



Thematic Concerns of Albert Camus

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Abstract:

*In this paper, I have focused on the different themes of Camus. His writings reveal the themes of the irrationality of the universe, absurdity of the human existence, the meaninglessness of human life, the importance of the physical world, suicide, decay and death, the nature of human revolt, exile and redemption. As a writer, Camus fashioned a body of literature using a variety of genres and themes to express the breadth and depth of his concerns especially about moral and political issues. He was true to the active and contemplative aspects of life. It is correct that the single work for which Camus is most famous is entitled *The Stranger*. Meursault, the main character of the novel, exists with a sense of the world and a morality that sets him apart from human society at large. Camus's first collection *Betwixt and Between* was published in 1937 while *Nuptials* was published two years later. The essays in both books largely reflect Camus's love of Algeria with sensuous descriptions of the landscape and its people. We see Algeria's landscape and climate informing much of Camus's work, thematically and symbolically. Exile, Redemption, Separation, Revolt, Absurdity etc are the themes found in Camus's work.*

Keywords: *The Fall, The Guest, The Plague, The Stranger*

1. The Stranger

1.1 *The Irrationality of the Universe*

Though *The Stranger* is a work of fiction, it contains a strong resonance of Camus's philosophical notion of absurdity. In his essays, Camus asserts that individual lives and human existence in general have no rational meaning or order. However, because people have difficulty accepting this notion, they constantly attempt to identify or create rational structure and meaning in their lives. The term "absurdity" describes humanity's futile attempt to find rational order where none exists. Though Camus does not explicitly refer to the notion of absurdity in *The Stranger*, the tenets of absurdity operate within the novel. Neither the external world in which Meursault lives nor the internal world of his thoughts and attitudes possesses any rational order. Meursault has no discernable reason for his actions, such as his decision to marry Marie and his decision to kill the Arab. Society nonetheless attempts to fabricate or impose rational explanations for Meursault's irrational actions. The idea that things sometimes happen for no reason, and that events sometimes have no meaning is disruptive and threatening to society. The trial sequence in Part Two of the novel represents society's attempt to manufacture rational order. The prosecutor and Meursault's lawyer both offer explanations for Meursault's crime that are based on logic, reason, and the concept of cause and effect. Yet these explanations have no basis in fact and serve only as attempts to defuse the frightening idea that the universe is irrational. The entire trial is therefore an example of absurdity- an instance of humankind's futile attempt to impose rationality on an irrational universe.

As if this great outburst of anger had purged all my ills, killed all my hopes,
I looked up at the mass of sighs and stars in the night sky and laid myself

open for the first time to the Benin indifference of the world. And finding it so much like myself, in fact so fraternal, I realized that I'd been happy, and that I was still happy. For the final consummation and for me to feel less lonely, my last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that they should greet me with cries of hatred.¹

1.2 The Meaninglessness of Human Life

A second major component of Camus's absurdist philosophy is the idea that human life has no redeeming meaning or purpose. Camus argues that the only certain thing in life is the inevitability of death, and, because all humans will eventually meet death, all lives are all equally meaningless. Meursault gradually moves toward this realization throughout the novel, but he does not fully grasp it until after his argument with the chaplain in the final chapter. Meursault realizes that, just as he is indifferent to much of the universe, so is the universe indifferent to him. Like all people, Meursault has been born, will die, and will have no further importance. Paradoxically, only after Meursault reaches this seemingly dismal realization is he able to attain happiness. When he fully comes to terms with the inevitability of death, he understands that it does not matter whether he dies by execution or lives to die a natural death at an old age. This understanding enables Meursault to put aside his fantasies of escaping execution by filing a successful legal appeal. He realizes that these illusory hopes, which had previously preoccupied his mind, would do little more than create in him a false sense that death is avoidable. Meursault sees that his hope for sustained life has been a burden. His liberation from this false hope means he is free to live life for what it is, and to make the most of his remaining days.

