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The Concept of the Absurd: Camus' Literary Exploration of Existential Philosophy

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Abstract

This article explores Albert Camus' literary embodiment of the concept of the absurd within the framework of existential philosophy. By analyzing major works such as "The Stranger," "The Plague," and "The Fall," the article illustrates how Camus articulates the conflict between the human quest for meaning and an indifferent universe. The discussion includes an introduction to existentialism, the definition of the absurd, and the thematic and symbolic elements in Camus' novels. The article also addresses Camus' influence on literature and philosophy, his philosophical contributions, and critiques and interpretations of his work. Ultimately, it highlights the enduring relevance of Camus' exploration of the absurd in contemporary discourse, encouraging readers to engage with his works and the profound questions they pose about meaning, existence, and the human condition.

Keywords; Absurdism, Existentialism, Albert Camus

Introduction

"There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night," wrote Albert Camus, capturing the essence of the absurd. This quote encapsulates Camus' existential philosophy, which grapples with the inherent contradictions of human existence: the perpetual quest for meaning in a universe that offers none. The concept of the absurd is central to Camus' literary and philosophical work, reflecting his belief that human life is fundamentally devoid of purpose, yet we must continue to search for meaning regardless. This paradoxical stance underpins much of Camus' writing and provides a lens through which we can examine the human condition. In this article, we will explore how Camus' literary works embody the concept of the absurd within the

framework of existential philosophy, delving into his major works such as "The Stranger," "The Plague," and "The Fall."

Camus' exploration of the absurd is deeply rooted in existentialism, a philosophical movement that emerged in the 20th century, emphasizing the individual's struggle to find meaning in an indifferent universe. Existentialism posits that life is inherently meaningless, but it is through our actions and choices that we create our own significance. This article will first provide an introduction to existential philosophy and its key tenets, laying the groundwork for understanding Camus' unique contribution to the field. We will then define the concept of the absurd as articulated by Camus, discussing its philosophical foundations and how it manifests in his essays, particularly "The Myth of Sisyphus." Following this theoretical groundwork, we will undertake a detailed analysis of Camus' major literary works. "The Stranger" will be examined through the lens of its protagonist, Meursault, an embodiment of the absurd hero who navigates a world devoid of inherent meaning. In "The Plague," we will explore how Camus extends the concept of the absurd from individual experience to a collective struggle against a devastating epidemic. Finally, "The Fall" will be analyzed for its narrative technique and themes of guilt and responsibility, further illuminating Camus' exploration of existential philosophy. Through this comprehensive analysis, we aim to demonstrate the profound impact of Camus' work on both literature and philosophy, highlighting the enduring relevance of his ideas in contemporary discourse.

The philosophy of the absurd, as developed by Albert Camus, arises from the recognition of a fundamental conflict between the human desire for significance, clarity, and order, and the silent, indifferent universe that offers no such assurances. This dissonance between the quest for meaning and the lack of inherent meaning in the world leads to what Camus describes as the absurd condition. In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus presents the absurd as a human's confrontation with this irrational universe, and he proposes that we must imagine Sisyphus, condemned to an eternity of futile labor, as happy. This acceptance of the absurd does not lead to nihilism but to a form of defiant affirmation of life. Camus argues that once we acknowledge the absurdity of our existence, we must also recognize our freedom to create our own meaning and live life to its fullest potential without resorting to false hopes or illusions.

In "The Stranger," Camus vividly illustrates the absurd hero through the character of Meursault, who exists in stark contrast to societal norms and expectations. Meursault's detachment and emotional indifference highlight his acceptance of the absurd. He lives authentically, unbound by conventional morality or societal judgments, and confronts the absurdity of life with unflinching honesty. This novel serves as a powerful narrative embodiment of Camus' philosophical ideas, demonstrating how an individual might live in accordance with the principles of the absurd. Meursault's journey from apathy to a profound realization of life's inherent meaninglessness, and his subsequent embrace of this reality, reflects Camus' existential thought and the idea that true freedom is found in acknowledging the absurd.

