

## The Absurd and Revolt: A Study of Absurd Heroes in Selected Fiction by Albert Camus

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### Abstract

The absurd can be defined as the conflict which arises due to the human inclination to pursue meaning and purpose in life, and human incapability to find any in a disordered and unreasonable world. Absurd heroes in literature perceive the world as meaningless and irrational and thereby revolt against the dynamics of power which are pervasive within societal institutions. This research is based on a study of the absurd and revolt of the protagonists in selected fiction of Albert Camus (1913-1960). The objective of this study is to scrutinize the ways in which the characters in Camus's fiction resist the absurdity of modern existence, ideological expectations and the dialectics of power in social institutions. The problem statement is based on exploring to what extent the characters' struggle, revolt and resistance can be considered as subversive in terms of how they are realized in the narratives. The methodology is a textual analysis of fiction which includes Camus's novel *The Outsider* (1942) and his short fiction "The Guest" (1957), "The Growing Stone" (1957) and "The Renegade or A Confused Mind" (1957). This study conceptualizes the absurd and revolt in Camus's selected fiction via theoretical frameworks predominantly based on ideology and power. It concludes that, Camus engages in a powerful socio-political critique by engaging with the diverse ways in which the resistance of his absurd heroes can be realized. These are explored in fictional contexts where such characters are surrounded by societal institutions which seek to discipline, regulate and control them.

**Keywords:** Albert Camus, Absurd, Revolt, Ideology, Power

### 1. Introduction

The absurd is born as a result of the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world (Camus, 1991, p.78). In literature, absurd heroes perceive the world as meaningless and irrational and thereby revolt, struggle and raise their voice of resistance against the dynamics of power which are pervasive within societal institutions. According to Foucault (1998) power is in a constant state of flux as it is "everywhere", "comes from everywhere" (p. 63) and operates as means of disciplining individuals. Foucault (1979) says that, these dialectics of power function within the structures and institutions of administration, authority and bureaucracy within the society. Such institutional structures can be identified as the government, prison, school, church, factory, office and hospital etc.

Literary work based on the philosophy of the absurd engage in a critical analysis of the dialectics of power within societal institutions to examine how they operate in absurd, meaningless and irrational manners. The characters of such texts revolt and raise their voice of resistance against a totalitarian regime, overwhelming dictatorship or overbearing authority which exercises power and control over them in diverse ways. This research is based on a study of the absurd and revolt of protagonists of selected fictional work by Albert Camus (1913-1960). Camus was a French author and journalist as well as an influential philosopher. He was one of the significant writers who contributed immeasurably to the philosophical doctrine of absurdism and developing the absurd hero in literature.

The objective of this study is to scrutinize the ways and means in which the characters in Camus's selected fiction revolt against the absurdity of modern existence, ideological expectations and the dialectics of power in social institutions. The problem statement is based on exploring to what extent the

characters' struggle, revolt and resistance can be considered as subversive in terms of how they are realized in the narratives. The state of being subversive can be identified as "positioning against the order imposed in a state, putting it in danger, undermining it through a strategy that is also risky for the power of the dominant group" (Oprescu, 2016, p. 106). This research engages with determining the subversive potential of absurd heroes in terms of identifying how they attempt to revolt and resist the overwhelming dialectics of power which are pervasive within social institutions in Camus's selected fiction.

## **2. The Absurd Hero in Literature**

Absurdism refers to "a philosophy based on the belief that the universe is irrational and meaningless and that the search for order brings the individual into conflict with the universe" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020).

The devastation, massive destruction and loss of lives in Europe during the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as the two world wars, led to a shattering of faith, religion and belief on God. People started questioning the innate goodness of humans who were capable of such overwhelming violence, terror and bloodshed. At such a chaotic time people started problematizing essentialist views on humans being offered a predestined fate by God. It was during these times that, absurdism started getting more popularity as a philosophical doctrine. It enabled people to embrace the "complexity [of the] human condition [in an absurd world] to confront [themselves] with the bitter truth that most human endeavor is irrational and senseless." (Esslin, 1960, p. 13). Thus, absurdism offered individuals means of coming into terms with their absurd reality in life.

