

The absurd and the concept of hope in camus's novels



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When one questions the existence of God, one often reverts to a specific, troubling question: “ if God exists, why are there moral tragedies that cause such great suffering?” In other words, humans find it very difficult when there is an event or scenario that does not fit their framing of thought. Similar types of thinking have plagued humans for centuries; whether morality exists or not is still a topic of debate. These seemingly unanswerable questions can only verify one aspect of the universe: the Absurd governs it. This concept that human reason could not possibly explain the universe and its workings is explained in *The Stranger* and *The Plague* by Albert Camus. However, this conception leads many to believe that there is absolutely no value in the world; however, this is not the message Camus wants to communicate. In *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, the conclusion is not one of nihilism, but of hope, as explained through “ Existentialist Fiction” and “ Nonviolence in a Plague-stricken World.”

To fully understand how Absurdism functions within Camus’s novels, we must first understand what the Absurd entails. The Absurd states that the human need for objective understanding of the world is incoherent because thought reduces the world to a sphere of human understanding. Though reduces an inhuman world to the world of the human; for instance, a tree is known to humans as a tree, but that is simply the meaning mankind has projected onto the object. In other words, a tree is not called “ a tree” by the universe, but rather because human society has decided that it is a tree. Furthermore, institutions created to instill meaning within the world have repeatedly failed; only absurdism can acknowledge the persistent confusion as a result of these institutions. It is clear that humanity has witnessed

failures of religious, governmental, and social institutions that were designed to create reason. Instead of adhering to what humans expected, institutionalized life only contributed to a growing sense of confusion.

Camus uses different tools to symbolize the Absurd in his novels. In *The Stranger*, Meursault is used to represent the Absurd and its interaction with the human world. For instance, when Meursault's mother dies, he does not view this death as something that has moral weight to him. Typically, humans will grieve their loved ones, and those who do not seem to go against common human reasoning. Another example arises when Meursault kills the Arab. He states that it is something that just "happened." There was no premeditation or rationality involved; he acted because of the hot sun. Furthermore, murder is something that humans confer moral judgment onto. But under the Absurd, murder is not something that is naturally bad, which is why Meursault is not able to understand why killing the Arab is a problem. He is unpredictable and indifferent to those around him: "I may not have been sure about what really did interest me, but I was absolutely sure about what didn't" (*Stranger* 60). This statement indicates that he knows that he is indifferent, and recognizes that he does not care for anything. He says he will marry Marie even though he does not care whether he does or not, and he barely attempts to defend himself in court. Just as in a perfectly absurd universe, one cannot predict what he will do next. Not only is he unpredictable, but he is also controlled by the empirical world. Instead of mourning for his mother, he cares more about the people crying in the room at that moment. Just as the absurd is entirely based on the physical world, Meursault's actions are motivated by the empirical world.

In *The Plague*, absurdism takes the form of the bubonic-like disease that rocks the small town Oran. The citizens of the town try desperately to rely on human-made institutions, such as government, religion, and medicine, to help them. Despite this reliance, absurdism triumphs over the manmade systems. The government fails in multiple instances. The first signs of the disease is marked by an increase in the dead vermin. Despite signs of a public health risk, the government does not do anything proactive: "Actually the Municipality had not contemplated doing anything at all" (*Plague* 16). Even as the problem becomes more dire, the government takes the wrong course of action, instead looking to collecting trash more often rather than searching for what is killing the rats. When the government assigns its prefect to deal with the problem, he decides to forestall the formal recognition of the plague. This move is problematic because it entails risking more lives for a longer period of time. Subsequently, the quarantine takes longer to take effect, and as a result, the risk of more death increases. Once it does take effect, the quarantine has the end goal of eliminating the afflicted rather than attempting to find a way to help. As a result, the diseased are all herded into the sports arena, much as pigs are moved into their pens. The hope of the citizens that the government would save them is misplaced; in fact, the inaction of the government is a crucial factor in making the epidemic so hard to clean up.

When the government begins to fail the citizens, many turn to religion to find solace and peace. Although the people are not usually religious, they grow more so as hope grows dim and the death toll rises. The town organizes a Week of Prayer in order to counter the disease. At the end of the Week,

Paneloux blames the plague on the “ heathen lifestyle” that the townspeople had led during his sermon:

““ My brothers, he cries, ‘ that fatal hunt is up, and harrying our streets today. See him there, that angel of the pestilence, comely as Lucifer, shining like Evil’s very self! He is hovering above your roofs with his great spear in his right hand, poised to strike, while his left hand is stretched toward one or other of your houses. Maybe at this very moment his finger is pointing to your door, the red spear crashing on its panels, and even now the plague is entering our home” (46).

However, he believes that if the people repent, “ God would see to the rest” (47). According to religion, the bubonic disease is something that brings suffering, but it is also something that opens the eyes of mankind. Rieux, the doctor, does not believe in this train of thought, as he believes that a disease that brings such suffering cannot possibly have such a positive implication: “ All the same, when you see the misery it brings, you’d need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague” (50).

This is a crucial junction between religion and the Absurd; religion is premised on the idea that things that cannot be explained by human reason can be explained by a higher order. However, absurdism brings up the paradox of God. Either an all-powerful God exists and humans are not responsible for the evil that occurs on Earth, or God does not exist, in which case there is no being to put transcendent meaning in the world and all human constructs of meaning are illusory. Furthermore, since the absurd debases all other ethical judgments which apply ethical meaning to the world, all conclusions must be based upon the absurd. Yet since the absurd

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only exists insofar as humans can experience the world, believing in a higher power does not do absurdism justice.