"The Plague" expands the concept of the absurd from an individual level to a collective experience, portraying a community's response to a devastating epidemic. This novel explores how people react to the absurdity of suffering and death on a massive scale. The characters in "The Plague" exhibit a range of responses to the crisis, from denial and resignation to solidarity and resistance. Through these varied reactions, Camus illustrates the human struggle to find meaning and maintain dignity in the face of overwhelming odds. The novel ultimately suggests that even in

the midst of the absurd, acts of solidarity and compassion can provide a semblance of purpose and human connection, reaffirming the value of resistance against the indifferent forces of nature.

In "The Fall," Camus delves deeper into themes of guilt and responsibility, using a unique narrative structure to engage readers in a philosophical dialogue. The protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, serves as both confessor and judge, reflecting on his past actions and the moral implications of his behavior. Through Clamence's introspective monologue, Camus explores the existential crisis of confronting one's own fallibility and the absurdity of attempting to find absolutism in a meaningless world. The novel's setting in Amsterdam's foggy, labyrinthine streets mirrors Clamence's psychological journey, reinforcing the themes of disorientation and existential angst. "The Fall" challenges readers to consider the complexities of guilt and the human tendency to seek redemption, even when faced with the absurd.

Camus' legacy in literature and philosophy is marked by his profound engagement with the concept of the absurd. His works continue to resonate with readers and thinkers, offering insights into the human condition and the existential dilemmas we face. Camus' exploration of the absurd provides a framework for understanding the tension between our desire for meaning and the indifferent universe, encouraging us to confront this reality with courage and integrity. By embracing the absurd, we can find freedom and authenticity in our lives, creating our own meaning and purpose despite the inherent uncertainties of existence.

The impact of Camus' work extends beyond the realm of literature, influencing various fields such as psychology, ethics, and even political thought. His ideas about the absurd and human resilience have been particularly relevant in times of crisis, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars like Mayer (2021) and Kabel and Phillipson (2021) have drawn parallels between Camus' depiction of existential challenges in "The Plague" and the contemporary global response to the pandemic, highlighting the enduring relevance of his philosophy. Camus' emphasis on human solidarity and the collective struggle against suffering resonates deeply in a world grappling with widespread uncertainty and adversity.

In conclusion, Albert Camus' exploration of the absurd through his literary works offers a compelling examination of existential philosophy. By analyzing "The Stranger," "The Plague," and "The Fall," we gain a deeper understanding of how Camus articulates the tension between the human search for meaning and the indifferent universe. His portrayal of the absurd hero, the collective human response to crisis, and the introspective journey into guilt and responsibility, all serve to illuminate the complexities of the human condition. Camus' philosophy encourages us to confront the absurd with courage and to find freedom in creating our own meaning, a message that remains profoundly relevant in today's world. Through his enduring legacy, Camus continues to challenge and inspire us to live authentically in the face of the absurd.

Introduction to Existential Philosophy

Existential philosophy is a branch of philosophy that focuses on the individual's experience of existence, emphasizing personal freedom, choice, and responsibility. Key tenets of existentialism include the belief that life is inherently meaningless, and it is up to individuals to create their own meaning through their actions and decisions. Existentialists argue that human beings are free to shape their own destinies, but this freedom comes with the burden of existential angst and the awareness of life's absurdity. Existentialism often grapples with themes of alienation,

authenticity, and the human condition, encouraging individuals to confront the inherent uncertainties of existence and live authentically despite the lack of inherent meaning in the world.

Historical Context

The development of existentialism in the 20th century was influenced by the works of key figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. Sartre's philosophy centered on the idea that "existence precedes essence," meaning that humans first exist and then define themselves through their actions. Heidegger, on the other hand, focused on the concept of "Being" and the human experience of time and mortality. Existentialism gained prominence during and after World War II, a period marked by widespread disillusionment and questioning of traditional values. This philosophical movement resonated with many who were grappling with the horrors of war and the complexities of modern life, leading to a broader acceptance and exploration of existential themes in both philosophy and literature (Mayer, 2021).

