

Literature in question

Literature



The outsider, written by Albert Camus and Perfumer by Patrick Suskind are two books that have addressed critically the concept of rationality and absurdity. The protagonist in the outsider is a controversial one, since he apparently does not have feelings even to his own mother. He goes undeterred even with her mother's death. He does not care about Marie- his girl friend- and even God. He wonders why the priest worries himself by visiting him. In a way he has created a world that he himself can understand. It is absurd that Meursault's inability to lie and his insensitivity make the authority to perceive him as a threat.

The concept of reason for any action he does is irrelevant. It is in this breath that the author of The Outsider perhaps wants the readers to believe that it is not always that we have emotions that we ought to have had. And sometimes we play up an emotion that was expected to exist but in actual sense the emotion did not exist within us. It is to this effect that Mersault's only acknowledgement of life is tangible, physical things rather than corruptible emotion. He is, in this case, a model in which the author shows the principle of existentialism where individuals have full responsibility for creating the meaning of their own lives. He does not need to rationally think with the rest of the society.

Camus becomes an existentialist in this case by showing that conscious human beings will always find in themselves a world of their own.

Existentialists believe that the ultimate and unquestionable is not reality, is not thinking consciousness but being in the world. Mersault is just in the world. In fact no one- even the society- can give a reason for Meursault to be in the world. He does not need a justification to exist in the world.

Camus wants to show us that a person cannot go against the society and the majority, be it good or bad, will always win; this is shown by the change of attitude by Mersault at the end of the novel. At this point the society has won by converting Meursault to its side but still there is no justification in the way the society perceives what transpires in Mersault's life. He has got the right to think the way he thinks and do whatever he does.

The book focuses on absurdity of life and death, as well as the society. It is in this sense that Camus expounds on the theme of existentialism and rationalism. He addresses the concept of subjectivity, individual freedom and choice, where life becomes a choice. Mersault's behaviours might be attributed to his choice in life rather than subjecting it to societal conventional reasoning. For him, apparently, rationalism is relative and depends on individual.

He does not even succumb to the mercies offered by the priest while he awaits his execution. It is the choice of an individual to choose to believe in God or not; he has chosen not to believe and even death does not give him a reason to believe in God. Meursault does not seem to care whether he lives or dies- he is not remorseful even at a time he could be seeking repentance; all seems to be absurd and vanity to him.

Mersault emotions are at most of the time switched off, which makes him possible to be an observer of his own life – watching it as an outsider. Camus writes the book in the first person so that the main character describes everything that happens to him in a very elaborate way but does not talk about his sentiments. The writer creates a cathartic effect by making the

reader put himself in the position of the main character, yet at the same time creates a disturbing effect increased by the recurring deaths. (Three deaths in the book includes that of the mother, climax produces the Arab man's death, then Meursault execution.)

The character starts showing emotions at the end- by recognizing his love for his girlfriend Marie. This gives a new lease in Mersault's life. He, at least, though late, revives his emotions, changes his attitude and has a reason to live. The societal absurdity wins over Mersault; he has conformed to the societal norms- which include showing emotion. At this point, Camus shows that regardless of someone's stand, life is paramount beyond reason and rationalism.

By referring to his past regarding how he gave up after having given up ambitions when he was a student. This reflection of the past shows that at a point Mersault did everything as per societal expectation but later realized the need for being who he was regardless of what the society would think of him-he could not figure out why he ought to do things to the societal satisfaction and not for his own satisfaction.

Patrick Suskind, on the other hand brings out the issue of absurdity in his novel Perfume by showing how Jean Baptiste Grenouille engages in his great passion-in his sense of smell leading him to become a murderer. Jean-Baptiste Grenouille born with one uplifting gift of smell; and this being a gift that nothing can be done to stop-we as readers are left doubting if we have to blame him for the iniquities that come along with the gift. The fact that he survives his birth by default complements this.

The reader asks himself if indeed fate has destiny. His identification of his gift to isolate every kind of smell is also an important aspect that comes in his infancy. It is irrational for the society to isolate an innocent person because of an inherent, unique gift. For Grenouille, he needed not to persuade the society to like him because all he got was an inborn gift. It is absurd how people in the society tend to give reasons as to why the society has to like them instead of living their own lives.

