
Original Paper

Existentialism and the Search for Meaning in Albert Camus'

The Stranger

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between existentialism and the quest for significance in Albert Camus' influential novel, *The Stranger*. The study first analyzes the intersection between literature and philosophy, emphasizing the mechanism by which literary works can serve as vehicles to articulate philosophical concepts. It also elucidates the fundamental principles of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, examining the notion that existence precedes essence, the significance of authenticity, and concepts of freedom, bad faith, and alienation. It then goes on to highlight the connection between literature and philosophy, by focusing on how Camus' *The Stranger* effectively conveys existentialist concepts through a fictional narrative, despite the author refusing to categorize himself as a philosopher. The author contends that *The Stranger* embodies existentialist ideas, despite Camus' conscious detachment from the philosophical movement. In particular, Camus' work is shown to seek to elucidate the concept of absurdism, and the futility of attempting to find meaning in life's incomprehensible events. The ways in which Camus effectively communicates a significant message concerning the influence of warring ideologies on their followers, through the lens of absurdism are highlighted. The study also challenges the general significance of texts, contemplating the pointlessness of seeking meaning in life through a work of fiction. It concludes by emphasizing the endurance of Camus' work as a medium for examining the human condition and the quest for purpose in an increasingly ludicrous world.

Keywords: Existentialism, Absurdism, meaningless, meaning of life, Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

1. Introduction

Literature is an integral contributor to the fabric of society, inseparable from the culture from which it originates. As explanatory discourses of culture and the functioning of society, literature and philosophy diverge in their respective areas of inquiry. Philosophy focuses on examining human ideas, placing importance on actual human experience, whereas literature concentrates on the fictional characters crafted by the author. However, these endeavors are closely related, and literature frequently serves as an expression of philosophical ideas. Novels can be understood as not usually intentionally instructional, but rather as employing fictional narratives to transmit a philosophy of life (Kim).

Existentialism can be characterized as a concept shaped by historical circumstances (Curzon-Hobson). Jean-Paul Sartre gained iconic status becoming one of the most renowned figures in existentialism, due to his significant contributions to the philosophical movement. In 2020, Crowell observed that existentialism encompasses both literary and philosophical aspects. Jean-Paul Sartre developed the term "self-description" to describe the various literary and philosophical works he produced after the war. Abdullah and Saksono highlighted a number of ideas associated with Sartre's existentialism as manifest in his work. Existence precedes essence, complete freedom, the duty of making choices, unease, individuality, hopelessness, and being left alone or feelings of disconnection.

Albert Camus, a renowned author, was born in Algeria during the period between both world Wars when the country was under colonial rule (Salah). He engaged in journalism, editing, playwriting, directing, novel writing, and short story authorship. However, he rejected the label of philosopher, since he did not systematically record his thoughts, and questioned the notion of a systematic philosophy (Arinze and Onwuatuwegwu).

Camus explores the concept of absurdism in his novels, thereby revealing the profound understanding of the inherent insignificance of human existence (Asadov). The points addressed can be seen to align with Sartre's description of existentialism as referenced in Webber's work. Despite distancing himself from existentialism, Camus presented one of the most renowned existentialist inquiries in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, stating "there is only one truly profound philosophical question, and that is suicide" (Camus 3). In the subject of this paper, *The Stranger*, the chief character's objectives appear unambiguously as, to illuminate the concept of absurdism and demonstrate the potential impact of society's adverse ramifications on its adherents. This message, however, appears to be delivered satirically.

The fundamental principle of absurdism asserts that attempting to uncover meaning in life's incomprehensible occurrences is pointless. That is, seeking to discover importance within a book would be a futile endeavor if the pursuit of meaning yielded no outcomes. The book's profound message regarding conflicting ideologies and their impact on followers is illustrated through Camus' lens. The novel's overall relevance is also questioned through a contemplation of the futility of seeking meaning in something as vast as life, let alone through the medium of a stack of paper pages with ink markings on them (Payne).

