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**The Importance of Perspective in
The Stranger and *The Myth of Sisyphus*:
The Absurdist's Need for Conscious
Rebellion**

Riley Imlay

there are those nights (You will recognize the feeling),

I lay in bed as my Mind

ascends from body.

travelling upward

further and further through our atmosphere into space

I see:

planet earth

the solar system

the milky way galaxy

the local group

the virgo supercluster

the observable universe

My Mind

returns. ← ← ← ← ←←← ←← ←← ←← ←←←

My heart begins to race

there is a strange feeling of lightness throughout.

I think of the charts and figures, atoms and cells, daily obligations of human life... Our struggle.

linked-out

on these nights

I feel...

A Beginning

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus asserts, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest — whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories — comes afterwards” (*Sisyphus* 3). In the context of Camus’s writing, suicide may pertain to either the physical forfeiture of life or the mental forfeiture of rational thought. The mission of confronting life’s worth is central to Albert Camus’s philosophy of the absurd, which seeks to address the underlying struggle in every human to make sense of living. Albert Camus’s novel, *The Stranger*, fictionalizes this innate human struggle through Meursault, a man estranged from the commonly perceived core aspects of life: love, family, and career – concepts that constitute the meaning of human experiences for a majority of individuals. The protagonist views such cherished designs as arbitrarily signified ideals, a view in accordance with the absurdist philosophy; yet, as I seek to explore, Meursault’s inability to effectively respond and function within the absurdity of his environment ultimately results in his marginalization from community and premature death – occurrences at odds with absurdism. In contrast, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus provides a different protagonist who recognizes the absurdity of his environment and responds in a manner promoting life.

The scholarship assessing Meursault is torn. Some critics praise his defiance as a triumph of the human spirit in the face of an absurd world; others believe he fails to comply with Camus’s definition of an absurd hero. This notion ultimately arises from the philosophical dichotomy between Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*. Through Sisyphus, Camus’s emphasizes that the ultimate form of rebellion against an absurd world stems from

continuing to live in search of meaning. Through Meursault, Camus provides a protagonist who defies norms but also reifies destruction. While *The Myth of Sisyphus* certainly presents ideals that are consistent with Meursault's characterization, my point of contention is the degree to which Meursault engages with the absurdity of his environment, the paradox this creates within Camus's philosophy, and the implications for human life – that is, how can one maintain their resilience while continuing to live and engage in absurd social environments. Jean-Paul Sartre discusses Camus's intentionality behind creating these paradoxical elements, "Meursault, the hero of *The Stranger* remains ambiguous, even to the reader familiar with theories of the absurd" (Sartre 113). While scholars have discussed the ambiguity of Meursault and Sisyphus as absurd heroes, little scholarship has analyzed exactly how the protagonists' response to their respective environments impacts their success or failure as an absurd hero. I will explore the ways in which Meursault, unlike Sisyphus, fails to embrace the absurdity of his environment and meet the ethical demands for an absurd hero, and how his shortcoming ultimately reinforces the absurdist's need for conscious rebellion.

Camus never intended for the narrative adaptations of his philosophy through *The Myth of Sisyphus* or *The Stranger* to propagate an adoption of nihilistic ideals.¹ On the contrary, absurdism emphasizes the beauty behind consciously struggling with humankind's innate desire to discern purpose in a life inherently devoid of any. In a world that is continually devastated by trivial foundations and divisions generated by racism, political alliance, or religion, absurdism attacks these dogmatic ideals by stripping the entirety of humankind to an essential inquiry: what is the point of human life? A proper engagement with the absurd is ultimately a perpetual framework of thought, action, and reflection; as such, it rejects philosophies, religions, and other schools of thought that claim to hold a transcendent remedy for human insecurity. Instead,

absurdism relies on the commonality of humanity's struggle for purpose and significance to reveal our united journey through life.

