

The Multilayered Meaning of Camus' Absurdity as Seen in Caligula and the Stranger

Shuheng Li

College of International Studies, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China

lishuheng2019@email.szu.edu.cn

Abstract. Albert Camus's literary works and philosophical ideas have had a profound impact on the world. After the two world wars, Europe, tormented by the catastrophe of war, was in a climate of resentful reflection, exploration of the future and skepticism about old values. When the old order is shaken and called into question, man's everyday life becomes a concrete manifestation of absurdity. The world is absurd, is the subjective feeling of many characters in Camus' books. The term "absurdity", a key term in Camus's life, evolved and developed throughout his work. In this paper, it examines two of Camus's books, *The Stranger* and *Caligula*, to analyze the "Absurd Man" in Camus's work, then introduces *The Myth of Sisyphus* to explore how Camus confronts the absurdity in his work, in other words, what he advocates as "revolt". By exploring how Camus deepens and broadens revolt, the paper offers a better understanding of the uplifting power of words in Camus' literature work.

Keywords: Camus, the 20th century, absurdity, revolt.

1. Introduction

Albert Camus is a world-renowned French writer, philosopher and literary theorist. His literary works and philosophical ideas have had a profound impact on the world. In the twentieth century, in which he lived, humanity's rational civilization was under attack from multiple factors such as war and technology. Because of the great contrast between reality and the ideal, existentialist philosophy took hold at this time and developed rapidly. Existentialism is one of the main philosophical currents to have exerted a profound influence on twentieth-century Western philosophy, literature and art. Existentialist philosophers explore questions relating to the meaning, purpose and value of human existence. It is precisely because existentialism is so concerned with man's relationship to the world, the human condition and the meaning of existence, that Claude Lévi-Strauss had talked about "as for the trend of thought which was to find fulfilment in existentialism, it seemed to me to be the exact opposite of true thought, by reason of its indulgent attitude towards the illusions of subjectivity. To promote private preoccupations to the rank of philosophical problems is dangerous" [1].

After the two world wars, Europe, tormented by the catastrophe of war, was in a climate of resentful reflection, exploration of the future and skepticism about old values. When the old order is shaken and called into question, man's everyday life becomes a concrete manifestation of absurdity. The world is absurd, is the subjective feeling of many characters in Camus' books. The essence of this sense of the absurd is the conflicting relationship between the individual and the world, between subjectivity and objectivity, an endless struggle between the two. Awareness of the absurd and revolt against fate are two very important themes in Camus' work.

The concept of the absurd was not introduced for the first time by Camus; before Camus, Heidegger, Sartre and others had already given an in-depth account of the absurd. At the same time, however, it is necessary to point out that absurdity has hitherto been taken as a conclusion, whereas in the present prose it is the point of departure [2]. Recognizing the absurdity of life is just the beginning. Wake up, tram, four hours in the office or at work, dinner, tram, another four hours at work, dinner, bed; Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, the same rhythm, and on and on, most of the time passed with ease. One day, however, the question "Why?" arose, and it was in this slightly surprised boredom that it all began [2]. For Camus, the absurd begins with the boredom of mechanical repetition, a questioning of the value of one's own existence. Based on this

idea, the heroes of Camus's novels also find themselves in this predicament, like Meursault in *The Stranger* or the emperor Caligula in *Caligula*.

2. The Absurdity between Life and Death

Camus's play *Caligula*, written in 1938. The main character, Caligula, was the fourth emperor of the Roman Empire and was known as a sinful tyrant during his reign. Camus did not significantly rework the story, and the content of his book is almost unerringly faithful to history. The young Roman emperor Caligula disappears for three days after the death of his sister and mistress, Drusilla. After three days' absence, he returns and becomes extremely incomprehensible. He has become a reckless tyrant who heeds no moral or political boundaries. He claimed the moon, deceived nobles, stole their wives, executed others at will, blasphemed the gods and, finally, died by the sword of his conspirators.

At the start of the play, Camus casts the horror of death over Caligula and the reader, and Caligula finds himself in an unprecedented situation. What is the reason for such a radical change for the monarch Caligula? Is it simply the sudden death of his lover? The author gives a clear answer to this question in the words of Caligula, who sees the death of his lover as a sign of truth. This truth refers to the absurdity of the relationship between man and the world. Men die; and they are not happy [3]. It is clear that Caligula is changed by the arrival of death, not by the disappearance of love, and that in the midst of the opposition between life and death, he suddenly realizes the absurdity of the world, and the rupture between man and the world causes him immense pain. Life is limited, death is the most fundamental nothingness, and the cruelty of "men die" renders everything meaningless. The realization that everything has become illusory due to the presence of death is the absurdity in *Caligula*.