Camus' Place in Existentialism

Albert Camus occupies a unique position within existential philosophy, particularly through his focus on the concept of the absurd. While often associated with existentialism, Camus himself rejected the label, preferring to describe his work as "absurdist." The absurd, as defined by Camus, arises from the conflict between humans' inherent desire for meaning and the silent, indifferent universe. Camus' exploration of the absurd is distinct in its emphasis on the human capacity to confront and embrace this inherent meaninglessness without succumbing to despair. Through his literary and philosophical works, Camus articulates a philosophy of defiance and resilience, encouraging individuals to live with integrity and passion despite the absurdity of existence (Sunardi et al., 2023).

Understanding the Absurd

The concept of the absurd, as articulated by Albert Camus, refers to the inherent conflict between the human desire to find meaning and order in life and the indifferent, chaotic nature of the universe. Camus posits that humans are constantly searching for purpose and clarity in a world that offers no inherent meaning or rational order. This dissonance creates a sense of absurdity, where the search for meaning becomes futile yet unavoidable. The absurd is not just the recognition of this conflict but also the response to it—acknowledging the meaninglessness of existence and still choosing to live with passion and defiance. Camus argues that this confrontation with the absurd is a fundamental aspect of the human condition, requiring individuals to accept the lack of ultimate purpose while continuing to strive for personal significance and joy.

Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical underpinnings of the absurd are deeply rooted in existential thought, which emphasizes individual freedom, choice, and the inherent lack of meaning in life. Central to this philosophy is the tension between humans' innate quest for meaning and the silent, indifferent universe that offers no answers. This tension is vividly described by Camus in his philosophical essays, where he explores the implications of living in a world devoid of inherent meaning. The absurd arises from the clash between our desire for significance and the universe's indifference. Camus suggests that recognizing this absurdity is the first step towards authentic existence. Rather than seeking false consolations or denying the absurd, individuals must confront it directly and live with the knowledge of life's inherent meaninglessness. This existential courage, Camus argues, is what gives life its true value and depth (Kabel & Phillipson, 2021).

Camus' Philosophical Essays

Albert Camus' essays, particularly "The Myth of Sisyphus," lay the groundwork for his exploration of the absurd and provide a comprehensive framework for understanding his existential philosophy. In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus presents the Greek mythological figure Sisyphus, condemned to eternally push a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down each time he reaches the summit. This futile and repetitive task symbolizes the human condition and the absurd struggle for meaning. Camus argues that we must imagine Sisyphus as happy, as his defiance and acceptance of his fate represent the ultimate expression of existential freedom. By embracing the absurd and rejecting both nihilism and false hope, Sisyphus becomes a symbol of human resilience and the ability to find personal meaning despite life's inherent meaninglessness. This essay, along with others like "The Rebel," articulates Camus' vision of living authentically in the face of the absurd, emphasizing the importance of individual freedom, moral integrity, and the continuous search for personal significance (Phillips, 2020).

The Absurd in "The Stranger"

"The Stranger" is a novel by Albert Camus that follows the life of its protagonist, Meursault, a French Algerian man who exhibits emotional detachment and indifference to the world around him. The novel begins with Meursault receiving news of his mother's death, to which he responds with a notable lack of emotion. He attends the funeral but shows no signs of grief. Following the funeral, Meursault returns to his life in Algiers, where he becomes involved with a woman named Marie and befriends a neighbor, Raymond. The central event of the novel occurs when Meursault, on a beach, kills an Arab man in a seemingly unprovoked act of violence, triggered by the blinding sun and heat. The latter part of the novel focuses on Meursault's trial, where his lack of conventional emotional responses and his atheism become central themes, leading to his conviction and death sentence. Throughout the trial and in his final days, Meursault remains indifferent, ultimately accepting the absurdity of his existence and the inevitability of death.