The Absurd

Earth is a grain of sand on a shore of the cosmic ocean. In this small sphere in our fraction of the universe, humankind exists. We are an incredibly complex species capable of experiencing an array of emotions and producing tremendous feats of ingenuity and progress; however, we are also capable of tremendous evil through an incessant lust for power, leading to atrocities devoid of humanity. The dichotomy in human nature itself elicits inquiries into the paradox of our existence, but aside from the broad scope of human experience, there are also the concerns of the individual. Amidst this vast universe, humans continue forth day-to-day completing arbitrarily signified tasks allowing us to integrate smoothly within our respective societies, but there comes a point when the monotony of our daily lives reveals itself and we recognize the inherent meaninglessness of our actions. "Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office of the factory, meal, streetcar four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement" (*Sisyphus* 13). Regardless of the individual's routine and quality of life, the repetitive and seemingly futile nature is an inescapable fact. And so, with a certainty of death, the elaborately constructed stage of human purpose collapses and we feel the divide between an inherent and fabricated purpose to existence – a feeling Albert Camus coined as *the absurd* (Showalter 101).

Logically, a recognition of this division is uncomfortable to beings capable of higher thought. This discontent with our insignificance leads to the adoption of various theologies and

philosophies that attempt to assign a purpose to human life and resolve our insecurities by establishing a just god or system of karma that governs existence. However, too often these resolutions are self-serving, devoid of logical reasoning that rely solely on faith. As Joseph Leblanc writes, “The impulses to faith in science and faith in a Christian deity each reflected the same fundamental human need: a faith in the possibility of a comprehensible order” (Leblanc 129). Camus called this reliance on any spiritual or transcendent ideology to provide meaning to humankind’s existence *philosophical suicide*, which is a mental submission that sacrifices both human intellect and motivation. One commits philosophical suicide by accepting illogical resolutions for their inherent insecurities.ⁱⁱ

Philosophical suicide not only stems from a reliance on theology, but can also arise from a dependence on secular constructions such as deriving meaning from monetary worth, commodity culture, entertainment mediums, and even academia. For example, science, while perhaps the most empirically supported realm of human intellect, still cannot fully provide answers to our fundamental questions about the existence of god or our purpose for living. The dangers in relying on this field is that every scientific concept ends as an abstraction. Camus sums up this disappointment perfectly: “At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multicolored universe can be reduced to the atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know” (*Sisyphus* 20). And so, while absurdism does not reject the pursuit of knowledge, it maintains that which is gained will never be able to answer humankind’s fundamental questions, or satiate our incessant desire for overarching principles guiding how best to conduct our lives.

While adopting an absurdist system of belief can be uplifting, there are inevitably periods of isolation originating from the recognition that humankind will never attain these answers. The impossibility behind discovering nonexistent remedies elicits questions about the rationality of continuing to live. For one that recognizes the inherent meaninglessness of human existence, there have ultimately been three methods of resolving this paradox:

1. Concede that life is too painful and meaningless to continue living, and respond with physical suicide.
2. Respond with philosophical suicide by turning to religious or spiritual frameworks that provide purpose to our lives.
3. Acknowledge the inherent lack of meaning, but continue to live in spite of this recognition.

Absurdism views the first two methods as means to evade the issue, whereas the final method proposes confrontation and willed optimism as a means to overcome. Camus believed in the latter – that the most fulfilled life is one that constantly recognizes the meaninglessness of human existence, but continues to consciously rebel against this inherent lack of meaning to create a purpose without adhering to a belief structure that forfeits human rationality. As we progress, I will illustrate the ways in which Meursault's response to the absurdity of his environment constitutes his inability to consciously rebel, reinforcing Sisyphus as Camus's intended model for an absurd hero.

A Middle Part I: The Myth of Sisyphus

According to the myth, Sisyphus's condemnation arises from his attempt to cheat death. Nearing the end of his life, King Sisyphus had such a disdain for Death that he locked Him away with chains, resulting in human immortality. This angered the gods, who, after liberating Death,

sought revenge on Sisyphus by eternally condemning our protagonist to the mundane, never-ending act of pushing a boulder up a mountain only to watch it fall to the bottom again.

