

Analysis of the "anti-hero" image of Camus' characters

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Abstract. Sean Farrand says, the hero is entirely a product of society. A paradigm that is recognized by society is given the title of hero because it is adapted to the needs of society. The creation of a hero is therefore inseparable from society. In today's society, hero is often the most glorious and sacred title we can bestow on a person. A hero is one who goes forward and is heroic, while an anti-hero is a term that stands in opposition to a hero. The anti-hero was born in the post-modernist literature of the twentieth century and is not as great as the hero. On the contrary, most of them are just ordinary people who do not want to follow the laws of society and are hardly disturbed by the outside world, preferring to listen to their own inner thoughts and pursue their own freedom. They are independent and sober in a world of disturbances, and from another point of view, they are also lonely and lost. But when faced with hardship or a great setback, they will not choose to give up, but try to persevere to reach their goals, even though sometimes their goals are difficult to achieve. Most of Camus's characters are typical of the anti-heroes, who occupy an important place in the works of postmodernism.

Keywords: Camus; Dystopia; Anti-hero; Postmodernism; The Outsiders; The Myth of Sisyphus; The Plague.

1. Definition of the anti-hero

The "anti-hero" character emerged after the Second World War and proliferated mainly in 20th century postmodernist literature. The character traits of the 'anti-hero' are very similar to the style promoted by postmodernist literature. The most typical 'anti-heroes' include Albert Camus' Meursault in *The Outsider*, Gogol and Didi in the Berthold's *Waiting for Godot*, etc.

What is an anti-hero?

This is a thorny question that is often encountered in the study of contemporary western fiction and drama. Yet it is still a question that has hardly been seriously explored in domestic foreign literature criticism. And some dictionaries, in explaining the meaning of the anti-hero, tend to treat anti-heroes and non-heroes as synonymous. This conceptual confusion inevitably leads to confusion about the social meaning and aesthetic characteristics of these two literary images. A brief explanation of non-heroes and anti-heroes in Longman's *Guide to Twentieth-Century Literature* (1981) does provide some relief.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the protagonist in fiction became closer and closer to the 'common man' and increasingly lost the character associated with the traditional protagonist in fiction. After the Second World War, the anti-hero became the main character of novels written by authors such as Kingsley Amis, John Wayne and John Osborne. The anti-hero denied the norms of behaviour or the social behaviour that had previously been seen as the basis of civilised society. Some deliberately rebel against those norms of behavior and see modern society as a world of inhumanity; others simply ignore them. [1]

2. The basic types and characteristics of the anti-hero

Mersault in *The Outsider* is a typical "anti-hero". The only difference between him and the others is that he acts as if he doesn't care about anything. When asked by his boss if he wanted to move to Paris for a change of life, Meursault said it was optional and that his life would be the same. When it comes to emotions, Meursault's girlfriend, Marie, asks him if he loves her and if he wants to marry her, but Meursault says he doesn't and it doesn't matter who he marries. When it comes to friendships, Meursault doesn't care about Ramon's notorious reputation and dubious character, he treats him like

anyone else. When Ramon asks him if he wants to be his friend, Meursault says it's okay to be or not to be. After agreeing to be Ramon's friend, he also does whatever he asks of Ramon, even going so far to get himself into trouble in order to help him. It is noteworthy that Meursault does not help Ramon knowing that he will have to sacrifice his own future; it is more like he does not think about the consequences of what he is doing before he helps him. Meursault is even more indifferent when it comes to his family, he doesn't know his mother's exact age, he doesn't want to see her last, he doesn't shed a single tear, he smokes with the concierge at the wake, he drinks coffee and milk, he even watches a comedy film with his girlfriend Marie the day after her mother's death and then they have sex afterwards. All the signs that would suggest to an outsider that Meursault is not sad about her mother's death. All the signs would suggest to an outsider that Meursault was not grieving the death of his mother and that his actions were not in keeping with the behaviour of a man who had lost a loved one. Meursault is one of those people who appear to be indifferent to everything. He is not as involved, committed and obsessed as the rest of the world, thinking about his future and his career, even when his life is at stake. When the judge asked him if he had anything to say in court after being sentenced to death, he responded: "I thought about it and said 'no'". [3] He did not even want to defend himself, and thus gave up the hope of his life.