In his "The Myth of Sisyphus" Camus elucidates on the absurd hero by reinterpreting the Greek Mythological tale of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was the King of Ephyra and was condemned by Zeus for his deception to roll an immense boulder up a hill, only to watch it come back to hit him, repeating this action for eternity. Camus reflects on the return journey of Sisyphus and instead focusing on the futility of the laborious task of Sisyphus, identifies him as an absurd hero who carries a tragic fate but still struggles against it. It is this struggle which gives him his dignity. "His fate belongs to him." (Camus, 1991, p.76).

According to Camus, it is not only the struggle which gives the absurd hero his dignity, it is the revolt as well. Camus says that the revolt is "the certainly of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it." (Camus, 1991, p.31). He further deliberates upon the notion of the revolt to state that, "[t]he struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1991, p. 78).

Thus, the absurd hero according to Camus resists by struggling and revolting against a tragic fate before succumbing to it, instead of despairing with resignation when faced with it.

## **3. Methodology**

This study is based on the methodology of a textual analysis of fiction which includes one novel and three short fiction by Albert Camus. These stories are also the primary sources of data used in this research.

All these literary works have been originally written in French and then translated to English. In this research the versions which have been translated to English have been used. These include Camus's novel *The Outsider* (1942) and "The Guest", "The Growing Stone" and "The Renegade or A Confused Mind" from Camus's short story collection *Exile and the Kingdom: Stories* (1957).

All these absurd heroes in the above-mentioned fiction are subjected to an absurd fate due to the dialectics of power in modern society and are surrounded by overbearing social systems. These systems represented in Camus's fiction are significant in this research. They are beneficial in terms of engaging in a study of how the protagonists resist such overwhelming power and control in overt, direct and confrontational ways.

Furthermore, this study incorporates a deductive theoretical approach. This facilitates the engagement with already established theories on the philosophy of the absurd, revolt, ideology, power and discipline. These theories are the secondary sources of data incorporated in this research. These are applied to conduct a thorough and comprehensive analysis of this novel and short fiction to scrutinize the engagement with the absurd and revolt in these fictionalized settings of Camus's narratives.

#### **4. Literature Survey**

The extant literature based on offering elucidations and interpretations on the philosophy of the absurd identify it as being vague, ambiguous and obscure due to its lack of theoretical clarity from its inception within a scholarly framework.

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, was one of the initial predominant figures who made extensive use of the term, interpreting the absurd as a paradox of faith. For the philosopher Jean Peal Sartre, it was "the given, unjustifiable, primordial quality of existence" (Cruikshank, 1960, p. 45). Researchers and scholars of European literature identify a work as absurd if it manifests "extreme forms of illogic, inconsistency, nightmarish fantasy," a rejection of "usual or rational devices," and a "use of nonrealistic form" (Balogun 1984, p. 44).

Eugene Ionesco defines absurd as "that which is devoid of purpose [and that when man is] cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, [he becomes] lost [and all] his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." (Esslin, 2001, p.23). The theorist Václav Havel (1990) finds the absurd similar to "the experience of the absence of meaning" (p.201).

All the above-mentioned literature offers diverse understandings of perceiving the absurd. However, this research is based on a specifically studying the absurd heroes in Camus's fictional work. Thus, such varied lenses in available research offer a sufficient platform through which the absurd existence and the revolt of the absurd heroes in literature can be investigated.

In terms of theatrical works based on absurd, it is Martin Esslin (1960) who is acknowledged for his coinage of the term the 'theatre of the absurd' which predominantly identifies the dramatists Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugène Ionesco as engaging with the absurd in their plays. He identifies the plays for their engagement with the individual's existential crisis and their critique of the conditions, standards and governing institutions in the modern society. Esslin also explores the existential crisis of the absurd hero and offers a critique of the governing socio-political and cultural institutions which govern the society in the selected fictional work. However, in this particularly study the methodology incorporated is a textual analysis of Albert Camus's selected fiction.