2. Research Problem

Published in 1942, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus is understood to be a seminal work of existentialist literature. It reveals how existentialism places great importance on the autonomy and accountability of the individual within a cosmos lacking in purpose. This research examines the character of Meursault, the central figure in *The Stranger*, as he pursues a quest for significance in a world that lacks fundamental meaning. The story centers on the notion of the ludicrous, that is, the intrinsic discrepancy between humanity's innate need for significance and the universe's apathy toward that endeavor. Meursault's seeming lack of feeling in reaction to his mother's death and his subsequent act of violence provokes inquiries into his detachment and desire for significance in a nonsensical world.

3. Research Questions

The objective of this research is to answer the following:

- How does Camus use Meursault's character to epitomize the notion of the absurd?
- Which of Meursault's experiences and observations lead to his perception of meaninglessness?
- Does Meursault finally discover significance, or does he fully accept the irrationality of existence?

While addressing these questions, this research will elucidate the intricacies of existentialist philosophy and the challenges associated with finding significance in a world devoid of intrinsic worth.

4. Literature Review

Jean-Paul Sartre is the originator of French Existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical perspective that values authenticity highly. Sartre asserts that "conflict is the fundamental essence of being-for-other" (Sartre 386). Additionally, he asserts that persons have the capacity to be genuine or lack in genuineness. Zekkour (2016) states that Sartre's definition of authenticity involves supporting a continuous endeavor to evade self-deception and dishonesty.

One prominent aspect of Sartre's philosophy is the concept that existence precedes essence. Sartre posits that the first man came into existence, confronted the reality of his own being, joined the realm of existence, and thereafter established his own identity (Priest and Sartre 44). Thus, Sartre's conception of existentialism takes the form of a philosophical doctrine that rejects the existence of a deity. Furthermore, Sartre contended that human freedom is not subject to the authority of God. "Man becomes what he desires" (Sartre) because man alone is accountable for his actions. Thus, existentialist ideology attributes significance and worth to human existence. Existentialism explores how individuals discover the nature of their existence through emotions, accountability, conduct, and liberty. According to Sartre, the act of punching someone is typically driven by emotion, as doing so necessitates a reason or intention.

The researcher consulted various studies to identify the key themes that inform Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. Each thing in the world, regardless of whether manufactured or natural is understood to possess an inherent character. Existentialists hold differing stances. For example, a theistic existentialist holds beliefs regarding the existence of God that are unique to them. Sartre maintains that humans lack an essential essence, and so prioritizes existence as the primary aspect: "A person comes into existence: they manifest in the world, confront themselves, and only then establish their identity" (490).

In "Basic Writing" according to Priest, Sartre argues that humans have two options for living their lives: authentically or *mauvaise foi*, which means living with false beliefs. A genuine life is then a human existence characterized by complete freedom, devoid of limitations or restrictions. The concept of Sartrean liberty can be comprehended by examining the context, as humans are inherently intertwined with their circumstances. Sartre, in his work "Being and Nothingness," elucidates the inseparability of freedom from the human condition. "The being of man and being free are indistinguishable." (Sartre 25). Sartre posits that human beings possess the capacity to exercise their will and take action, which he designates freedom. As individuals, humans have the potential to become whatever they desire through their daily actions.

The cessation of sorrow poses the most significant peril to the survival of humanity. Sartre characterizes it as a form of profound emptiness, and a mindset can hinder personal growth and development. The presence of internal conflicts resulting from a lack of sincerity prompt the deterioration of human lives as they have been shaped and created by individuals themselves. Typically, humans have a tendency to make broad generalizations about the universe based on individual ideas, habits, and standards. This can prevent people from fully realizing their potential as individuals.

Alienation is said to arise when an individual becomes disconnected from their true and genuine identity. The repercussions of this alienation encompass social estrangement, psychological disorders, criminal behavior, and a pervasive sense of disillusionment. In "Being and Nothingness," Sartre elucidates the notion of alienation as unawareness of inter-human connections. Refusal occurs when one is regarded as ignorant by others, because this then restricts one's freedom. The reference to this is taken from Sartre's 1949 work (294). Alienation also occurs when someone rejects established conventions and the inherent qualities of people, preferring to adopt a separate set of behaviors that are honest and affirming of our true nature.