The Chaplain knew the game well too, I could tell right away: his gaze never faltered. And his voice didn't falter, either, when he said, 'Have you no hope at all? And do you really live with the thought that when you die, you die, and nothing remains?' Yes, I said.²

1.3 The Importance of the Physical World

The Stranger shows Meursault to be interested far more in the physical aspects of the world around him than in its social or emotional aspects. This focus on the sensate world results from the novel's assertion that there exists no higher meaning or order to human life. Throughout *The Stranger*, Meursault's attention centers on his own body, on his physical relationship with Marie, on the weather, and on other physical elements of his surroundings. For example, the heat during the funeral procession causes Meursault far more pain than the thought of burying his mother. The sun on the beach torments Meursault, and during his trial Meursault even identifies his suffering under the sun as the reason he killed the Arab. The style of Meursault's narration also reflects his interest in the physical. Though he offers terse, plain descriptions when glossing over emotional or social situations, his descriptions become vivid and ornate when he discusses topics such as nature and the weather.

2. The Plauge

2.1 Exile and separation

The theme of exile and separation is embodied in two characters, Rieux and Rambert, both of whom are separated from the women they love. The theme is also present in the many other nameless citizens who are separated from loved ones in other towns or from those who happened to be out of town when the gates of Oran were closed. In another sense, the entire town feels in exile, since it is completely cut off from the outside world. Rieux, as the narrator, describes what exile meant to them all: "That sensation of a void within which never left us, that irrational

longing to hark back to the past or else to speed up the march of time, and those keen shafts of memory that stung like fire.”³ Some, like Rambert, are exiles in double measure since they are not only cut off from those they want to be with but they do not have the luxury of being in their own homes.

The feeling of exile produces many changes in attitudes and behaviors. At first, people indulge in fantasies, imagining the missing person's return, but then they start to feel like prisoners, drifting through life with nothing left but the past, since they do not know how long into the future their ordeal may last. And the past smacks only of regret, of things left undone. Living with the sense of abandonment, they find that they cannot communicate their private grief to their neighbors, and conversations tend to be superficial. Rieux returns to the theme at the end of the novel, after the epidemic is over, when the depth of the feelings of exile and deprivation is clear from the overwhelming joy with which long parted lovers and family members greet each other.

For some citizens, exile was a feeling more difficult to pin down. They simply desired a reunion with something that could hardly be named but which seemed to them to be the most desirable thing on Earth. Some called it peace. Rieux numbers Tarrou among such people, although he found it only in death. This understanding of exile suggests the deeper, metaphysical implications of the term. It relates to the loss of the belief that humans live in a rational universe in which they can fulfill their hopes and desires, find meaning, and be at home. As Camus put it in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile. Because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his setting truly constitute the filling of Absurdity.⁴

2.2 Solidarity, community, and resistance

The ravages of the plague in Oran vividly convey the absurdist position that humans live in an indifferent, incomprehensible universe that has no rational meaning or order, and no transcendent God. The plague comes unannounced and may strike down anyone at any time. It is arbitrary and capricious, and it leaves humans in a state of fear and uncertainty, which ends only in death. In the face of this metaphysical reality, what must be the response of individuals? Should they resign themselves to it, accept it as inevitable, and seek what solace they can as individuals, or should they join with others and fight back, even though they must live with the certainty that they cannot win? Camus's answer is clearly the latter, embodied in the characters of Rieux, Rambert, and Tarrou. Rieux's position is made clear in part II in a conversation with Tarrou. Rieux argues that one would have to be a madman to submit willingly to the plague. Rather than accepting the natural order of things -the presence of sickness and death - he believes one must fight against them. He is aware of the needs of the community; he does not live for himself alone. When Tarrou points out that “[his] victories will never be lasting”, Rieux admits that he is involved in a “never ending defeat”, but this does not stop him from engaging in the struggle. Rieux is also aware that working for the common good demands sacrifice; he cannot expect personal happiness. This is a lesson that Rambert learns. At first he insists that he does not belong in Oran, and his only thought is returning to the woman he loves in Paris. He thinks only of his own personal happiness and the unfairness of the situation in which he has been placed but gradually comes to recognize his membership in a larger human community, which makes

demands on him that he cannot ignore. Ultimately he realizes he cannot face his lover if it is as a coward.