Studies which engage in a textual analysis of absurd literary work such as Bowker (2008) engage with ambivalence with regard to Albert Camus's literary work to interpret the philosophy of the absurd with the objective of revealing the "harrowing and thrilling experience of absurdity" (p. ii) as well as the "challenges, dangers, and moral and political consequences of living with contradiction" (ii). Bowker engages in a thorough analysis of Camus's philosophy of the absurd to study its ambivalent desires which he identifies as being implicated in the moral and political tensions between "self and others, absolutes and limits, creation and destruction, and good and evil" (p. 19).

Pözlzer (2018) engages with what Camus refers to as the "feeling of the absurd" (p. 1) to elucidate on the lack of scholarly attention given to this concept. He engages in a detailed analysis of this feeling to posit that; it is not strictly a feeling but a conjunction of a mood and of the emotions which this mood give rise to. He says that, "both moods and emotions qualify as absurd in virtue of their promoting the discovery of the absurd; that is, the discovery that humans search for meaning, but the world does not answer this search" (p.1).

Foley (2008) demonstrates an "intellectual continuum" by linking Camus's perceptions on the absurd and revolt in his text. He argues that, for Camus, the absurd "is fundamentally an epistemological claim addressing an ontological need" and that, "[f]rom this premise, Camus progressively extends the absurd

perspective to a critique of all transcendental truths or values" (p. 8). He engages in an analytical commentary of a number of Camus's fictional and non-fictional work. Among these he reads Camus's *The Outsider* as "a plea for the rights of the individual against social conformity and against the state" (p.22) thereby examining how the book critiques the overwhelming power wielded by social institutions.

The afore-mentioned scholarly work engage with Camus's textual work through a study of ambivalence (Bowker, 2008), the feeling of the absurd (Pözlner, 2018) and as an engagement with the absurd and revolt to critique societal institutions (Foley, 2008). However, there is a lack of sufficient research based on the study of the absurd and revolt of Camus's protagonists to critically analyse the subversive potential of their resistance in existing research.

Therefore, this study engages with extending the elucidations and elaborations on Camus's concepts based on the absurd and the revolt in existing research in terms of studying absurdism and resistance in his selected fictional work. It contributes to enrich the arena of research based on Camus's writing by foregrounding and conceptualizing his fictional work within the theoretical frameworks of ideology, power and discipline.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

The results and discussion of this research are based on the following thematic concerns and their deliberations.

### **5.1 State Apparatuses and Resistance**

Althusser (1971) identifies that, in Marxist theory, the State can be examined in terms of State Apparatuses (SA). He identifies the government, administration, army, police, courts and prisons as Repressive State apparatuses (RSAs). He identifies Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) as, "the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade-union ISA, the communications ISA and the cultural ISA" (p. 143).

Althusser says these RSAs function and govern primarily by violence and secondarily by ideology while the ISAs function primarily by ideology and "secondarily by repression, even ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic" (p. 142). In terms of offering a definition for ideology, he identifies it as a "system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group" (p. 145).

The RSAs and ISAs function and govern by both violence and ideology in the selected fiction by Camus. This study specifically explores the ways in which Camus's absurd heroes subvert and challenge the power and authority of RSAs and ISAs as ways of expressing their resistance. This study particularly identifies the manners in which the governing ideologies in social institutions in the selected fiction operate in absurd manners in terms of oppressing the characters in the novel.