According to Sartre, death, or what he refers to as nothingness, is the greatest adversary to human existence. Sartre likens the absurdity of death to birth, theorizing that it is an inherently ludicrous phenomenon (561), and arguing that the abrupt arrival of an event can deprive us of the capacity to attribute significance to our former actions as they manifest in current behavior.

5. Methodology

This research employs qualitative methodologies in its design.

5.1 Study Design

This research utilizes the close reading method in conjunction with literary analysis to investigate the existential issues present in *The Stranger*. Analyzing Meursault's relationship to his environment, family, and society makes it possible to explore the key themes of alienation and detachment. The researcher examines how his apathy and absence of emotional attachment exacerbate his sense of estrangement. The researcher then continues by analyzing the use of repeated symbols and imagery, such as the intense heat of the sun, to symbolize Meursault's seclusion and the irrationality of his circumstances, and also examines Meursault's dialogues and internal monologues to identify his ideas and intentions.

5.2 Data Collection

The primary source of data is the textual content of *The Stranger*. In addition, secondary materials, such as philosophical treatises on existentialism authored by Jean-Paul Sartre and other scholars, critical evaluations of *The Stranger*, and biographical data concerning Camus contribute to the overall understanding of the study's background.

5.3 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis is performed, with a specific emphasis on finding and examining themes connected to concepts of absurdity, alienation, and the quest for purpose. The novel's passages are also encoded and classified according to these topics. The examination conducted also explicates the use of literary techniques to depict Meursault's existential journey.

6. Discussion

Existentialism explores the principles, views, and relationships that shape an individual's position in society, and the extent to which they perceive their own freedoms or constraints. Existentialism as a philosophy for negotiating reality gained popularity worldwide in the aftermath of World War II. This significant event led to heightened experiences of chaos, devastation, obliteration, terror, and frustration, alongside the disintegration of conventional beliefs and principles. The abandonment of the previous paradigm, including faith in the divine, and confidence in human existence, coupled with the experience of sorrow, anxiety, estrangement, and solitude, potentially rendered life completely devoid of purpose, significance, orientation, and aim. Thus, Camus refers to the ensuing process of exploration as a Sisyphean endeavor.

In Albert Camus' novel, *The Stranger*, the author employs a process of straightforward characterization to develop the characters. Camus meticulously develops the key character in the story through intricate details. Notably, the absurdity of Camus' philosophy is evident in the portrayal of the figure Meursault. As the central character, Meursault, represents an absurdist, someone who refuses to accept society's constructs and the supposed significance of existence. Issues arise when Meursault leaves his mother at a nursing home. Meursault's perception of alienation stemmed directly from his individualistic and absurdist personality, as well as from his rejection of the established values that had developed in society. The author portrays him as indifferent towards the demise of his mother and the cultural norms and customs that prevail in his culture. Meursault's character and behavior caused him to become estranged from the people around him, particularly from his mother's immediate family.

Meursault's primary trait is absurdism. Absurdist, or 'the absurd', refers to the contradiction inherent in the human inclination to search for intrinsic worth and significance in life. It denotes the incapacity of humans to derive a sense of purpose or meaning from a universe that lacks order, meaning, or coherence. This aspect is exemplified most notably in the initial section of *The Stranger*. Meursault's mother has died at the start of the story and Meursault experiences a sense of alienation from the people formerly in his mother's social circle. Meursault had neglected his mother in later life.

Meursault experienced innate sorrow during his childhood and subsequently committed acts that were deemed unethical seen within the context of religious beliefs, such as taking up smoking, following a death. Furthermore, reflecting extreme viewpoints that argue that death might be considered a form of liberation, Meursault perceives the death penalty imposed upon him as a form of liberation. An individual who is executed while on death row is characterized as being in a more advantageous position than someone who commits suicide.