There is no doubt that a character like Meursault is a rarity in the history of fiction and literature, his character traits are, to put it nicely, gentle, kind, easy-going, friendly and bland, but to put it badly, indifferent, withdrawn, eccentric, cold-blooded, indiscriminate, and unmotivated, which is the exact opposite of the character of most fictional protagonists. The normal character of the novel is positive, enterprising, and concerned with personal gain. For example, in the preface to the English translation of *The Outsider*, Camus says of Meursault: "He does not play tricks, in the sense that he is an outsider in the society in which he lives", "He refused to lie. What is, he says is. He refused to pretend his feelings, and so society felt threatened", "He was poor, a frank man who love the light", "a man who voluntarily died for the truth without any heroic act", [4] The real reason why Meursault was sentenced to death was, as Camus said, because he could not play this game. He did not understand such social rules or the connection between the fact that he did not cry at his mother's burial and the fact that he killed the Arab; he was like a man who ignored the rules of society, which is why we call him an outsider. Camus once summed up the theme of *The Outsider* with this phrase: "In our society, anyone who doesn't cry at his mother's burial is in danger of being sentenced to death." [5] But Meursault, the archetypal anti-hero figure, is not going to just sit back and wait for the death, he keeps resisting all the time. Throughout the trial of the case, Meursault did not follow his lawyer's advice to lie in order to give himself a chance of survival, nor did he drive away the priest to express his refusal to confess. In the face of the alienation of man by the machinery of the state and the mechanisms by which the law operates, he always followed his heart, confronted the absurdity and refused to be alienated, and he always sought spiritual freedom and truth, the day before his execution Meursault became more acutely aware of the absurdity of modern justice, he became clearer about his choice, rose up against the absurdity, clung to truth and justice in despair, and walked firmly towards death.

After *The Outsider* was finished, Camus went on to write *The Myth of Sisyphus*, one of his most powerful philosophical masterpieces and an important masterpiece for Camus, whose protagonist, Sisyphus, is also the quintessential anti-hero figure. Sisyphus is punished for offending the gods by pushing a rock up a mountain and having it roll down, in a never-ending cycle. The gods considered this to be the most severe punishment for Sisyphus, as it was a job with no hope or future in sight and no end in sight. But Sisyphus did not go down without a fight. Knowing his doomed fate, he defied the gods, confronted the absurdity, transformed the gods' stone into his own stone, transformed the fate imposed on him by the gods into his own fate, and fought back with the fiercest consciousness. Although Sisyphus knew full well that the boulder would roll down again after reaching the top of the mountain because of its own weight, he pushed it again and again, struggling to reach the top, pushing not only the boulder but also his passion for life. It was in the process of pushing the boulder up the mountain that Sisyphus found his own happiness and the true meaning of life, and all the

inhuman torture he suffered was the price of his infinite love for life. As Camus says, 'the hard work required to climb to the top of the mountain is enough to fill one's heart', and 'one should imagine that Sisyphus was happy'.⁶ Not to be discouraged in a desperate situation, not to run away from an absurd situation, not to give up, to be able to confront the absurd and find in this desperate situation a sense of happiness and contentment of one's own, it is enough to call it a spiritual miracle. Like Meusault, in their rebellion against the absurd, they use the courage to face up to their miserable life to find meaning and a passion for life, and this defiance and rebellion with self-consciousness is the most powerful counter-attack against the absurd, Sisyphus is the master of his own destiny, he transcends it, an unyielding defiance that brings him pain but also creates his success. Sisyphus examines the absurdity of the world with an incomparably sharp and dispassionate eye, but he embraces the earth with an infinitely deep love, and this is Sisyphus's happiness as an anti-hero.

