



PRISON AND ABSURDISM IN *THE STRANGER*

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Abstract

The word prison always brings with itself a morbid feeling. It hardly generates an idea of idealist place or life style. However, if we go deeper and think what the idea was behind the origin of this idea, we would find to instill discipline through punishment was in the mind behind its origin. In the words of Michael Foucault "prison is a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals. To experiment with medicines and monitor their effects. To try out different punishments, to teach different techniques". When everyday activities and a prisoner's role in that is analyzed it appears absurd but brings about deeper meaning when is brought under close reading. The paper focuses on the theory of absurdism and its application on Albert Camus' *The Stranger*.

Index Term: prison, absurdism, punishment and nihilism.

Introduction

Prison is a state of unease where all confidence and trust in the surrounding environment disappears: in this state, the individual realizes that the surrounding environment is not as it appears to be. There is no safety net: the realization grows that there is, indeed, no safety for the deeply suffering self. The self is insecure, at risk, and on guard. This is often experienced by prisoners in a quite literal sense as falling. Trying to explain their feelings since entry into prison, prisoners often say that it has been like a long slow falling off a cliff. When Jeremy Bentham spoke of the prison in 1791, with reference to his blueprint for the innovative Panopticon, he referred to it as "a mill for grinding rogues honest," and this demonstrates the cultural fit between the newly emerging industrial society of which he was an illustrious member, and his way of thinking about the prison. This industrial metaphor speaks of the ruthless grinding action which decimates grain, and which can be cruelly applied to the normalisation of the indigent and the criminal. Erving Goffman's characterisation of the total institution, such as the prison and the asylum, as "a forcing houses for changing persons" also carries an echo of the industrial process. The total institution is so powerful that it can alter persons against their will, just as factories force raw materials into changed forms.

The prison mirrors the activity of the modern state, in a heightened atmosphere of punitive loathing. It is the individual self that is the object of the special knowledge, the laborious rules and networks of power within prison. The regulatory apparatus of the modern prison does not remain external to individuals: they cannot remain untouched by it. It enters into and shapes their subjectivity, and this profound power is what is absolutely intrinsic about prisons. Quite effortlessly, it persuades some prisoners that they are worthless. Self-esteem is often the first casualty of the imprisoned self. Every activity and every human relationship

in prison takes place under the shadow of power relations: even the way medical care is practiced in prison is subsumed under the principles of domination, repression and mortification. It is doctors who certify prisoners healthy enough to be punished for breaking rules. If the prison can be said to have an intention, that intention is surely to mortify, curb, deny, or break the human spirit.

The prison's intentions do not stop with the prisoners: it is profoundly successful with the mortification of staff also. Very many prison staff in the UK are decent and ethical men and women, who struggle with inadequate resources and bad management to provide decent, humane conditions and regimes. Prison staff have extremely high rates of sickness, mental breakdown and early retirement. Some get corrupted, disillusioned, crushed. Some start out rotten, drawn to work in prison because of their rottenness, others become rotten.

Prison does what it does, to staff and prisoners, with an economy of effort. So-called advanced societies have made a historical transition toward an economy of power: the lash, the torture, and the meaningless labour are no longer necessary for subjugation of the human spirit. It is not necessary to break the body in order to reach the soul. Slot bodies into spaces, remove all control and personal choice in relation to personal space, personal time, privacy and human association and activity, and the soul will provide its own torment, as thoughts fly inward. The following extract shows how easy it is to produce suffering, through knowledge of the human psyche coupled with the efficient management of time and space:

You keep on thinking of the years you have to do, in this little space...you are in it for 24 hours a day...well, you can imagine for yourself...(weeps). Trying to survive a problem...it's not possible (weeps).

No-one had beaten this prisoner. He had been receiving three good meals a day, and an hour's exercise, with a further hour out of cell. But he was in torment: the management of his time and space, coupled with his own thoughts about the years ahead, was enough to produce profound pain, so deeply felt that he longed to die.

Prisoners often find it hard to define the prison, because its routines seem so ordinary. For that reason, it is not often appreciated how deep the ordinary suffering of everyday life is:

If it was just the unhappiness of the place, you could cope with it, but again, the word that springs to mind is oppression, isolation. It's just getting up, sit down, get into bed and go to sleep. Get up, sit down, get into bed and go to sleep, over and over again.