When Caligula discovered the unknowable, unshakeable nature of fate, the contradiction between man's rationality and the irrationality of the world, he chose to rebel. "That is why I want the moon, or happiness, or eternal life—something, in fact, that may sound crazy, but which is not of this world [3]." This is a passionate declaration born of absurd nothingness. Faced with an absurd world, Caligula adopts an extreme, clear-cut attitude, following only the logic of reason and rejecting all hypocrisy and contradiction. It is not enough for Caligula to grasp the truth of the absurd; he also seeks to explain this absurdity to the world through his actions. He uses his supreme power to create unpredictable fates for others, so that the masses can experience this absurdity first-hand through the cold contingency of capricious destiny. "I live, I kill, I exercise the rapturous power of a destroyer, compared with which the power of a creator is merest child's play" [3]. He disguises himself as fate to make people feel the uncertainties of life and the smallness and fragility of individual will.

However, his attempt to embody fate and apply logic to the extreme was inadmissible and immoral in everyone's eyes. Caligula does his best to fight against the absurdity of the world, which ultimately leads to its destruction. Scipio had warned Caligula that "I believe you've done everything necessary to mobilize a legion of equally brutal human gods who will one day drown your godhead in blood" [3]. The fact that Caligula recognized this point of view shows that he was sober. He understood that these extreme actions would inevitably lead to his own downfall, but he still insisted on following his own logic to the end. His destruction was an alternative suicide.

3. The Absurd Man Outside the Social Order

The Stranger, published in 1942, is Camus's first novel. Along with *Caligula* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it forms part of what Camus called "the cycle of the absurd". Compared to the other two works, *The Stranger* is better known and more familiar. Meursault's attitude and situation among the marginalized correspond more closely to the absurdity of modern life since the twentieth century.

The plot of *The Stranger* is very simple and straightforward: it tells the story of a small office worker sentenced to death by the court for a murder he committed in the midst of his mediocre life.

But it's clear from Camus' narrative that Meursault's death is not due to his murderous crimes, but to what appears to the world as incomprehensible indifference. The first sentence of the book begins, "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know" [4]. In the eyes of traditional morality, how could a normal person be wrong about the time of her mother's death? Later, Meursault's behavior after the funeral is equally unconventional, baffling and disconcerting. He fell asleep in front of his mother's coffin, bathed in the sea the day after her funeral and had fun with his girlfriend. Camus' portrait of this socially alienated outsider seems inhuman and devoid of morality.

The norms of behavior and habits prevalent in traditional society, as well as the value scales of right and wrong, good and bad, commonly used in traditional literature, are not appropriate for determining the meaning of Meursault's images. Meursault is not interested in anyone or anything around him, the world seems ridiculous to him, so he would say, "I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't dissatisfied with mine here at all" [4]. Refusing to play by society's rules, Meursault did not shed a tear at his mother's funeral, refused a promotion at work, refused to confess to a priest - he was a stranger to this absurd world. Meursault's attitude as a stranger consists simply in awakening people to their sense of self, to the absurdity of the relationship between man and the world contained in the conventions of social life that have become habitual. Having seen the absurdity of the world, he considers that nothing has meaning, that meaning is merely a disguise, and that there is no need to change it.

The sense of absurdity shown in *The Stranger* is slightly different from that of *Caligula*. In this work, absurdity stems from modern man's questioning of everyday existence, from the great gap between the individual and the world. A sense of strangeness is inevitable when confronted with a world beyond our control. This strangeness and isolation make it impossible to establish a link with the world around us, and we become strangers outside the rules of the world, the "absurd". As Camus put it, this divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity [2].

In an essay written by Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, he explained that capitalism had freed people from the bonds of tradition and fostered the growth of freedom in a positive sense, but at the same time, it had made the individual lonelier, more isolated, and left him with a profound sense of insignificance and powerlessness [5]. It is a bit like the absurdity in *The Stranger*. Fromm also mentions that this situation can lead to a desire to escape freedom in order to satisfy one's own need for personal connections with the world and others. But it is clear that in Camus' book, Meursault does not submit to this desire for coherence. When he feels the boredom born of the repetition of his life, of the strangeness of the world, he does not avoid it, he does not accept it, and his death is not due to a murderous crime, but to the truth.

4. From Absurdity to Confrontation

Although the protagonists in both of Camus's novels seem to be trapped in absurd situations and ultimately die, death does not imply a deconversion to obedience. Insofar as it is a skeptical deconstruction of ingrained assumptions about our knowledge of the world, designed to identify what grounds, if any, can be found on which to construct, Camus' absurd is not a precursor to nihilism, to a rejection of all value-claims, and he himself compares it (with a due sense of proportion) to Descartes' systematic doubt [6]. Camus clearly recognized that absurdity pervades all corners of life; man is almost destined to encounter it. Taking this as his starting point, he began to meditate on the human condition, asking in what sense life is worth experiencing. Faced with the absurdity of the world and of life, human beings cannot surrender to it, but must find a way to rebel against it and reconstruct the meaning and value of life in an absurd world. To resist "meaninglessness" with "meaning" is the starting point of Camus' idea of "resistance. As a result, he wrote the philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a work of special significance in Camus's entire philosophical system, which is a concentrated and condensed embodiment of Camus's absurd philosophies, and is the most authoritative masterpiece. This essay starts from the emergence of the sense of the absurd and the

definition of the sense of the absurd, then discusses the attitude of facing the absurd and the method of resolving the absurd, and extends to the relationship between literary creation and the absurd, which constitutes the most large-scale and systematic philosophy of the absurd in the twentieth-century Western literature [7].