Tarrou lives according to an ethical code that demands that he act in a way that benefits the whole community, even though, in this case, he risks his life by doing so. Later in the novel, when Tarrou tells Rieux the story of his life, he adds a new dimension to the term 'Plague'. He views it not just as a specific disease or simply as the presence of an impersonal evil external to humans. For Tarrou, plague is the destructive impulse within every person, the will and the capacity to do harm, and it is everyone's duty to be on guard against this tendency within themselves, lest they infect someone else with it. He describes his views to Rieux: What's natural is the microbe. All the rest health, integrity, purity is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention.

2.3 Religion

In times of calamity, people often turn to religion, and Camus examines this response in the novel. In contrast to the humanist beliefs of Rieux, Rambert, and Tarrou, the religious perspective is given in the sermons of the stern Jesuit priest, Father Paneloux. While the other main characters believe there is no rational explanation for the outbreak of plague, Paneloux believes there is. In his first sermon, given during the first month of the plague, Paneloux describes the epidemic as the "flail of God" through which God separates the wheat from the chaff, the good from the evil. Paneloux is at pains to emphasize that God did not will the calamity: "He looked on the evil-doing in the town with compassion; only when there was no other remedy did He turn His face away, in order to force people to face the truth about their life".⁵ In Paneloux's view, even the terrible suffering caused by the plague works ultimately for good. The divine light can still be seen even in the most catastrophic events, and a Christian hope is granted to all. Paneloux's argument is based on the theology of St. Augustine, on which he is an expert, and it is accepted as irrefutable by many of the townspeople, including the magistrate, Othon. But it does not satisfy Rieux. Camus carefully manipulates the plot to bring up the question of innocent suffering. Paneloux may argue that the plague is a punishment for sin, but how does he reconcile that doctrine with the death of a child? The child in question is Jacques Othon, and Paneloux, along with Rieux and Tarrou, witnesses his horrible death. Paneloux is moved with compassion for the child, and he takes up the question of innocent suffering in his second sermon. He argues that because a child's suffering is so horrible and cannot easily be explained, it forces people into a crucial test of faith: either we must believe everything or we must deny everything, and who, Paneloux asks, could bear to do the latter? We must yield to the divine will, he says; we cannot pick and choose and accept only what we can understand. But we must still seek to do what good lies in our power (as Paneloux himself does as one of the volunteers who fight the plague). The second sermon given by Paneloux, however, suggests that his faith has been shaken. Unable to reconcile his beliefs with the death of the child, Paneloux becomes sick and refuses to be treated. His illness is not consistent with the symptoms of the plague, and the inexplicable nature of the illness leads Rieux to diagnose him as a "doubtful case". He leaves his fate in the hands of God, and he dies clinging to his cross and the remnants of his beliefs. The implication is that Paneloux's loss of faith is what leads to his death. Paneloux's death is in contrast to Tarrou's, who fights valiantly against death when his turn comes. The fight Tarrou puts up against his end is emblematic of the fight against the plague and the absurdity of the universe. The criticism of Paneloux, is that he, unlike Tarrou, has lost his faith in humanity. He chooses, instead, to cling to a hollow ideal he no longer believes, and his

death, in contrast to Tarrou's, does not bring him peace. It is clear that Camus's sympathy in this contrast of ideas lies with Rieux and Tarrou.

3. The Guest

3.1 Morality

Daru faces a moral dilemma when he is ordered to turn in the Arab. Like all the themes in the narrative, morality is treated with ambiguity. Daru's course of action leads him into moral trouble: he does not know whether the Arab deserves to be punished or let go, and he allows this uncertainty to overwhelm him. He fails to choose at all, instead allowing the Arab to choose either freedom or trial. Daru's ensuing moral despair should be understood in the light of Camus's philosophy. Camus believed that once a decision was reached, it should be stuck to, and that the freedom to choose one's action gives meaning to human life. Daru certainly believes that turning in the Arab was wrong, yet he fails to simply release the prisoner. He fails to make a decision, and as a result he is left in complete moral solitude.

