

The Absurdity in *The Stranger*

GAO Yi-xiao

Beijing International Students University, Beijing, China

This article starts with the introduction of medium-length famous novel *The Stranger* by the eminent novelist and postwar intellectual Albert Camus. The analysis is conducted from three different perspectives: the absurdity of the essence of life, the absurdity of ethics and morals, and the absurdity of the trial, in order to explore the inner world of the protagonist Meursault. The novelette reflects the mental confusion and loneliness, indifference of people in the context of post-World War II. Paris was in a state of intellectual flux. The language of the novel is cold and concise, the “white writing” of Albert Camus; Roland Barthes called this style of language *zero-degree writing*. Meursault is a misfit on the edge of the society who keeps out of everything. The protagonist Meursault realized the absurdity and hypocrisy of society and the world. But he still sticks to his sincerity, appearing to be indifferent on the outside but gives his utmost respect to others without judgment on the inside. He calmly accepted everything that fate gives him, not afraid of being ostracized by society as a stranger, even if the threat of death cannot make him compromise. Camus said: “For me, therefore, Meursault is not a piece of social wreckage, but a poor and naked man enamored of a sun that leaves no shadows. Far from being bereft of all feeling, he is animated by a passion that is deep because it is stubborn, a passion for the absolute and for truth”.

Keywords: absurdity, ethnic, conscience, Albert Camus, Meursault

Introduction

Albert Camus wrote at the beginning of the masterpiece: “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday” (1946, p. 4). The whole book is narrated from the first-person perspective of the protagonist Meursault. The protagonist’s indifference under the secular standards is vividly demonstrated in the opening chapter. The protagonist Meursault did not seem sad at all when he heard that his mother has passed away in the nursing home. He refused to open the casket to see his mother for the last time at the funeral. He even went so far as to forget the exact age of his mother’s. Meursault drinks a cup of coffee with milk and “offered the caretaker a cigarette” at his mother’s funeral. He even went to the beach and comedy movie with his girlfriend Marie the day after his mother died. When Marie proposed that she wanted to marry him, he replied “Yes”, just so he would not have to say anything else. There is no doubt that the protagonist Meursault remains dispassionate, heartless, disengaged in the eye of the nursing staff and others. However, when we break away from the perspective of the bystander, we will find that the protagonist Meursault is a person who is merely living with his nature, daring to break through the shackles of secular rules, and truly loves life.

The Absurdity of Essence of Life

Meursault was a misfit, which made him a stranger in society. As a defendant, he also set himself aside in the trial, not caring about its outcome. He wanted nothing more than to get out of the noisy courtroom. When Marie asked him if he wanted to marry her, Meursault said indifferently and laconically that they could if she wanted to. His boss wanted to set up an office in Paris and asked if he wanted to work in Paris. Meursault turned down the proposition even if he noticed Marie's curiosity and desire for Paris. The protagonist Meursault was accustomed to his normal life and he had no idea of changing it. As far as the protagonist Meursault was concerned, life is the same everywhere. One might even say that nothing interested him. He rarely chose to do anything of his own accord and almost always accepted his fate passively. The only choice he made on his own initiative was to fire four more shots at the Arab's inert body. Meursault, rather than endure fate, decided to take charge of it. Rather than being a victim of the absurd, he decides to assume his criminal behavior by ostensibly repeating it four times.

This reflects the author's view of the meaninglessness of life itself—men try to pursue meaning and value, but the world returns them a hostile, indifferent answer. Life is meaningless and we cannot impose meaning on it either. This also makes the process of finding life's meaning absurd. All we can do is embracing the meaninglessness. Camus' subjective consciousness shapes Meursault's role as a rebel against religions and prophets. At the end of the novel, Meursault refused salvation by the priest and resolutely decided to throw himself into the arms of death.

The Absurdity of Social Consciousness

Albert Camus (1946) claims in his preface "In our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death". You must cry at the funeral; you must mourn when your mother dies; you cannot help a rogue, or you are a rogue too. "Most people are inconsistent, and what they do is often not what they long for. All of them have a sense of community: a fear of alienation and rejection; a fear of being alone and without support" (1946, p. 2). According to the agreed-upon social consciousness, crying is the way to mourn. Thus, not knowing Meursault's personality, non-strangers who had little contact with him indiscreetly judged his behavior, labeled him an apathetic person, and tampered with the trial.