In literary world prison literature is an important genre. The importance of the prison in the Western literary tradition has been well documented. As literary critic Victor Brombert remarks, "Prison haunts our civilization." Writers who have written in or about prison are legion: Defoe, Wilde, Dostoyevski, Chekov, Tolstoy, Hugo, Verlaine, Malraux, Camus, Genet. There is a broad spectrum of writing about prison, ranging from the sociological and the documentary, to the autobiographical, to the purely imaginary. While prison figures prominently in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, the novel does not attempt – either textually or paratextually – to blur the line between fiction and non-fiction. Moreover, there is no deliberate conflation of the identities of narrator-protagonist and author. Critical reception of *The Stranger* reflects the work's straightforward and unambiguous status as a non-documentary novel.

Absurdism and Albert Camus

Absurdism was founded during post world war II. It came about when everyone was confused about the world that they had once known and they felt strange. It is this separation between a man and his life, the actor and his setting which is the feeling of absurdity. Absurdism was rebellion against the traditional methods of culture and literature. The earliest tradition was that every human was remotely decent and capable of heroism and dignity and was thought that they lived in even a remotely logical universe. A human isolated in his own universe came from nothingness so he must end in nothingness. This existence must be therefore quite absurd. The foundations of the concept of Absurd can be traced back to the deeply religious Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, also regarded as the fore-father of Existentialism.

Kierkegaard describes the Absurd as a situation in life which all the rational and thinking abilities of a person are unable to tell him which course of action to adopt in life, but in this very uncertainty he is forced to act or make a decision. He has to do something but his reason offers him no help. He writes in one of his journals: "What is the Absurd? It is, as may quite easily be seen, that I, a rational being, must act in a case where my reason, my powers of reflection, tell me: you can just as well do the one thing as the other, that is to say where my reason and reflection say: you cannot act and yet here is where I have to act.

In general people often say that life is absurd and that since everyone has to die one day, toiling is meaningless. Many people's lives are absurd, temporarily or permanently, for conventional reasons having to do with their particular ambitions, circumstances and personal relations. In this context Nagel has given four arguments. Firstly, our existences will not matter a long time from now. His second ground of absurdism is that we are very small in comparison to the universe as a whole. Thirdly that we are mortal and fourthly he considers is the charge that the chain of justification is never resolved satisfactorily.

Albert Camus' philosophy of the absurd describes a tension between nihilism, that is, total rejection of established laws and institutions, and the impulse to resist it at the heart of human experience. The condition of absurdist is described by Camus as a kind of nihilist interpretation of various levels of existence. According to Camus to exist is to be a stranger to oneself and to the world. He was not the first to present the concept of Absurd but it was owing to him that this idea gained popularity and influence, and it transformed into a proper philosophical movement of Absurdism. Since the beginning, thinkers have strived to find out the meaning to life and have pondered over the purpose and objective of this universe. Either they have concluded that this life is meaningless and purposeless, or they have taken refuge in some faith and religious belief such as the existence of God to make-up for this apparent lack of meaning. Even in the latter case, the question arises: what is the purpose of God? And it is this question which a believer has no answer to, as Kierkegaard pointed out, rendering belief in God (or any other religious authority) as absurd. Hence there exists an absurdity which cannot be eliminated. Camus believed in the first scenario: a life intrinsically devoid of meaning and purpose. He refuses to accept any meaning that is beyond this existence. "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know the meaning... What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? But if life is absurd, what is the point of living on? Why shouldn't we commit suicide and hasten our fate? Using the Greek myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor, Camus attempts to answer this question and present an alternative to suicide. How to live with the consciousness of this absurdity of life is the central question of Camus's philosophy. "Does the absurd dictate death?" Camus believes that the answer is no. The appropriate response to the experience of Absurd, Camus suggests, is to live in full consciousness of it. He rejects all those things which erase the consciousness of absurd, such as religious faith, suicide and Existentialism.

It is, however, important to notice that although Camus sees life as absurd and ultimately irrational, he does not advocate a stoic acceptance of the difficulties and problems of life. Camus believed life to be valuable and worth defending and all his life he did engage in helping the poor and the oppressed. Camus' attitude in the face of an absurd and indifferent world is to take a stand against it and make this world one's own, instead of measuring oneself against it.