Emphasizing on the significance of freedom and resistance, Nietzsche (2016) poses the question "[h]ow is freedom measured in individuals and peoples?" He offers the following as an answer;

According to the resistance which must be overcome, according to the exertion required, to remain on top. The highest type of free men should be sought where the highest resistance is constantly overcome: five steps from tyranny, close to the threshold of the danger of servitude. (p. 38)

Thus, according to Nietzsche, the primary incentive for resistance is realized by encountering constraints against one's freedom. Elaborating on Nietzsche's understanding of resistance Hoy (2004) says that, this "resistance can be to domination, and in the name of emancipation. But it can also be domination's resistance to emancipatory efforts" (p. 2). The absurd hero's struggle for resistance in the fiction by Camus also comes from the need to realize freedom or emancipation from a dominating force and a tragic fate which govern his entire life.

### **5.2 The Absurd, Discipline and Revolt**

Meursault, the protagonist in Camus's *The Outsider* is punished by the judicial institution for murdering a man and is sentenced to death by beheading after undergoing a trial. However, Camus demonstrates how Meursault's sentencing is not only based on his crime of shooting a man and killing him. Camus realizes this by revealing the absurdity of the modern society and governing social institutions which judges and condemns the protagonist for his non-conformity to social norms and rules. Meursault is disciplined by social institutions due to his revolt against the ideological expectations of the judicial, familial and religious institutions. For example, one of the key arguments which condemned him at the trial was the fact that, he has "shown no emotion on the day of [his mother's] funeral." (Camus, 2013, p. 58). Another argument for his condemnation was based on his refusal to abide by the religious ISA and publicly claim that he believes in Christian faith and God. This is because Meursault is a character who believes that the religious institution would neither give him any purpose nor meaning in life.

In Camus's novel, the societal institutions are critiqued as irrational for absurd heroes like Meursault who is unable to conform, regulate and discipline himself according to normative expectations of the ISAs. To critically interpret this, this study refers to Foucault's (1979) identification of discipline as "an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations" (p.136). Discipline has the ability to transform individuals into "docile bodies [and a body which is docile] may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (p.146) according to dominant societal ideological views, rules, regulations and expectations of RSAs and ISAs. Accordingly, the ISAs in the modern society expect Meursault to discipline himself as a docile body and embrace normative expectations of social institutions. Within the narrative, despite Meursault's understanding of the governing systems as a "good management" (Camus, 2013, p.70) he still sees the absurdity of disciplinary mechanisms of the RSAs and the ISAs in the society.

The protagonist's revolt against the pervasive power of social institutions and ideological expectations can be interpreted from the title of the novel itself. It suggests that Meursault is an estranged, detached and indifferent man and that he will remain a stranger and outsider who will not discipline himself according to the norms of the society. Even at his own trial he is relegated to a mere outsider and observer of his own case. At court he is judged for not showing any remorse and regret though he is not given a sufficient opportunity to speak out and defend himself.

He observes that, "[b]ut given the position I was in, I couldn't actually speak to anyone that way. I didn't have the right to show I had feelings or good intentions." The prosecutor who is arguing for his damnation observes that Meursault had "no soul, and that nothing makes a man human, not a single moral principle, could be found within [him]" (Camus, 2013, pp. 91-92). Camus, thus engages in a socio-political critique on the absurdity of the modern judicial institution as Meursault is relegated to be completely voiceless at his own trial which would decide his own fate.

Through Meursault's fate Camus is able to engage in a subversive social critique of the absurdity and meaninglessness of social institutions, power structures and governing mechanisms by revealing how they are deeply entrenched within the society. These overwhelming power dynamics which are in place in the social institutions serve as a disciplinary mechanism to deprive the individual of his power and agency. Thus, Camus's heroes in his stories are usually oppressed, suppressed and restricted as they do not discipline themselves according to the rules and regulations imposed by the authoritative social institutions within the narratives.