Character Analysis

Meursault, the protagonist of "The Stranger," is often regarded as the quintessential absurd hero. His actions and attitudes reflect Camus' philosophy of the absurd, characterized by a sense of detachment and a rejection of conventional social norms and expectations. Meursault's emotional indifference, from his mother's death to his own trial and sentencing, highlights his acceptance of the absurdity of life. He does not seek to impose meaning on his experiences or conform to societal expectations of behavior. Instead, he lives in the moment, reacting to sensory experiences rather than emotional or moral considerations. This detachment is most starkly illustrated in his reaction to the murder he commits; rather than expressing remorse or justification, Meursault acknowledges the act as a result of the physical discomfort caused by the sun. His trial further exemplifies his absurd heroism, as he refuses to feign emotions he does not feel, ultimately leading to his condemnation. Through Meursault, Camus portrays a character who embodies the existential courage to face life's meaninglessness without resorting to false comforts or hypocrisies (Mayer, 2021).

Themes and Symbolism

"The Stranger" is rich with themes and symbolism that underscore the novel's exploration of absurdity and existentialism. One of the primary themes is the absurdity of existence, illustrated

by Meursault's indifferent reactions to life events and his ultimate acceptance of the meaningless nature of life. The novel also explores themes of alienation and isolation, as Meursault is emotionally disconnected from those around him and society at large. The sun and heat are recurring symbols in the novel, representing the oppressive and indifferent forces of the universe. It is under the blinding, scorching sun that Meursault commits the murder, symbolizing the irrational and uncontrollable aspects of existence. Additionally, the courtroom scenes highlight the absurdity of societal norms and the judicial system, as Meursault is judged more for his lack of conventional emotions than for the actual crime he committed. Through these themes and symbols, Camus illustrates the central tenets of existentialism, emphasizing the need to accept life's inherent absurdity and to find personal meaning in an indifferent world (Phillips, 2020).

So, "The Stranger" presents a vivid literary exploration of Camus' concept of the absurd, through the character of Meursault and the events of the novel. The narrative challenges readers to confront the absurdity of existence and to consider how one might live authentically in a world devoid of inherent meaning.

The Absurd in "The Plague"

"The Plague," a novel by Albert Camus, is set in the Algerian city of Oran, which is suddenly struck by a devastating plague. The story begins with Dr. Bernard Rieux, the central character, discovering a dead rat, which signals the onset of the epidemic. As the plague spreads, the city is sealed off from the outside world, and the residents must come to terms with their isolation and the pervasive threat of death. The narrative follows various characters, including Dr. Rieux, the journalist Raymond Rambert, the eccentric Jean Tarrou, and the municipal clerk Joseph Grand, as they grapple with the reality of the plague and their responses to it. Throughout the novel, the characters engage in acts of solidarity, resistance, and introspection, ultimately revealing the human capacity for resilience and moral integrity in the face of an indifferent universe. The plague eventually recedes, but the survivors are left with a profound understanding of the fragility and absurdity of human existence.

Community and Absurdity

"The Plague" extends the concept of the absurd from the individual experience, as seen in "The Stranger," to the collective experience of an entire community. The city of Oran, under quarantine, becomes a microcosm of the human condition, where the collective response to the plague reflects Camus' existential philosophy. The plague serves as a metaphor for the arbitrary and indifferent nature of the universe, highlighting the random and senseless suffering that can befall humanity. The citizens of Oran, initially in denial and panic, gradually come to terms with the absurdity of their situation. Their collective experience underscores the themes of alienation and solidarity, as they confront the meaninglessness of the epidemic and seek to find personal and communal meaning in their responses. The novel illustrates how a community can unite in the face of the absurd, transforming individual despair into collective action and moral resistance (Kabel & Phillipson, 2021).