Sisyphus's fate parallels humankind's, who, without a submission to philosophical suicide, must recognize and confront the absurdity of our environments and cyclical meaninglessness of daily tasks that constitute human life. Camus's selection of an ancient myth as the platform to advance the mental framework of the absurd has been quite understated. This form of story-telling is itself rooted in the same individual understanding necessary for one to rightfully engage with the absurd. As Camus writes, "Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them" (*Sisyphus* 120). Just as these stories require a subjective interpretation, the absurd demands an acknowledgment of life as an inherently meaningless, finite experience, and a subsequent personal rebellion to create a life of wonder in spite of this realization. At their most fundamental level, these stories are a canvas through which societies grapple with values and concerns, and by this method an individual's engagement with the absurd progresses toward a life of meaning.

The incessant exploration and confrontation of the absurd is a remarkably challenging task, but the process of this engagement justifies the challenge. Karl Jaspers writes, "This limitation leads me to myself, where I can no longer withdraw behind an objective point of view that I am merely representing, where neither I myself nor the existence of others can any longer become an object for me" (qtd in *Sisyphus* 8). Just as absurdism suggests, Jaspers recognizes a desire to refuse objective answers to his most fundamental concerns, and aspires to adopt a mental foundation that continually challenges the established norms of the world. Camus elaborates on Jaspers' assertion:

He is evoking after many others those waterless deserts where thought reaches its confines. After many others, yes indeed, but how eager they were to get out of them! At that last crossroad where thought hesitates, many men have arrived and even some of the humblest. They then abdicated what was most precious to them, their life. Others, princes of the mind, abdicated likewise, but they initiated the suicide of their thought in its purest revolt. The real effort is to stay there, rather, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions. (*Sisyphus* 8)

Camus believes the honest quest for personal truth, absent of theological and material dependence can be enough to fill anyone's heart. The task is difficult and may lead to feelings of isolation, despondency, and contemplation of both physical and philosophical suicide; yet, absurdism challenges us to stay! Beauty and hope arise when venturing through the odd vegetation of those distant regions, the untapped areas of the mind, and discerning one's personal meaning of life. We are all Sisyphus, grappling with our personal boulders. We are absurd heroes born into a meaningless world trapped by the fate of our inevitable death; yet, absurdism allows the nature of the events between these two inevitabilities to be consciously decided by the individual. And this freedom is enough to make one happy.

Consequently, one can identify Sisyphus as an absurd hero through his incessant passion for life and scorn of the gods; yet, of particular importance is the method by which this protagonist responds to the absurdity of his environment. Here is Sisyphus at his daily task: "One sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hand" (*Sisyphus* 120). Camus's

striking imagery of Sisyphus illustrates one in a conscious struggle. Sisyphus is strained by the physical and mental hardships of his absurd condemnation, but this protagonist exudes an element of willed optimism through a physical engagement with his natural environment in an effort to overcome the absurdity of his eternal fate.

If Sisyphus's ascension of toil up the mountain represents the epitome of a physical rebellion against the absurd, it is during his descension to the bottom when his mental rebellion surfaces. "I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end" (*Sisyphus* 121). Camus uses "heavy" to illustrate the weariness that inevitably comes with embracing the absurd; however, the author counteracts this weariness with "measured" to signify our protagonist's calculated awareness of his circumstance. Here, Sisyphus is conscious of his environment but it is the direction in which this consciousness flows that is essential. As Camus states, "The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory." Should our absurd hero allow his consciousness to lead his thinking toward sorrow, so shall be his existence. "Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself" (*Sisyphus* 122). To live with purpose and satisfaction, one must not allow their rock victory; like Sisyphus we must actively choose to embrace and overcome the daunting, absurd nature of our environment. Fully aware of his fate and comprehending the fixed nature of his circumstance, Sisyphus does just this, leading Camus to believe our protagonist concludes, "All is well."