3.2 Solitude

There are two kinds of solitude in *The Guest*. Throughout the story Daru faces physical isolation on his the remote plateau. This physical solitude is not a negative state, however; Daru has accepted his living conditions and indeed feels at home within them. Though the landscape itself is unfeeling and unforgiving, Daru makes himself comfortable within it. At the end however, Daru occupies a state of moral solitude. His failure to act with regard to the Arab's fate has left him disconnected from himself. He looks at the harsh landscape, once his home, and sees only his failure to choose. This moral solitude is most clearly symbolized by the mysterious writing on the blackboard. If he wrote it himself, it represents his despair and his alienation from himself -- he has betrayed his own principles in allowing the Arab to choose punishment. If someone else wrote it, it represents a clear threat. Daru, who failed to use judgment, will now be judged by others who do not understand him. Thus his situation is one of extreme isolation from human understanding.

3.3 Freedom

Freedom lies at the core of *The Guest*, and is inherently connected with the human right to choose a course of action. Freedom gives life meaning, and Camus believed that through independent action one finds value in life. The narrative represents this philosophy. Daru's choice to live in the plateau region is a choice motivated out of what Camus would call an understanding of the 'absurd'. Any human needs to belong to a place, and the cruel plateau region embodies a type of home for him despite its desolate climate. Just so, Camus feels, we all need to make a home for ourselves within an essentially uncaring universe. The way we make this home is through individual choice. However, the freedom to choose is also paradoxically an obligation. When we decide not to choose we fall victim to the essential cruelty and ambiguity of the universe. Indeed, we cannot decide not to choose - we must choose in order to retain freedom. Daru attempts to pass along his obligation to choose to the Arab. However, when the Arab decides to turn himself in, Daru suffers for it. Daru should have made a decision, one way or the other, and stuck with it. Instead, he finds himself in a state of desperate moral ambiguity.

3.4 Limits of Human Knowledge

Everyone in *The Guest* has limited knowledge of the happenings of the story. Balducci doesn't know why the Arab killed his cousin, or why Daru must take the Arab to the police; he simply has his orders and follows them. Daru doesn't know whether the Arab should be released or punished, though he constantly tries to glean information about why the Arab committed murder

-- if he even did. Meanwhile, the Arab displays confusion when Daru asks him difficult questions and when Daru explains his choice to either escape to the south or turn himself into the police. The reader, too, occupies a limited vantage point. We never learn whether the Arab deserves punishment or freedom. We never learn who wrote the message on the blackboard at the end of the story. Camus denies us crucial knowledge, thus putting us in a similar position to Daru or to any individual who must make choices despite his or her limited perspective. And indeed, we all must do so every day, though rarely in the dramatic fashion Camus sets up in *The Guest*. If we let this fact haunt us, the way that Daru does, we open ourselves up to moral despair. However, if we make choices anyway and *own* our choices, we may avoid such despair. Daru becomes preoccupied with the limitations of his knowledge and thus fails to choose the opening the door to despair.

3.5 *The Absurd*

Camus envisions the universe as silent and indifferent. Despite this indifference, human beings must survive. They continue to build meaning and pursue certainty, even though such aims are impossible. This combination of a godless, uncaring world and human striving leads to a condition that Camus dubs 'the absurd'. He writes; "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."⁶

Although it might sound pretty depressing to live in an inescapable state of 'the absurd', Camus feels that this is the only way we can exist. One must continue striving, choosing and pursuing freedom, even though the universe does not care whether we live or die. Daru's ability to find comfort and within the harsh plateau climate bodes well for his ability to sustain life in absurd conditions; however, his failure to respond to the moral dilemma represented by the Arab ultimately crushes him. In the face of ambiguity and uncertainty, one must act with an absurd confidence. One must choose anyway. Daru fails to do so, and thus falls into despair.

4. The Fall

4.1 *Justice and Judgment*

Much of *The Fall* has to do with the human fear of being judged by others, along with the human tendency to judge everyone, including the self. The narrator of this fictional confession claims that it is the very process of judgment that we hate. Meanwhile, our protagonist, Jean-Baptiste, derives power from judging others, which he justifies by simultaneously judging himself. Justice, too, is a main focus of the novel. *The Fall* suggests that true 'justice' is elusive, if it even exists at all, in a world where all are guilty and hypocritical.