When he (Sisyphus) saw the face of the world again, and enjoying running water and sunshine, the sea and warm stones, he does not wish to return to the shadows of hell. Summoning, anger and warnings are ineffective. The summons, the anger and the warnings were all ineffective. For many years he faced the curves of the bay, the splendor of the sea and the lines of the bay, the splendor of the sea and the smile of the earth [2]. This was the first rebellion of Sisyphus, who resisted the nothingness of death and the coldness of hell, and left there by his wisdom, to live once again on earth, in the "present" of his life, until the punishment of the gods came. Similar to Caligula, Sisyphus rejects the prospect of death and the fear of being controlled by an impermanent fate, but unlike Caligula, he chooses the desire for life. Since man does not believe in God or in the immortality of life, he is responsible for everything that is alive, for everything that is born of suffering and destined to suffer for life [8]. Caligula takes the logic of a dystopian world and an evil destiny to the extreme. Since the world is intolerable and the people are insensitive, he commits tyranny and kills at will; since "man does not understand fate", he "dresses up as fate". It's like Karamazov saying, "Everything is permitted [9]." Sisyphus looked towards the sun to find happiness on earth, but in the end, he paid the price for his love for this shore of the earth, he was thrown into hell by the gods, carrying a huge stone on his back to climb to the top of the mountain again and again, never ending.

As mentioned earlier, Meursault's "sense of the absurd" allows him to see the abnormality in these seemingly most normal everyday behaviors, and therefore strives to distance himself from them. Man has been thoroughly disciplined by society without conscious of being thoroughly disciplined by society, and Meursault has discovered precisely the existence of this discipline. But with this sobriety came another immediate result: nihilism. After Meursault breaks away from this absurd world, but goes to stagnation, to another form of chaos. In his case, nihilism eventually took the upper the wind, and one might even say that nothingness always prevailed. Meursault's lack of a strong and distinct vital drive that causes him to stand still in nihilism. He became a victim of his own "the consciousness of the absurd." This also makes an essential difference between Meursault and Sisyphus. Sisyphus pushed the boulder toward the top of the mountain and watched it roll back down over and over again in hell. On the way to the bottom of the mountain, he knows full well that the boulder he pushed so hard will still slide down, but he chooses to shoulder the "absurd" boulder once again and be brave enough to take it all on. It is this sober consciousness that gives his behavior a heroic grandeur, and makes him different from a slave who pushes the stone. This is Sisyphus' second revolt against the senseless punishment imposed on him by fate.

5. Conclusion

Caligula's and Meursault's fight against the absurd, and their deaths, bear witness to the power of the absurd. When a man encounters absurdity, he must stay there until he dies. But that does not mean resistance is pointless. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious [2], Sisyphus realizes the absurdity of his fate, but does not shirk it, choosing instead to keep pushing the boulder to the top of the mountain and endure the torture of forced labor. What these three Camus books have in common is that they defy God, defy fate, defy the conventions of the world. They do not succumb to false morality, and pursue their destinies in the most authentic way possible. In absurdity, it is destined to have no escape, and the only way to rebel against it is to face it, recognize it and survive it. In the Sontag article she writes that Kafka evokes pity and fear, Joyce evokes admiration, Proust and Gide evoke respect, but I can't think of any other modern writers other than Camus who evoke love [10]. It is this deep love that connects Camus to others and to us in our contemporary times.

References

- [1] Lévi-Strauss, C. (1992). *Tristes Tropiques* (p. 62). New York: Penguin Mass Market.
- [2] Camus, A. (2018). *The Myth of Sisyphus* (p. 9, 12, 16, 89). Vintage Books.
- [3] Camus, A. (2012). *Caligula and Three Other Plays* (p. 18, 77, 52). Vintage.
- [4] Camus, A. (2013). *The Stranger* (p. 10, 37). Vintage International. (Original work published 1942).
- [5] Fromm, E. (2010). *The fear of freedom*. London: Routledge.
- [6] Foley, J. (2008). *Albert Camus: from the absurd to revolt*. Acumen.
- [7] Mingjiu, L. (2004). On Camus's thought and composition. *Contemporary Foreign Literature* (02). <https://doi.org/10.16077/j.cnki.issn1001-1757.2004.02.015>.
- [8] Camus, A. (1991). *The rebel: an essay on man in revolt*. Vintage Books.
- [9] Fyodor Dostoevsky. (2015). *The Brothers Karamazov*. First Avenue Editions.
- [10] Sontag, S. (2009). *Against interpretation and other essays*. London Penguin Books. (Original work published 1966).