This final declaration is an allusion to the myth of Oedipus, whom Camus believes to be the epitome of a man scorned by fate. A life plagued by the fated murder of his father and

marriage to his mother which inevitably brought devastation to both his family and city, one acknowledges the incredible difficulty behind Oedipus making such a statement at the end of his life; yet, by the conclusion of the myth, Oedipus proclaims, “Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude all is well.”ⁱⁱⁱ One must realize Oedipus and Sisyphus are not ignorant of their past or disregarding the pain they have endured, but are rather consciously choosing amongst the chaos to pronounce life as beautiful and well. Camus believes this is a sacred remark as it, “Echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled by men” (*Sisyphus* 122). Sisyphus actively chooses to combat fate’s determination on his state of being, and through a conscious rebellion he acquires the liberating capability to overcome the absurdity of his environment.

A Middle Part II: The Stranger

“Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know” (*Stranger* 3).

This famous opening from *The Stranger* is an immediate submersion into the psyche of Meursault, who struggles to find any deep significance in the experiences and relationships formed with family and lovers throughout life. While Meursault’s recognition of these meaningless constructions is consistent with tenants of absurdism, a key aspect to his shortcoming as an absurd hero is the destructive relationship between the absurdity of his environment and its impact on his agency. Throughout the novel, Camus utilizes the sun and heat as motifs to measure the degree of absurdity in our protagonist’s environment. In particular, I will focus on Meursault’s physical and mental submissions in response to this absurdity, and

how the sun and heat become dictating forces in Meursault's decisions, ultimately disempowering his ability to reason and rebel against the absurd. Though consistently present throughout *The Stranger*, there are three scenes where the sun and heat particularly disempower Meursault and reveal his inadequacy in adhering to the ethical demands of an absurd hero. Although the setting and level of absurdity vary, consistent is Meursault's apathy toward making conscious decisions and the resulting outcomes. Through his dangerously apathetic nature, Meursault forfeits his agency and becomes a puppet manipulated by external factors, whereas an absurd hero acknowledges the inherent meaninglessness of his world but consciously chooses to rebel in spite of this recognition.

Meursault's Indifference During his Mother's Funeral

A crucial literary thread throughout Meursault's development in *The Stranger* is his physical and mental submission to his external environment. The reader is initially exposed to this at his mother's funeral where Meursault's continual physical weariness, particularly while in the presence of others, becomes paramount, "I asked him if he could turn off one of the lights. The glare on the white walls was making me drowsy. He said he couldn't. That was how they'd been wired: it was all or nothing" (*Stranger* 9). Here, the combination of Meursault's physical environment and engagement in human interaction lead to his fatigue. The bright imagery of the light and white walls can be seen to represent a degree of pureness and normality within human life, which, unsurprisingly, heavily weighs on our protagonist who disregards societal constructions. At first, this characterization seemingly portrays him as an absurd hero, for these natural elements can be interpreted to represent common, pure conventions of societal structure; the importance of human interaction, or the "normal" reaction of grieving at your mother's

funeral – these are concepts Meursault is incapable of feeling and are therefore factors that lead to his despondent and weary disposition.

Meursault's exhaustion is evident as the funeral procession makes its way to a church during the midday, a journey marked by shimmering heat radiating off the rugged dirt and the smell of dung. "If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill inside the church.' She was right. There was no way out" (*Stranger* 17). This advice superficially appears to detail the paradox of navigating the path to a church in order to proceed with the funeral, yet the implications extend to signify the effects of the sun parallel the human condition. Just as the inescapable properties of the sun cause harm through prolonged exposure or an equally damaging physiological ailment through an attempt of avoidance, there are no ways to evade suffering in life. Death is an inescapable aspect of existence which all of humankind must struggle to accept and cope with, and this inexorable truth inhibits Meursault's ability to grieve for his mother's passing. While Meursault's recognition of the absurd in human interactions and tragic experiences is not detrimental, the consistent method in which he responds is. One never sees Meursault embrace the absurd or fight to overcome the negative implications; rather, our protagonist consistently adopts a lethargic, passive demeanor and allows life to simply happen.