He is rejected by the society, grows up in an orphanage, unloved and malnourished. If indeed rationalism was to be applied in this case, no substantial reason can be given for the tribulations that Grenouille undergoes. It is equally irrational for the society to treat him the way it does instead of sympathising with him and according him a chance to exploit his gift. Isolation from the society is the reason for him developing disgust for fellow humans and hence distinguishing himself by the uncanny sense of smell. It is amazing how he even uses his gift to find the beautiful girl.

He could not believe his nose and was threatened that the nice smell was from human race, which he had come to despise. It is quite paradoxical that he hates human race which he is part of. It is due to the absurd situation he finds himself in and with the intention of preserving his sense of scent he kills the beautiful girl. This shows his effort to find meaning to the universe and of course a place since, humans to him, are a threat. Though tortured by the scent he continues to search the scent and this keeps his survival going - a weird way and reason to survive. This scenario creates an absurd and irrational situation whereby Grenouille is sandwiched between the nice smell and the repugnance of human beings.

He develops an even greater disgust for human as he goes through the journey in the forest to the extent of being repulsed by the scent of human of human existence. It is quite irrational and absurd how the greed to find this perfect scent drives Grenouille into the forest. He lives for seven years in a dark cave where he was intoxicated by smells he preserves in his internal 'palace of smells'. His high aptitude for mixing strange and exotic perfumes would be an asset in the rational world but instead, in his apparently irrational way, he takes responsibility for creating the meaning of his own life.

The skill and gift leads him to his desire to cover his own lack of smell and quest to create the most unique perfume the world has ever known. This in essence explains the passion the protagonist lives for- creating most unique perfume- but unfortunately, a human being has to be killed for the perfume to be made. It is absurd that this passion supersedes even the life of humans.

To the society, Grenouille's acts are unacceptable but then when he is supposed to be executed the same society becomes remorseful and throws his deeds to the dogs in the expense of the perfume. It is equally illogical or irrational for Grenouille to be engulfed with the power of dissatisfaction because the society does not love him but his perfume; he instead ought to be celebrating!

Patrick Suskind has succeeded to show that it is not right to judge individuals in the society and yet the society itself is irrational in its thinking.

Grenouille's situation is inexplicable to the society but he has all the justification as to do what he does. He tries to find meaning in the universe

but fails. It is absurd that he becomes a murderer from being a scent smeller.

He does not comprehend why he should not act in the case where his reason, his power of reflection tells him. He is being only himself by doing all he does; after all it is the same society that made him who he is by isolating him. In deed he uses his power of following his favorite scent only to find out that it is for human beings who he loathes and kills them one by one, eventually turning out to be a dangerous murderer. This complements the fact that life is more than the rational thinking. This in essence is a case where man has chosen to embrace his absurd condition instead of following the rational thinking of the society.

The protagonists in the two novels evidently show that man's freedom and the opportunity to give life meaning lies in the acknowledgement and acceptance of absurdity. The freedom of man is therefore established in man's natural ability and opportunity to create his own meaning and purpose. Mersault and Grenouille, both create a world of their own and a purpose to live in it. The individual becomes the most precious unit of existence, as he represents unique ideals that can be characterized as an entire universe by itself.

The two writers have succeeded in bringing out the principles of absurdism, rationalism and existentialism. They have managed to create characters that have stood out of the society by defying the societal norms. These characters enable the readers elicit some crucial questions on about their existence. The writers manage to bring out the irrational way the society

thinks of individuals who are only but living their lives. The rejection of reason as a source of meaning dominates the two works by focusing on the feelings of fear and dread -by the protagonists- that are felt in their own radical freedom and their awareness of death.

The writers succeed in showing that indeed human counter their fear of being in the world by believing that they are rational and everyone else is; they do not have the anything to fear and no reason to feel anxious about being free. They make the reader to view human beings as subjects in an indifferent, objective, often ambiguous and absurd world, in which meaning is not provided by the natural order, but rather created by human being actions and interpretations.

Reference

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