### **5.3 The Dignity and Dilemma of the Absurd Hero**

In engaging with his absurd crisis Meursault confronts and revolts against the social expectations imposed upon him by the overwhelming power wielded by the governing authorities within social institutions in an overt and direct manner. He asks, "[w]hy should the death of other people or a mother's love matter so much? Why should I care about his god, the lives, the destinies we choose when one unique destiny had chosen me?" (Camus, 2013, p. 109)

To interpret this, this research refers to Camus's theoretical concept of the absurd hero's revolt. For Camus, the absurd man is the one who accepts the challenge lucidly as the basis for his revolt is to

struggle against the absurd fate which is imposed upon him. Camus believes that this revolt and resistance will give the absurd hero dignity. This is the reason why he does not identify Sisyphus from Greek Mythology as a tragic character who has been subjected to damnation. He says that, “[o]ne must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus, 1991, p.78) despite the eternal punishment he is made to undergo by Zeus.

The implication of imagining Sisyphus as happy despite his tragic fate can be likened to the absurd crisis which Meursault undergoes as well. This is due to the fact that, it is actually Meursault’s assurance of himself and how he abides by his own principles that give him dignity as an absurd hero. He says, “I may look as if I had nothing but I was sure of myself, sure of everything, sure of my life, sure of my impending death. Yes that was all I had. But at least I had a hold on that truth as much as it had a hold on me” (Camus, 2013, p. 109). Camus is thus able to emphasize on the subversive potential of this novel against social institutions by demonstrating Meursault’s strong individual streak and passionate outburst of his own individuality after realizing the absurdity of his world and his existence. Like the absurd hero Sisyphus whom Camus imagines to be happy in his essay, Meursault knows that his struggle is hopeless but still continues to do so. This gives him dignity.

In the short story “The Guest” by Camus the school teacher Daru is ordered by the government to take a prisoner, an Arab to the police headquarters in Tinguit. However, Daru frees the prisoner and gives him a choice to escape his fate or turn himself to the police. As a result of Daru’s dilemma in his inability to take a decision, he seals his own fate as a warning is written on his blackboard which says, ‘[y]ou turned in our brother. You will pay.’ (Camus, 2006, p. 55). Daru, though he is given a direct order by the state, which governs predominantly by violence as a RSA, makes his own choice to free the prisoner. He overtly struggles and revolts against the order given to him and ultimately this resistance gives him dignity as he makes his own individual choice though it goes against the state. However, despite the choice he makes he is still condemned to a tragic fate.

Furthermore, despite his individual decision to free the prisoner, he achingly discovers that the Arab (the prisoner) was “slowly making his way along the road to the prison” (Camus, 2006, p. 55). Though, Daru makes his own choice after undergoing an absurd dilemma or existential crisis, his decision is revealed to be absurd, meaningless and purposeless at the latter part of the story. This is because the prisoner refuses the opportunity of pursuing his freedom which Daru gives him. However, the subversive potential of his decision is evident, as he undergoes the dilemma of resisting against the overwhelming and overarching rules, regulations, norms and expectations of the RSAs and the ISAs. Moreover, despite the meaningless aftermath of his choice, the fact that he made his own individual decision gives him dignity as an absurd hero in literature.

#### **5.4 Ideology, Interpellation and the Appearances of the Absurd**

In Camus’s “The Growing Stone” d’Arrast takes over the task of the sailor who decides to carry a stone of 50 kilos to the church in the city of Iguape out of religious faith. Though the burden of the stone gets heavy, d’Arrast struggles but ultimately changes his route and flings the stone inside the sailor’s own hut instead. d’Arrast’s own choice of changing his route shows his overt revolt against what he identifies as an absurd, irrational and purposeless task. This research refers to Althusser’s (1971) theoretical concept of “interpellation” (p. 164) in order to explore how the absurd hero in this short story refuses to interpellate himself. Althusser (1971) says that, “ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects” (p. 162). Thus, ideology has “always-already interpellated individuals as subjects” (p.164) to perform the roles and obligations expected by the governing dominant ideologies of social institutions.