In Camus' later novel, *The Plague*, we see more of the active resistance of some of the anti-heroes. The book is set during the Second World War, at that time people lived under fascist oppression for a long time and were very miserable and depressed, so Camus wrote *The Plague* as a metaphor for the state of people's lives during the Second World War by describing the state of life under the plague. Here, Camus draws on his own philosophical view of life to suggest the absurdity of the entire human condition by depicting the plague's impact on all of humanity. In this novel, the absurd is no longer just an abstraction as outlined in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but not just a 'conflict between the cries of man and the irrational silence of the world', 'the separation of man from life, the actor from the set', or 'the drift of man without relief'. It is a living image of the reality of life, a painful and unfortunate life that defies human aspirations and reason.⁷ The protagonists of the book, Dr. Rieux, Tarrou and others, all fight in their own ways against the ravages of the plague, embodying a force of resistance that defends the legitimate interests and rights of human beings. The book's protagonists, Dr. Rieux, Lambert, and Tarrou, all fight the plague in their own unique ways, exemplifying a rebellious power to defend man's rightful interests and happiness. Dr. Rieux is the archetypal anti-hero. As an ordinary man, Dr. Rieux plays an irreplaceable role in the fight against the epidemic. However, after having contributed so much to the fight against the plague, Dr. Rieux refuses to be celebrated as a hero, so to speak, and to a certain extent he is against heroism. He said that the fight against the epidemic was a natural, matter-of-fact affair, and that he had done everything he could to save lives simply out of professional ethics, which did not warrant glorification. He preferred to see him as an ordinary person, to look at his actions in a normal way, to appreciate them but not to deify them, so that other ordinary people could follow these favourable actions, rather than thinking that only heroes can do them, and that ordinary people are capable of doing them to attain such a state. This book also differs from *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in *The Plague* Camus emphasises collective resistance rather than individual resistance, which in fact represents a collective resistance to fascism during the Second World War, a special feeling for Camus at this particular time. In Camus' later works, this resistance becomes more personal.

Like Sisyphus, Dr. Rieux knew that his medical skills were limited, that his efforts to save his patients were futile, that his victories were only temporary, that death was a problem that people had to go through in their lives, that the virus would not be completely eradicated and would return, but instead of giving up, like Sisyphus, he continued to persevere, doing his best to save his patients, because life is precious and the life only comes once, and he thought, which better way to show enthusiasm and courage for life than to keep on living when death is known to be inevitable? A man who knows death has earned the passion and freedom to live, and understands the meaning of resistance, and Dr. Rieux's small but righteous act in the face of a great absurdity is all the more admirable. As Camus himself concludes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "This resistance gives its value to life. Resistance pervades existence, restores its greatness. There is no more beautiful spectacle for an open-eyed man than the fray between the intellect and a reality that transcends him." Unlike Sisyphus, Dr. Rieux was a man who pushed for a shift from individual to collective resistance, and it was through Dr. Rieux's persistence and hard work that his resilient spirit infected those around him, and many people who had been negative about the plague were motivated by Dr. Rieux to take up the fight

against it. "Individualism alone receded and was replaced by a search for solidarity among people. "It could be argued that the spirit of defiance in Dr. Rieu was more prominent and more explicit.

3. Analysis of the character of the anti-hero

As a product of post-modernism, the anti-hero is distinctly post-modernist and has a strong sense of uncertainty. Post-modern writers merge tragedy and absurdity into one, finding absurdity in tragedy and tragedy in absurdity, because tragedy no longer describes the situation of contemporary Westerners well, and contemporary western writers no longer believe in God or in human beings. What they seek more than anything else is pluralism and freedom, just as the anti-heroes do, knowing that life has no meaning but still trying to live it in their own ways, creating their own meaning in the process of rebelling against the absurd, inspiring passion and hope for life. This is the role of the anti-heroes, who invariably and without exception choose to resist. Although most of them ended up in failure, this did not mean that their efforts were worthless. They are brave enough to fight against a dystopian world and strive for freedom and meaning in their lives, even though the results are often unsatisfactory; they are full of enthusiasm and motivation to rebel, not bound by the established laws of society, even though they have many of their own limitations as ordinary people. We can not say that their existence is meaningless, because in them, we see the courage to oppose alienation and face the absurd, the possibility of resistance, and the positive and optimistic attitude of life.

References

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