4.2 *Guilt and Blame*

The Fall operates on the premise that all are guilty. This is indeed a classic argument for Camus, but the narrator of this novel goes so far as to suggest that all men are murderers, even if only by accident or through negligence. Since the novel was written in the aftermath of WWII, this is a particularly poignant argument. This sort of 'universal guilt' makes any attempt at judgment completely hypocritical. A guilty man condemning another man of guilt is absurd by nature.

4.3 *Religion*

In the world of *The Fall*, God is dead. The narrator argues that, since we no longer have a God to tell us what to do, we need to find another 'master' to replace him. Men have basically taken the place of God, because we are perfectly capable of subjugating and judging one another. Who needs God if we can do it all ourselves? The narrator finds religion to be farcical and hypocritical; we misinterpret, manipulate, and bastardize Jesus' true intentions, he argues.

4.4 Freedom and Confinement

The Fall features a man steeped in isolation, in part because he finds all relationships to be confining. The problem is one of responsibility: if you interact with others, you're confined not only by their expectations of you, but by the reputation you publically build. And yet, this very same man preaches a philosophy of slavery. Give up freedom, he says – it is too much of a burden. The burden comes in having to prove over and over your innocence in order to continue to remain free. Having to prove as much means getting judged, which the narrator seeks to avoid at all costs. Admit guilt, give up freedom, and submit to a life of slavery that is his solution.

4.5 Innocence

Innocence doesn't really exist in *The Fall*. In the world of this novel, everyone is guilty even Jesus Christ. The narrator's philosophy consists of declaring your own guilt in order to avoid judgment and condemning yourself to a life of imprisonment. In his viewpoint, being imprisoned means you are guilty, and being free means you are innocent. The classic cause and effect has been reversed; we are not thrown in shackles because we are criminals, rather we are judged as criminals because we find ourselves in shackles.

4.6 Power

The Fall claims that power and subjugation are necessary in the world. Only authority can absolutely determine truth in an uncertain world. In the case of the novel's narrator, power is derived by judging others, and by taking a God-like stance of authority over them. Power is also tied to physical location, and manifests in geographical summits. For example, to live on a mountain is to be above others, and therefore to have power over them. Lastly, just as judging others yield power, so does forgiving them.

4.7 Theme of Philosophical Viewpoints: The Absurd

The Fall explores Camus's philosophy of the absurd. Most prominently, we see an illustration of Camus's claim that all men are guilty of something. We are guilty not only by our actions, but by our inactions, or failure to act. Crimes we fail to stop are just as much our fault as those we commit ourselves. The novel explores several existential ideas as well, including Sartre's 'bad faith' and Kierkegaard's 'dread.' The idea of doubt and universal uncertainty features not only in the novel's themes, but in its technique and narration as well.

4.8 Transformation

The Fall explores one's man transformation from the blissful ignorance of self-serving hypocrisy to the internal angst of self-judgment and awareness. This transformation has less to do with discovering new information than with being willing or able to face what is already known. Truth, innocence, and freedom are reconsidered in the new light off self-examination. Interestingly, what this transformation provokes is a change in mindset, not a change in action – leading us to wonder how legitimate a shift it is.

4.9 Truth

The Fall reflects the existentialist claim that there is no objective truth. What we think of as fact is a set of beliefs. In fact, that novel's main conflict arises from those beliefs being shaken by the narrator. This narrator then concludes, almost jovially, that truth is overrated. For one, it's boring. It's also not that useful. According to the narrator, "truth" as we think of it, isn't always as illuminating as lies.

4.10 Mortality

The pursuit of immortality drives much of the conflict in *The Fall*. The narrator is admittedly in love with himself, and the thought of his own death torments him. He finds himself struggling to deal with a set of paradoxical facts, including: men will never take you seriously until you're dead, but once you're dead, you can't stick around to enjoy it. According to the narrator, death is a great way to make your point, but it's likely that men will misinterpret the reasons of your martyrdom, meaning you have died in vain. The narrator seeks moments of immortality in a variety ways (i.e., sex and alcohol). Moments of debauchery, he claims, are the moments when you are most freed from your own mortality.

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