Meursault's Inability to Maintain Intelligibility on the Beach

A second representation of our protagonist's inability to effectively navigate his environment occurs during the beach scene where Meursault shoots and kills a man. In this chapter, Camus continually emphasizes the sun's impact on our protagonist, which functions to measure the degree of Meursault's submission to the absurd. In the beginning of the day when

he, Masson, and Marie are swimming in the ocean, Meursault reflects that he was, “absorbed by feeling that the sun was doing [him] a lot of good” (*Stranger* 50). This overwhelming feeling of happiness is sustained during their first trip to the beach and ends with a picturesque scene, “Marie was glistening all over with salty water and holding her hair back. She lay next to me and the combined warmth from her body and from the sun made me doze off” (*Stranger* 51).

Yet, as soon as Masson, Raymond and Meursault return to the beach after lunch, the sun impacts Meursault in exactly the opposite way. “The sun was shining almost directly overhead onto the sand, and the glare on the water was unbearable” (*Stranger* 52). Just as the sun’s relationship to Meursault has drastically changed, so too has the mood which now foreshadows the oncoming encounter between Masson, Raymond, Meursault and the Arab men. “All that heat was pressing down on me and making it hard to go on. And every time I felt a blast of its hot breath strike my face, I gritted my teeth, clenched my fists in my trousers pockets, and strained every nerve in order to overcome the sun and the thick drunkenness it was spilling over me” (*Stranger* 57). Camus’s anthropomorphism of the sun adds another layer of depth to our protagonist’s relationship with his natural environment. By animating the sun into a life-like figure with whom Meursault is engaged in a combative relationship, the two become equals and Meursault loses ground to his external world. This image is furthered through Camus’s diction, “clenched fist” and “gritted teeth,” which are descriptors reinforcing Meursault’s intense struggle with the absurdity of his environment.

While scholars have recognized the impact of the sun and heat on our protagonist’s intelligibility, they fail to extend this analysis as a recurring theme of Meursault allowing the absurdity of his situation to strip away his identity as a rational being. William M. Manly writes, “Camus’ recurring emphasis on a heat and glare that disturb Meursault’s normal processes of

thought, together with his repeated stress on “[the forehead],” the symbolic source of consciousness – these suggest that the pressure in the beach scene is toward a delirium which will destroy the mental poise Meursault has maintained by staying uninvolved” (Manly 324). This image of Meursault battling the sun emphasizes the necessity of an individual maintaining their rationality while functioning within absurdity of daily life. Just as the natural aspects of the sun bear down on Meursault and elicit discomfort, so do many aspects of our daily life. Do we not feel a similar physical exhaustion with existence in the afternoon on those hot summer days when driving through town, the sun bearing down on the asphalt while waves of heat radiate, blurring the trash-littered roadside? Do we not have similar emotional discomforts in the check-out line of a grocery store when those unkempt children unceasingly scream while their overweight mother argues with the cashier about the value of her coupon?

These feelings are not uncommon. They are moments that may lead one to question human purpose and, if uncontrolled, develop misanthropic ideas, creating a bitter, lethargic perspective on life. But a full submission to these thoughts is detrimental, and can only occur when an individual forfeits their conscious recognition and rebellion of the absurd. “The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire. My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave” (59). These discomforts are manifested in the recurring image of the sun bearing down on Meursault, but it is our protagonist’s inability to cope with these moments of physical and emotional exhaustion that lead to his murder of a man and continuation toward certain death. As such, we see Meursault acting not in rebellion but in passivity, allowing his fate to be completely determined by feelings of immediacy and the external world.

Meursault's Inability to Navigate the Judicial Process

Meursault's actions lead to his arrest and trial for manslaughter. In this section of the novel, Camus particularly addresses the arbitrary nature of the judicial process – that is, how one's justification for an action and the perceived malevolence of that act are impossible to reconcile. As Stephen Bronner writes, “An irresolvable paradox exists between the objective judgment of an action and the subjective motivations behind its performance. Truth disappears. Therein lies the absurdity of existence” (Bronner 34). Here, Bronner poses that the theatrical nature of judicial processes that assess crimes symbolize the absurdity of existence, as an objectively true verdict is unattainable through an inevitable division between the perspective of the judge and judged. Scholars^{iv} have recognized the importance of this section and its efforts to reveal and critique the absurdity behind a societal construct that carries such power in determining an individual's fate; however, I am not concerned with the validity of these analyses. While I wholeheartedly agree with their conclusions, my primary focus is on how Meursault's failure as an absurd hero is rooted in the way our protagonist, while recognizing the absurdity of this judicial process, fails to respond effectively in a manner that sustains his life.

