned a black tie to adhere to social conventions. He would not have permitted Raymond to stroll alone on the beach if he were entirely devoid of emotion. He would have confiscated his rifle until there was a possibility that Raymond would discharge it. Moreover, he contemplated a shared existence with Marie after observing Mr. and Mrs. Messon. These traits render the notion of Meursault's absurdity debatable. Camus has created a persona that is neither totally socialized nor entirely ridiculous. Thus, from Sartre to Camus, the concept of absurdity has evolved, with Camus' absurdism providing a more relatable depiction of individuals in their actual lives.

Another observation I made during my investigation is the significance of dying. According to Camus' theory, whereas existence is devoid of meaning, death possesses significance or purpose, whether natural, social, or religious. Every living organism inevitably confronts death; without mortality, succeeding generations would lack a viable habitat for existence. Consequently, to establish a foundation for future generations, individuals must pass away as Meursault's mother does naturally due to her advanced age in *The Stranger*. Furthermore, the passage illustrates the social purpose of death. When an individual poses a threat to society, lacking adherence to its social norms and ideals, he must perish like Meursault. Meursault's killing is inadequately justified; he becomes a prisoner of the death sentence only due to his transgressions against societal norms. Moreover, in every faith, death is revered as significant, with the notion of the afterlife commencing at death. Consequently, the priest endeavours to console Meursault, urging him to repent to God for salvation and eternal life in heaven, but Meursault rejects his belief in God. Thus, death serves specific goals, particularly from natural, social, and religious viewpoints.

Death is the inescapable reality of human existence. In *The Stranger*, Camus emphasizes death as a significant theme throughout the narrative. The demise of Meursault's mother, the murder of the Arab man, and Meursault's capital punishment illustrate death-related events that transpire by natural causes, inadvertent actions, and legal decree in chronological order. Camus' theory of the Absurd posits that while existence is devoid of meaning, death possesses a particular significance. Consequently, Meursault, who exhibits a passive disposition towards the deaths of others throughout his life, ultimately begins to contemplate death when confronted with his own death sentence, perceiving it as a liberation from the myriad battles and miseries inherent in material existence.

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