This aligns with the existential emptiness experienced by Meursault. Mortality is considered the primary route to profound liberation. When they arrive at a realization of their temporary nature, individuals are forced to contemplate their limitations. There is a stage in human existence in which individuals contemplate their own yearning for immortality. This is the sequence of events that Meursault encountered leading up to his execution; i.e., a sense of complete and unrestricted freedom.

According to Sartre, human activity is not pre-determined by any fixed moral or human nature; that is humans possess radical freedom. The suggestion is that individuals possess complete autonomy when determining their actions in every given circumstance and throughout their existence. *The Stranger* can be seen to convey the concept of radical freedom. In the initial part of the novel, Meursault demonstrated the manner in which his profound autonomy became inseparable from his being. From the moment of his mother's funeral, until he was apprehended by the police for the murder at the bungalow, he exhibits a notable indifference towards established societal conventions. Meursault also possesses his own perspectives and position.

The narrative's first lines serve as both an overview and an introduction to the piece. Instead of prioritizing what is crucial, Meursault is preoccupied with the exact date of his mother's death, as indicated by the telegraph, which stated that the funeral would occur the following day. The reader is then introduced to existentialism in its most authentic manifestation in the opening phrase. Regarding life, Meursault displays a complete lack of interest and apathy, to the extent that he does not even care about his mother's passing. He is however, obliged to attend the entire burial, which is portrayed as the most distressing aspect of this entire ordeal.

Upon his eventual arrival for the funeral, he displays minimal concern regarding his mother, instead becoming completely absorbed by the intense heat of the day. Albert Camus effectively communicates the concept of existentialism and its tangibility to the reader. *The Stranger's* distinctiveness stems from its visual portrayal of existentialism. Rather than attempting to elucidate the topic through theoretical means, *The Stranger* offers the reader a character that embodies the ideology, and demonstrates how he would engage with others. Meursault's sense of reality lacks any discernible structure, whether it pertains to the physical surroundings or the realm of his thoughts and emotions.

Meursault's actions, such as his marriage to Marie and the death of the Arab, are introduced as devoid of any discernible logic. The story is narrated by the protagonist, who offers a concise first-person account of his own life. During his conversations, he focuses on topics such as the environment, the food he consumes, and the pursuits he participates in, rather than expressing his emotions regarding persons, places, and events. This is correlated with the internal world of an individual fixated on existentialism, who would exhibit behaviors and thought patterns characterized by indifference and apathy. Meursault, who abstains from making subjective evaluations of individuals, killed an Arab without any apparent justification, resulting in his subsequent execution. Existentialism is a controversial philosophical framework; however it does present compelling and legitimate arguments (Baker).

Upon closer examination, the cosmos may appear devoid of purpose. Due to our inherent desire to comprehend our surroundings, we can start to imbue the universe with deliberate intent. We might ask: if this belief had been present in previous ages, what would have driven its development in the late 1800s? However, it is apparent that it was a product of philosophers witnessing the atrocities and devastation brought about by numerous brutal global conflicts. Examining Albert Camus's biography, it is undeniable that the rise of existentialism was intricately connected to his own sense of profound grief (Pätzler 476).

Existentialism is a fundamental doctrine that theorizes some temporal circumstances of human life as having metaphysical properties. However, it is considered a somewhat naive doctrine. The perceived radicalism of existentialist philosophy is that it is merely a product of imagination. Marcuse contends that existentialists commit the fallacy of presuming that the absence of any discernible goal in human circumstances implies an absence of purpose. Arguably, from a philosophical and metaphysical perspective, the lack of any apparent agenda on the part of the cosmos only proves that an understanding of purpose cannot be resolved by examining historical events as evidence.