A major problem with how many perceive Camus's two works is that Camus's philosophy tends to be seen as nihilistic. Many argue that *The Stranger* is mostly existentially nihilistic, as the story seems to suggest that Meursault, who represents the Absurd, does not confer value onto anything in his life. This is why he is able to act without any motive or reason; he simply "does." The definition of existential nihilism is the idea that life has no purpose, value, or objective meaning. Moreover, it argues that a person cannot affect the universe in its totality because it cannot alter the infinite nature of it. This interpretation fits Meursault's actions, as he seems to understand that all the actions he takes are essentially useless up to a certain point. Another facet of existential nihilism is the idea that subjective values and ideas cannot have lasting meaning because they are subject to change. Such an idea is clearly demonstrated in terms of Meursault's dismissive attitude with marrying Marie. In the case of *The Plague*, Camus's writing may be more representative of political nihilism, or the refusal to accept governmental and political structure due to a lack of objectivity. The conflicts within *The Plague* are largely centered around these manmade institutions that ends up failing. The government at first stalls the quarantine, and religion is not able to offer shelter to the citizen. Thus, it makes sense that the novel is largely politically nihilistic.

Camus, however, did not intend for his novels to be read as nihilistic. In fact, his own conclusion is quite the opposite. His short story "The Myth of Sisyphus" helps clarify and correct the misconceptions of absurdism. <https://assignbuster.com/the-absurd-and-the-concept-of-hope-in-camus-novels/>

Sisyphus is stuck rolling a boulder up a hill for all eternity; when he finally reaches the top, the boulder rolls back down. It is understood that the act of rolling the boulder up has no inherent meaning, as Sisyphus is simply expected to do so an infinite number of times. One may state that this means that the entirety of Sisyphus's life is now meaningless. However, that is not the conclusion that Camus reaches. When Sisyphus reaches the top of the mountain and the boulder rolls down, he becomes aware of his absurd fate as he heads down to continue his laboring. This moment of lucid understanding of his situation is crucial, as it demonstrates that life can be meaningful despite not having any kind of order. This understanding of his fate is also crucial, as an acknowledgment of the futility of his actions makes it that much more bearable. By acknowledging the pain, the individual is able to confer a certain amount of control over his situation. Sisyphus has also accepted that he will never be able to stop rolling the boulder down the hill. To him, there is no opportunity to leave or to have some alternate task available. This is the crucial difference between nihilism and absurdism; nihilism is the idea that nothing matters, but absurdism takes it a step further by understanding that nothing matters and then accepting that there is no better alternative available to anyone. Therefore, rather than the answer being suicide, the answer is acceptance; only through this acceptance can anyone find true happiness.

This idea is present in both novels, thus denying the nihilistic conclusions that many believe these works have. In *The Plague*, the disease represents the Absurd, and so the book is literally about humans fighting against the unforgiving nature of the universe. However, the way in which the characters

react to the disease allows them, to some extent, to combat it. In “Nonviolence in a Plague-stricken World,” the author argues that the Absurd via the disease allows the individuals to create meaning through human solidarity. However, this solidarity is only reached through suffering. The clearest example is when Tarrou asks how Rieux developed his knowledge of reality, which Rieux replies with “suffering.” This is because suffering is a twin, and healing is its sibling. Similarly to how dark does not have context if light did not exist, one would not understand healing if suffering is not present. After the plague disappears as quickly as it appeared, Rieux is able to share in his happiness of surviving such suffering. The misery the disease brought upon Oran allows for the survivors to feel a common solidarity amongst each other. This is an important message; it suggests that once humans go through the Absurd together, they will be able to feel a sense of community with one another. In fact, this idea explains why the Oran community began to act:

“ Still, if things had gone thus far and no farther, force of habit would doubtless have gained the day, as usual. But other members of our community, not all menials or poor people, were to follow the path down which M. Michel had led the way. And it was then that fear, and with fear serious reflection, began” (Plague 22).

In terms of *The Stranger*, the novel takes a “show don’t tell” method of explaining the Absurd to the reader. However, the novel can be used as a tool to explain the difference between existentialism and absurdism, whereas *The Plague* can delineate the difference between nihilism and absurdism. There is a misconception that existentialism is akin to absurdism, <https://assignbuster.com/the-absurd-and-the-concept-of-hope-in-camus-novels/>

but the difference can be explained in “ Camus and the Novel of the ‘ Absurd.’” Existentialism suggests that because the world could be empty, one has to take action to get rid of that emptiness. However, Meursault understands the loneliness and emptiness of the universe, but does not attempt to find any kind of meaning in his life. Absurdism is about accepting the emptiness of the universe and conceptualizing it, rather than applying one’s own meaning upon the world. Even in the end where he realizes that he wants life, he takes no action to attempt to stop his execution. Instead, he decides that he will go on passively.

Thus, absurdism is the middle ground between nihilism and existentialism. One does not concede that there is absolutely no value to the world, but one also does not apply one’s own source of value to the world. Absurdism is about being one with the universe, whether that means being passive or struggling for life. This idea is usually experienced by those who face mortality, and in the face of it, decide to accept whatever fate may come to pass. Everyone has the capacity to access the Absurd; it is just how they act when they come into contact that defines them as individuals.