In this short story the religious ISA governs as a social institution which expects the characters to interpellate themselves to fulfill the dominant ideological expectations of Christian faith and devotion. However, d’Arrast as an absurd hero resists by refusing to interpellate himself to fulfil these set roles and expectations by the religious ISA. Furthermore, his choice to abandon the task and revolt against the religious institution gives him self-dignity as an absurd hero. This becomes evident when it is revealed that he is filled with “tumultuous happiness” as he “joyously honoured his own strength” after making his own individual choice (Camus, 2006, p. 108). Thus, the subversive potential of the absurd hero’s revolt in this story becomes evident as it comes across as a direct, overt and confrontational resistance against

Christian traditions, faith and practices. At the end of the story the absurd hero opens the way for the people in the city to “find fulfilment in their present circumstances by teaching them that man must be directly responsible for his actions” (Claire, 1976, p. 28).

However, in Camus’s “The Renegade or A Confused Mind”, the unnamed absurd hero embraces the absurdity of his existence by abandoning all reason and logic. Though he faces a tragic fate of being tortured and eventually executed, he still struggles and revolts against it before embracing it. He initially goes as a Christian missionary to convert those of the closed city of Taghaza but later on accepts this city’s faith of the house of fetish and eventually disowns Christ.

His embracing of the ideals of the house of fetish leads him to take his own individual decision to brutally murder a missionary who is sent to replace him. Unfortunately, he still ends up being tragically forsaken by the house of fetish. However, the absurd hero is “superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.” (Camus, 1991, pp. 76-77). Thus, the renegade in this story is superior to his fate as he resists the religious ISA by struggling and revolting against his Christian faith, by voluntarily choosing to murder the missionary and condemning himself to a tragic fate in the process.

To further engage with this short story, this research refers to the concept the “appearances of the absurd” (Pözlner, 2018, p. 2) through which the feeling of absurd manifests. The forms of manifestations of such absurd appearances can include “weariness, anxiety, strangeness, nausea, and horror in the face of one’s mortality” (Pözlner, 2018, p. 2). The absurd dilemma or existential crisis of the unnamed hero in “The Renegade or A Confused Mind” becomes evident in terms of the suffering and horror he undergoes. The appearances of the absurd can be seen in terms of the psychological dilemma the renegade endures in changing his Christian faith to that of believing in the ideals of the house of fetish. These can further be seen through how he comes into terms with the difficult decision to murder the Christian missionary of his previous faith. Moreover, the subsequent betrayal of the house of fetish manifests the appearance of the absurd which makes him feel both physical and metaphorical pain as he asks “O fetish why hast thou forsaken me? It’s all over, I’m thirsty, my body is burning, a darker night fills my eyes” (Camus, 2006, p. 30).

Althusser says that subjects are “inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISA” and are obedient to the governing higher authorities like God and even their own morality. (Althusser, 1971, p. 181). The renegade in this story is also inserted into practices and rituals of house of fetish after embracing its faith. However, it is also important to establish that despite embracing the ideals of the house of fetish, the renegade resisted religious practices by rebelling against God, Christian faith and the ideological expectations of morality. Thus, despite the suffering he underwent the subversive potential of this absurd hero’s revolt comes across as overt, direct and confrontational. This is due to the fact that his own individual choices enabled his revolt. He refuses to self-discipline himself as a docile body according to the dominant and governing rules and regulations of the RSAs to abstain from murder and the ISAs to follow a religious moral code.

## **6. Conclusion**

The absurd heroes in Camus’s fiction resist against the absurdity of their existence in different ways. Camus’s heroes revolt and struggle against the system and its devastating power and authority. Through these narratives the author engages in a socio-political critique by reflecting on the subversive potential of his protagonists’ resistance. This becomes evident when he exposes how these characters revolt against the dominant and governing ideologies, norms, values and expectations of the RSAs and ISAs which govern by various forms of violence and repression in direct, overt and confrontational ways. Therefore, he engages with the revolt of his absurd heroes, to make a powerful critique against the dominant ideological expectations of the RSAs and the ISAs which strive to control, regulate and discipline the individual.

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