Camus returns to his motif of heat as a means to signify the growing intensity of the absurd over the course of Meursault's trial. Yet again, our protagonist allows this external force to dictate his attitude and responses throughout the hearing; but given the severity of the situation, doing so implicates even more severe consequences. “It was getting hotter and hotter. As always, whenever I want to get rid of someone I'm not really listening to, I made it appear as if I agree” (*Stranger* 69). In this passage, Meursault conveys a lack of control and blatant disregard for his life. In response to the prosecutor's incriminating questions, our protagonist simply disregards the gravity of his situation and passively allows the discomfort of his

environment to control his behavior. Later in the trial, Camus returns to the rising temperatures as a representation of Meursault's increasing lack of physical and mental capability within the absurd. "I found myself in the same courtroom, in front of the same faces. Only this time it was much hotter, and as if by some miracle each member of the jury, the prosecutors, my lawyer, and some of the reporters, too, had been provided with straw fans" (*Stranger* 88). The imagery of this scene accentuates the division between Meursault and the others in the courtroom. On a literal level, the fans function to relieve the intensity of the rising heat, while figuratively they symbolize the glaring difference between our protagonist and the world from which he is estranged – the others have a means to steer away the absurd while Meursault remains negatively impacted. This is not to say the others are confronting this force without committing philosophical suicide; in fact, I believe Camus's effort to list the occupations is an indication of their unwitting involvement in an absurd process. However, their possession of fans reinforces Meursault's alienation from society and inability to maintain intelligibility within the absurd.

Even though Meursault recognizes the absurdity of the situation, the fact remains that our protagonist conducts himself inadequately and ultimately loses his life. This is evident not only through the self-incriminating statements as discussed above, but also through irrational blurbs such as blaming the sun for his murder. These uncontrolled acts not only convey a sense of insanity to the courtroom, but also reinforce his lack of mental and physical fortitude against the absurd as his agency becomes submissive to his environment. Another unsettling feature of Meursault's persona for the jury is his lack of remorse for killing the man. The protagonist reflects on a recognition of this truth, "I didn't feel much remorse for what I'd done. But I was surprised how relentless he was. I would have liked to have tried explaining to him cordially, almost affectionately, that I had never been able to truly feel remorse for anything" (*Stranger*

100). So while Meursault again conveys a relationship with the absurd, his inability to maintain a mental rebellion against the environment and successfully navigate the situation constitutes the resulting verdict: to have his head cut off in a public square. The irony Camus poses with Meursault's sentencing reinforces our protagonist's failure as an absurd hero, who will ultimately be severed from his source of conscious thought, the characteristic necessary for him to rebel against the absurd and evade the death to which he has been sentenced.

Ultimately, the distinction becomes whether Meursault's actions during his trial reflect a conscious rebellion against an arbitrary system, or if they are a continuation of his inability to effectively cope and navigate the absurdity of his environment, leading to an unwitting path toward death. Remembering Camus's assertion that retaining life is the supreme objective, I believe the latter. If sustaining one's life is the primary basis upon which an absurd hero is to govern their existence, can Meursault's actions, assuming they were done in rebellion, be acknowledged as heroic when they directly lead to his death? Given Camus's consistent use of heat and the sun, and the corresponding severity in which Meursault's actions lead to his demise, I believe our protagonist becomes an individual at the mercy of his environment as opposed to a hero rebelling against it. Meursault can then be held as a warning to the dangers of an improper relationship with the absurd, which leads to forfeiting rationality and an inability to consciously rebel against the meaninglessness of existence.