Philosophical Reflections

The characters in "The Plague" offer diverse responses to the absurd, reflecting existentialist thought and Camus' philosophy of the absurd. Dr. Rieux embodies the existential hero, responding to the plague with relentless dedication to his duty, despite recognizing the futility of his efforts. His pragmatic approach and refusal to succumb to despair highlight the importance

of living authentically and ethically in the face of absurdity. Jean Tarrou, who chronicles the events of the plague, represents a philosophical engagement with the absurd, grappling with questions of morality and the human condition. His eventual death, despite his efforts to combat the plague, underscores the randomness of suffering and the inherent injustice of the universe. Raymond Rambert, initially focused on escaping Oran to reunite with his loved one, ultimately chooses to stay and fight the plague, illustrating a shift from individual desire to collective responsibility. Joseph Grand, with his obsessive pursuit of perfecting a single sentence, symbolizes the human quest for meaning and order, even in the face of life's absurdities. Through these characters, Camus explores the various ways individuals confront and cope with the absurd, emphasizing the importance of solidarity, ethical action, and personal integrity (Mayer, 2021).

In summary, "The Plague" provides a profound exploration of the absurd on a communal level, portraying how individuals and communities respond to arbitrary suffering and existential challenges. The novel's characters exemplify different approaches to living with the absurd, highlighting the potential for resilience, solidarity, and ethical engagement in an indifferent world.

The Absurd in "The Fall"

"The Fall" is a novel by Albert Camus that centers on Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a former Parisian lawyer who now resides in Amsterdam, where he serves as the self-proclaimed "judge-penitent." The novel unfolds through Clamence's extended monologue to an unnamed listener in a bar. Clamence recounts his life story, detailing his fall from a respected lawyer to a man haunted by guilt and self-loathing. He describes a pivotal moment when he failed to act to save a woman who fell from a bridge, a failure that triggers his existential crisis. This event leads Clamence to question his own moral integrity and the authenticity of his previous altruistic actions. As he delves deeper into his psyche, Clamence reveals his hypocrisy and the duplicity of his former life. The novel ends with Clamence fully embracing his role as a judge-penitent, acknowledging the absurdity of existence and his own moral shortcomings.

Narrative Technique

"The Fall" employs a unique narrative technique through its use of a monologue form, which allows for an intimate and introspective exploration of the protagonist's existential crisis. The monologue format creates a direct and unfiltered connection between Clamence and the reader, drawing them into his confessional narrative. This technique effectively conveys Clamence's internal turmoil and his struggle with guilt and self-awareness. The one-sided conversation also reflects the isolation and alienation central to existentialist themes, as Clamence's introspection reveals his deep sense of disconnection from others and from his former self. The setting of Amsterdam's foggy, labyrinthine streets mirrors Clamence's psychological state, enhancing the sense of entrapment and existential dread. By using the monologue form, Camus is able to delve deeply into the protagonist's psyche, providing a profound and unsettling examination of human nature and the absurd (Maglione, 2022).

Themes of Guilt and Responsibility

"The Fall" addresses profound themes of guilt, responsibility, and the absurd nature of existence. Clamence's narrative is dominated by his sense of guilt over his inaction during the woman's suicide, an event that symbolizes his broader moral failings. This incident forces him to confront the hypocrisy of his previous life, where he prided himself on his virtuous actions and public image. Clamence's realization of his own moral duplicity leads to a profound existential

crisis, as he grapples with the absurdity of trying to live a morally consistent life in an indifferent universe. The novel explores the theme of responsibility, as Clamence acknowledges his failure to live up to his own ethical standards and the consequences of his actions (or inactions) on others. This acknowledgment does not lead to redemption but rather to a deeper understanding of the human condition and the acceptance of life's inherent absurdity. Clamence's role as a judge-penitent symbolizes the paradox of human existence, where individuals must continually judge themselves and others while recognizing the ultimate futility and absurdity of such judgments (Sunardi et al., 2023).

In summary, "The Fall" provides a rich exploration of the absurd through its narrative technique and its examination of themes such as guilt, responsibility, and existential crisis. The novel's monologue form effectively conveys the protagonist's internal struggle, while the thematic content underscores Camus' philosophical inquiries into the nature of human existence and the inherent contradictions of trying to live an authentic life in an absurd world. Through Clamence's confessional narrative, Camus invites readers to reflect on their own moral choices and the complexities of the human condition.

