

Humankind's drive to
find meaning:
dostoevsky, camus,
and woody allen



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In absurdist fiction, authors and writers focus on characters who investigate the meaning of human existence in order to call into question existential notions. Some writers may utilize character's confrontation with absurdism to either reject or honor existentialism, whereas others may use it to prove a sense of comfort or anxiety in the irrational nature of existence. In *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* by director Woody Allen, human behavior under absurd circumstances is highlighted. The characters of these prominent absurdist fictions struggle to find inherent meaning in human existence. Although the protagonists confront the absurdity of the world in similar ways, their individual battles with existentialism illuminate human's utmost motivation to find meaning in existence.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky uses Raskolnikov's wavering qualities of good and evil and identification as the "ubermensch" to demonstrate his desire to find meaning for himself. In the beginning of the novel, Raskolnikov commits acts of kindness, however begins to question his actions. For instance, he leaves Marmeladov's family money after seeing the misery contaminating their household, however, suddenly regrets doing so: "'What a stupid thing to have done,' he thought. 'They have their Sonya, and I need it myself,'" (Dostoevsky 27). Raskolnikov's quick reproach to his good actions illuminates his motivation to find meaning since he cannot grasp the importance of being kind. It additionally foreshadows his ideas about justice. After overhearing a student and officer discuss killing Alyona, Raskolnikov begins to find meaning: "'For one life, thousands of lives saved from decay and corruption. One death for hundreds of lives- it's simple arithmetic!'"

(Dostoevsky 65). This conversation sparks a realization for Raskolnikov: the world is filled with injustice, and therefore, to create meaning and order, one must eliminate the injustice. This new conceptual remedy to make sense of the unknown becomes a reality and Raskolnikov not only murders Alyona, but also her sister, Lizaveta. Additionally, this act manifests into a lifestyle for Raskolnikov; he begins to place himself on a pedestal, calling himself the "ubermensch." This identification as the "superman" provides Raskolnikov with a new understanding of existence, however this title only proves to isolate him even more and illuminates the falsity of his newfound meaning. Raskolnikov's initial confrontation with absurdity portrays humankind's need for a sense of meaning.

Raskolnikov struggles to find his essence once committing the crime, however, he eventually rejects his former ideas about existence and surrenders to love. Throughout the novel, he is constantly stricken with isolation marked by his confrontation with absurdity. For instance, by placing himself above most people and labeling himself as the "ubermensch," he has become divided from the people around him like Dunya and Sonya. This isolation is apparent through Dostoevsky's use of symbolism; Raskolnikov's tight, confined room represents his separation from the world, and the dark, grim imagery offers an ominous tone which reveals the internal struggles humans face while conquering absurdity. By the end of the novel, Raskolnikov begins to surrender to love and God, ultimately abandoning his former ideas about existence and justice: "Infinite happiness lit up in her eyes; she understood, and for her there was no longer any doubt that he loved her, loved her infinitely, and that at last the moment had come..."

(Dostoevsky 549). ““ Can her convictions not be my convictions now? Her feelings, her aspirations, at least...,” (Dostoevsky 550). Both Sonya and Raskolnikov realize that he finally loves her and once he takes out his copy of the New Testament, he recognizes that with the power of God and love, Sonya and he are connected. Raskolnikov has finally stripped himself from his former isolation and has become spiritually regenerated. Through Raskolnikov's rejection of his prior discovery of existence, Dostoevsky has highlighted that humans must confront absurdity in order to find salvation, and this confrontation is inevitable.

In *The Stranger*, Meursault attempts to find meaning in the absurd and eventually begins to accept the meaningless quality of existence. Meursault, a very passive and indifferent man, murders an Arab and is put on trial for his crime. However, there is no explanation for his action. In fact, in court his only justification for the murder is the scorching sun: “ Fumbling a little with my words and realizing how ridiculous I sounded, I blurted out that it was because of the sun,” (Camus 103). Like human existence, the murder has no rationality. Nonetheless, the prosecutor begins to create rationality and explain the murder, concluding that Meursault lacks normal human empathy, given his absence of emotion from his mother's death, and makes him out to be a monster. Likewise, Meursault has an ultimate desire to explain his actions, yet, he starts to realize that there is no explanation. Through Meursault's interaction with the Chaplain, his understanding of existence becomes apparent: “ What would it matter if he were accused of murder and then executed because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral? Salamano's dog was worth just as much as his wife,” (Camus 121). Meursault illustrates the

equality all beings face given the inevitability of death by equating Salamano's dog to the Chaplain's wife. This depressing realization of humankind's absurdity, however, allows Meursault to reach a state of happiness: "...I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much life myself - so like a brother, really - I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again," (Camus 123). Meursault has finally accepted the absurdity of existence and is at peace. In fact, he has freed himself from the constant false hope of finding meaning in the absurd. Camus concludes that although humans are constantly driven to find meaning, it is important to accept the irrationality of existence.

In Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Judah, like Meursault, struggles to find meaning in existence, yet, eventually accepts the absurdity of the world and rejects religion. Judah seems to have a successful and happy life, however, his affair with Dolores begins to hinder his perfect lifestyle: she wants their relationship to be public, threatening to release his financial interactions to his family. With the help of his brother, Jack, Judah decides to hire a hitman to murder Dolores and free him from his suffering. After she is killed, Judah is struck with an overwhelming sense of remorse and he begins to question whether good and evil truly do matter. For instance, he has flashbacks from his childhood and remembers his father's beliefs about ethics: "If necessary I will always choose God over truth," (Allen). Judah's father essentially believes that a person should lead a morally good life in a world devoid of meaning, ultimately choosing God. Judah becomes very confused about existence given these flashbacks, however eventually chooses truth unlike his father. Since he rejects a higher power, he realizes

that people can do anything in their power to maintain happiness. Therefore, Judah accepts the absurdity of the world and is eventually at peace, similar to Meursault. Allen's analysis of existential philosophies through Judah's revelation illuminates humankind's motivation to confront absurdity.

Human existence lacks a sense of rationality and order and therefore, humans will inevitably strive to find meaning. This existential philosophy is demonstrated in *Crime and Punishment*, *The Stranger*, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. The protagonists of these stories struggle to find meaning and eventually confront the absurdity of the world. Their individual yet comparable attempts to unveil the truth behind existence highlight humanity's futile and endless search for meaning.