Philosophies such as existentialism center on the individual's distinctiveness and seclusion in the face of a hostile and apathetic world, underscoring the absence of any visible meaning. As the protagonist of *The Stranger*, Meursault, authentically embodies principles of existentialism, which establishes this philosophy as the novel's fundamental topic. In *The Stranger*, Albert Camus explores various aspects of existentialism, such as its definition, its manifestation in individuals, and its overall theoretical validity. Initially, it is crucial to understand that Albert Camus' artistic realm rejects the existence of God. Indeed, the primary characters in Camus' works are highly likely to be either skeptical or ambivalent towards their own ideas.

Readers can access assistance by contemplating the potential consequences when a character becomes aware that there is an absence of any God or Divinity in the world. The person in question, similar to Kafka's character Joseph K., who was condemned to an everlasting state of emptiness through no fault his own. The only thing he had to worry about was his own mortality, as he was stuck in limbo as a consequence of the meaningless cycle of birth and death. In the television program, where he expressed his ambitions and desires for the future, he envisions, in brief, the ultimate conclusion. Any expectation

based on these extraordinary powers is now futile. Both he and humanity have achieved peaked.

Camus' writings are predominantly molded by his preoccupation with mortality and the void of nonexistence. Camus' characters frequently endure the anguish and distress of their creator, due to their awareness that their inevitable fate is one of eternal nothingness. Arguably, for readers, the recognition of their own death catalyzes understanding of Camus concept of the Absurd (Pätzler 477). Through Meursault's first-person narration, the reader uncovers his own lack of belief in the significance of life. Despite opportunities to embrace both, Meursault dismisses both faith and secular importance. The moment is perceived as more agonizing when Meursault's boss gets angry with him for his lack of enthusiasm towards flying to Paris. Meursault perceives all cities as equally pleasant. To him, Marie's proposal, the challenges resulting from the functioning of the legal system, and ultimately his impending capital punishment are indistinguishable.

During the second portion of the text, Meursault becomes aware that his thoughtless behavior resulted in his incarceration. Within the confines of the penitentiary, Meursault experiences a sense of incompleteness. However, toward the conclusion of the narrative, Meursault realizes that the true essence of freedom lies in the radical form he attains subsequent to his incarceration. The freedom he previously battled for was really a manifestation of his ego, and so his embracing of the death sentence was an expression of extreme liberty. For Meursault, death represents genuine liberation, as life was merely a temporary and artificial reality. Life does not distribute freedom equitably. Meanwhile, when encountering death, humankind is confronted with the divine legislation of God, and will achieve immortality and liberation through it. Consequently, death liberates Meursault from the state of being socially and personally isolated, as life served only to restrain him.

7. Conclusion

The character of Meursault embodies existentialism in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. *The Stranger* effectively presents Albert Camus' thoughts on existentialism and absurdism. Meursault, a French-Algerian who lacks interest or concern, represents the perplexity, dissatisfaction, isolation, decay, and detachment experienced by contemporary individuals. His characterization in Albert Camus' novel, *The Stranger*, is executed meticulously as he develops throughout the narrative.

Meursault's character is revealed through his habits, occupations, and the reactions of other characters toward him. In addition, Meursault deliberately embraces a life of estrangement, devoid of aspiration. The absurdity of Camus' philosophy is evident in the portrayal of the figure Meursault. Camus' character development enhances the notion of isolation and reinforces the bizarre narrative he has crafted. Meursault's figure in Sartre's notion is depicted as experiencing two sorts of alienation: societal alienation and self-alienation. Social alienation refers to the feeling of being disconnected or estranged from society due to the realization that the social structure is either harsh or fails to fulfill one's desires and views.

Self-alienation' refers to the disconnection of individual selves from any tendencies or desires that do not align with dominant social norms. This disconnection forces individuals to conform to societal needs or feel powerless to control their actions. The personality characteristics, of absurdism, indifference, carelessness, selfishness, and radical freedom reflect a lack of enthusiasm for life. These personality traits were deemed detrimental to Meursault's destiny, as evidenced in the second half of the novel. Meursault's self-alienation was also made evident in his inclination to reject the conventional perspectives and principles of Mediterranean society.

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