Camus' Legacy and Influence

Albert Camus' influence on contemporary and later literature, particularly within the existentialist tradition, is profound and far-reaching. His works have inspired a multitude of writers and thinkers who grapple with themes of existential angst, the search for meaning, and the human condition. Camus' distinctive narrative style and his ability to weave philosophical concepts into compelling stories have left a lasting imprint on the literary world. Authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, his contemporaries and fellow existentialists, were influenced by his ideas, albeit with significant philosophical divergences. Moreover, Camus' exploration of the absurd has resonated with postmodern writers who continue to interrogate the nature of reality and human existence. His works, including "The Stranger," "The Plague," and "The Fall," remain staples in the canon of world literature, studied not only for their literary merit but also for their philosophical depth. Camus' ability to capture the nuances of the human experience in the face of an indifferent universe continues to inspire and challenge writers and readers alike (Phillips, 2020).

Philosophical Contributions

Camus' contributions to existential philosophy are particularly notable for his articulation of the concept of the absurd. While existentialism broadly explores the individual's struggle to find meaning in a meaningless world, Camus' unique focus was on the inherent conflict between humans' desire for clarity and the universe's indifference. Through his seminal essays, such as "The Myth of Sisyphus," and his novels, Camus developed a philosophy that emphasizes living with the absurd rather than escaping it. He argued for the importance of embracing life's absurdity and responding to it with personal integrity and defiance. This stance diverged from some existentialist thinkers who sought solace in existential freedom or divine transcendence. Camus' idea that one must imagine Sisyphus happy—continuing to push the boulder despite its inevitable fall—encapsulates his view that individuals can create their own meaning through their actions, even in the face of absurdity. His emphasis on ethical action, personal responsibility, and resilience has had a lasting impact on both philosophical thought and practical ethics (Kabel & Phillipson, 2021).

Critiques and Interpretations

Despite his significant contributions, Camus' work has not been without criticism. Some critics argue that his concept of the absurd is overly pessimistic and fails to provide a viable framework for meaningful action. Others have pointed out perceived inconsistencies in his philosophy, particularly his rejection of existentialist labels while engaging deeply with existential themes. Additionally, some have critiqued his works for their limited engagement with issues of social and political justice, arguing that his focus on individual existential dilemmas overlooks broader systemic concerns. However, alternative interpretations of Camus' exploration of the absurd suggest that his emphasis on personal integrity and ethical action offers a powerful response to life's inherent meaninglessness. By focusing on the individual's capacity for resilience and moral responsibility, Camus provides a framework for navigating the complexities of the human condition without resorting to nihilism or despair. His works continue to be reinterpreted and debated, underscoring their enduring relevance and the richness of his philosophical insights (Mayer, 2021).

In summary, Albert Camus' legacy in literature and philosophy is marked by his profound exploration of the absurd and its implications for human existence. His influence on contemporary and later writers, his significant philosophical contributions, and the ongoing critiques and interpretations of his work all attest to the enduring impact of his thought. Camus' writings challenge us to confront the absurdity of life with courage and integrity, offering a timeless reflection on the human condition. Through his exploration of existential themes, Camus invites readers and thinkers to engage deeply with the questions of meaning, freedom, and ethical action in an indifferent universe.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has examined how Albert Camus' literary works, such as "The Stranger," "The Plague," and "The Fall," embody the concept of the absurd, illustrating the inherent conflict between the human quest for meaning and the indifferent universe. Camus' exploration of the absurd, rooted in existential philosophy, highlights themes of alienation, ethical action, and resilience in the face of life's inherent meaninglessness. The enduring relevance of Camus' ideas is evident in their application to contemporary existential challenges, prompting reflections on the human condition and our responses to uncertainty and suffering. Readers are encouraged to engage deeply with Camus' works, not only to appreciate their literary brilliance but also to grapple with the profound philosophical questions they raise about meaning, existence, and the essence of human life. Camus invites us to confront the absurd with integrity and passion, finding personal significance in a world devoid of inherent meaning.

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