In the text, it is easy to see that Meursault was not devoid of affection for his mother; he simply did not want to force himself to cry—to put on a show, telling the world that he was sad. He just expressed his grief in a particular way: After his mother's death, Meursault stayed on the balcony in a daze. He did not want to accept the fact that his mother was dead, so he refused to see her for the last time. He repositioned the furniture in his home, repeatedly recalled his mother, and felt the familiar discomfort of the sun when the tragedy of shooting happened:

The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman, and like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin. It was this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward. I knew that it was stupid, that I wouldn't get the sun off me by stepping forward. (1946, p. 58)

We can see that Meursault was not unmoved and indifferent. The book also reflects the arbitrariness of judgment, which is even more evident in the information age—people characterize a person through a one-sided understanding, influenced by his power over them. People prefer to believe the appearance because it makes understanding faster and easier. Refusing to go deeper into a person's heart, experiences manifests the

indifference of society and its disinterest in the essence of things. As Camus (1946) commented in the preface of *The Stranger*: “Meursault doesn’t play the game. The reply is a simple one; he refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say what isn’t true”, and he added: He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings, and immediately society feels threatened. He is asked, for example, to say that he regrets his crime, in the approved manner. He replies that what he feels is annoyance rather than real regret. And this shade of meaning condemns him.

The Absurdity of Trial

The Stranger demonstrates the absurdity of the conventional social consciousness as well as the absurdity of modern law. The unfair trial was made by the non-strangers—the judge, the prosecuting attorney, and the audience—against the protagonist Meursault, the stranger. It was an “exclusion of the heterodox”. The trial procedure was just a formality. What Meursault has done was not important. The trial has nothing to do with the justice, it’s just a “drama”:

There was a brief silence, and then the judge asked him if he was sure I was the man he had just been speaking of. The director didn’t understand the question, so the judge told him, “It’s a formality.” He then asked the prosecutor if he had any questions to put to the witness, and the prosecutor exclaimed, “Oh no, that is quite sufficient!” with such glee and with such a triumphant look in my direction that for the first time in years I had this stupid urge to cry, because I could feel how much all these people hated me. (1946, p. 75)

The absurdity of this “drama” is mainly manifested in the following two points:

First of all, ethics, the universal morals, took the place of law in the trial. Meursault was sentenced to death because he did not cry at his mother’s funeral, and his actions violated the moral standards of the judge and the prosecutor. After a series of uncontrollable circumstances, Meursault committed manslaughter and became an unfortunate victimized criminal. Suppose one investigates the process of his killing. In that case, it is easy to find out the truth of the matter. To some extent, it is “justifiable” because he unintentionally killed somebody in an unstable state after his mother’s death. Camus explanation of Meursault’s killing of Arab is an unplanned act or spontaneous uncontrolled act. In the courtroom, the investigation never happened, and the prosecutor compared him to murderers through a biased analysis of his daily life. On the surface, his indifference caused his death, but deep down, it is because of the authenticity of his behavior, which is out of step with the “drama” played out in the courtroom.

The second point: the uncompromising personality of Meursault. On the one hand, he hopes to deal with the issue according to the standards constructed by himself. On the other hand, he refuses to defend himself. As a result, the lawyers spoke almost throughout the trial in the name of Meursault on the ground that Meursault was too honest; the judge and the prosecutor even his lawyer all but removed him from the case as a defendant, and the judicial personnel reduced his presence to zero or even replaced him entirely. What’s more, Meursault’s right of defense and appeal was also deprived, which also caused the absurdity of the judgment process.

Conclusions

The protagonist Meursault sits on the sidelines in the first part of the novel. The author explores the inner world of the protagonist Meursault in the second part of the novel. From beginning to the end, Meursault is foreign to the society in which he lives. The protagonist Meursault remains an outsider, and the whole society is also an outsider. Generally speaking, the vast majority of people we encounter in our lives exist as outsiders, and there are only a few who have a close relation with us. On the one hand, it’s easy for the majority of

outsiders to judge us irresponsibly only by what we show as a certain stage. On the other hand, they do not want to spend too much time and energy to get in touch with us. So is it the society or Meursault is truly apathetic?

The sad thing is that the other charters, in other words, most of us are not as frank and brave as the protagonist Meursault; we give up easily what we insist on. Live in the eyes of others. It seems that all of us are supposed to act typically—crying or laughing in the appropriate situations. The reason is that the person who acts differently has always been an outcast under the insults and surrounded by bullies. Like the protagonist Meursault, the main character of Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger*, is a person not of the same clan. He is completely detached from normal social norms. He refuses to mask his true feelings with lies. Hence, it is his one-hundred-percent honesty, instead of indifference, that sets him apart and brings him to the gallows.

“There should be someone who does not cry when everyone else do, let alone when the tears is utilized as prop in this act”, said Mo Yan, the first Chinese writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Given that the respect for each other will allow the margins of mainstream ideas exist. It is fair to say the strangers like Meursault will be accepted in a highly-developed society.

References

- Camus, A. (1946). *The stranger*. (S. Gilbert, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.
Camus, A. (1983). *The outsider*. London: Penguin Books.