The Stranger by Albert Camus

Camus is more famous for his novels, where many of his philosophical ideas are worked out in a more subtle and more engaging manner. Unlike most of the prison fictions Albert Camus's *The Stranger* is not about the tortures or sufferings of a prisoner or their distressed solitary life. It carries a very different theme than any other prison based fiction. The character Meursault represents humanity on the earth and in the universe as a whole. Meursault is a man without any perception, existing only via sensory experience. *The Stranger* tells the story of Meursault, who lives for the sensual pleasures of the present moment, free of any system of values. Rather than behave in accordance with social norms, Meursault tries to live as honestly as he can, doing what he wants to do and befriending those whom he likes. He also refuses to simulate feelings that he does not possess, and thus he does not force himself to cry at his mother's funeral or to mourn her death too deeply. A series of events leads to the climactic moment when Meursault haphazardly

murders an Arab on the beach. The subsequent trial condemns him not so much for the murder as for his lack of commitment to the unspoken rules of society.

Most of the philosophical content of the novel comes near the end, where Meursault sits in his cell awaiting his execution, and particularly in a heated exchange between Meursault and the prison chaplain who tries to convert him to Christianity. Meursault rejects the chaplain's entreaties, telling him that he has no interest in God or anything otherworldly. He wants to live with the certainties of this life, even if his only certainty is the death that awaits him.

Meursault is an absurd hero both on a figurative and on a literal level. On a figurative level, Meursault, condemned to death and awaiting execution, is a metaphor for the human condition. On a literal level, Meursault perfectly exemplifies the absurd characteristics of revolt, freedom, and passion outlined by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Meursault refuses to accord himself with custom, and asserts his freedom by doing what strikes him as appropriate at any given moment. This includes smoking and showing indifference at the vigil for his dead mother, going to the beach and sleeping with a woman the day after his mother's funeral, and forging a letter for his friend Raymond, who is a thug and a pimp. This exercise of freedom also represents a revolt against any attempt to place restrictions on his life. His passion is evident in his enthusiastic pursuit of new pleasures and new experiences: he loves being alive.

Meursault also maintains the kind of ironic detachment we would expect from an absurd hero. He prefers observing events to getting directly involved; one memorable chapter describes Meursault spending an entire day sitting on his balcony watching passers-by in the street. Even when he is directly involved in events, he is unable to get too caught up in them. When his lover, Marie, asks him to marry her, he tells her that he doesn't love her but that it makes no difference to him if they get married or not. Even when he kills the Arab, there is a sense that he is not really there, not really doing what he is doing. It seems almost as if he is observing himself shooting the Arab rather than actually doing the shooting.

In his final outburst to the chaplain in prison, Meursault sums up a great deal of his absurd worldview, forcefully asserting that nothing really matters, that we all live and we all die, and what we do before we die is ultimately irrelevant. After the chaplain leaves, Meursault enjoys a final, revelatory moment: "And I felt ready to live it all again too. As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again." Free from hope, Meursault recognizes himself in a universe without meaning and without hope. At the end of the novel, he comes to a full acceptance of his absurd position in the universe and cannot but conclude that he is happy.

Not only does Meursault exemplify many of the characteristics of an absurd hero. In writing *The Stranger*, moreover, Camus attempts to exemplify what he defines in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as the characteristics of the absurd artist. In *The Stranger*, Camus describes ordinary events without getting too caught up in their philosophical implications and without trying to point to any universal themes. The first part of the novel, in particular, delights in describing the many humdrum events and quirky characters that fill Meursault's everyday life. We meet Salamano and his dog caught in a moving love-hate relationship and learn about the joys of sunbathing at the beach. In all of these descriptions, we find a fascination and exuberant joy at the myriad possible life experiences. Any universal themes we draw from the novel do not arise from excessive sermonizing or over-heavy symbolism, but from a cohesive and coherent worldview that is engaging and arresting.

Conclusion

The prison is far more than punishment. It helps in finding meaning of the bizzare and meaningless exterior of the world. Hence theory of absurdism applies to this text where it is not easy to establish relation of a stagnant life of a prisoner which appears meaningless but philosophically carries great meaning of looking within and understanding one's self in the context of the chaotic world. In Camus' prison there is no casuality of the self, but the special knowledge of the self and life is indeed learnt by the protagonist. Meursault never reflected on his behaviour with people in the society before imprisonment. It is inside the prison that he really learns it and do not regret his past actions. On the contrary he more poignantly realises

the futility of everything. Even his trial on which was the matter of death and life for him is taken very indifferently by him and in this way the theme of absurdism is asserted in the novel. However, Meursault feels the beauty of life on earth when he waits every day to see the setting sun through the prison window. This shows how Camus is not against the world.

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