An End

On the night before his execution, Meursault's conclusive stream of consciousness supports his unsuited nature as an absurd hero. While our protagonist recognizes the absurdity of human life, he finds himself confronted with death as a direct result of his overall inability to maintain a conscious rebellion toward his absurd environment. During his final night, Meursault expresses his newfound passion for life:

Sounds of the countryside were drifting in. Smells of night, earth, and salt air were cooling my temples. The wondrous peace of that sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide. 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 bother, really – I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate. (*Stranger* 123)

Upon first analysis, this conclusion may indicate a degree of resolution in Meursault's relationship with the absurd. Evidence of this can be observed through the change in relationship with his natural surroundings – where our protagonist was once plagued by environmental factors that seemed to dictate his fate, we now see Meursault “cooled” by the air and calmed by the sounds and smells of nature. In addition, we even find our protagonist displaying evidence of a mental rebellion, as his tone toward the absurdity of his death is that of acceptance, as though he now deeply understands “the gentle indifference of the world,” and recognizes how this truth manifested in his own being creates a unifying bond between his existence and the universe.

While I believe our protagonist derives peace from his recognized similarity to the world, the reader must acknowledge Meursault's acquisition of this mental framework is too late. Even with his new appreciation and love for life, a mental state that could lead to an existence as an absurd hero, Meursault's previous inability to properly engage with the absurd has inevitably led to his death; as such, Camus intends our protagonist to become a warning. I attribute Meursault's overall vindictive tone in his final assertion to underline his inadequacy as an absurd hero; whereas Sisyphus affirms a definitive state of contentment, Meursault's conclusive thoughts reveal that all is not well. Meursault's desire for a large crowd of spectators to greet him with cries of hate represents his inability to overcome the absurd on a personal level; rather, Meursault requires affirmation from a world in which he has always been estranged in order to develop the level of conscious rebellion ethically demanded of an absurd hero. In this manner, yet again, Meursault's improper engagement with his environment opposes his autonomy and ultimately reveals an unresolved man, concluding a life of indifference with a death of submission.

While Meursault's inadequacy as an absurd hero originates from a wrongful engagement with the absurd, Sisyphus's perspective encapsulates an individual consciously embracing the ethical demands of this mental framework. And it truly is this characteristic of consciousness that constitutes Sisyphus's success as an absurd hero. As Stephen Bronner writes, "preserving the absurd without succumbing to it is a matter for the individual alone. The undertaking can proceed in many ways. Intention and experience, however, are always determinative" (Bronner 41). We see both intention and experience guiding Sisyphus, and as Camus concludes his interpretation of this myth, the author parallels the setting between *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* to further distinguish the characterization of Meursault and Sisyphus:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burdens again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.
(*Sisyphus* 123)

While Meursault's final night of life is spent imprisoned in a cell, Sisyphus's story concludes with our protagonist uninhibited and reinvigorated to confront his rock. Whereas Meursault seeks external justification for his final state of awareness, Sisyphus's willed optimism against the absurd is derived only from his personal, conscious rebellion. Camus's decision for both endings to be set at night is crucial as it represents a common state of mental and physical rest for our protagonists. As Camus asserts, "There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night" (*Sisyphus* 123). We end the stories with Meursault and Sisyphus both residing in this night – but while Meursault's life will soon end as a result of his consistent inability to navigate the absurd, Sisyphus's will continue in a resilient search for meaning. Camus's final declaration of, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" resounds particularly in two ways. On one hand, this assertion provides a sensible conclusion for the argument Camus has developed over the course of his essay, but this statement also reinforces the necessity of a willed optimism when facing the absurd. One must not only imagine Sisyphus happy due to Camus's logical sequence of thought, but more importantly because by doing so we begin to develop a mental framework that will provide the same willed optimism and conscious resilience toward the absurdity of our environments that Sisyphus embodies.

Ultimately, at the heart of Albert Camus's literature is an investigation into how best engage with the absurdity of human existence. In *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, we find Meursault and Sisyphus completely aware of their absurd situations, but what distinguishes their individual success as absurd heroes is the manner in which they respond to their environments. The former has his actions dictated by the absurd, while the latter actively confronts this force. Sisyphus becomes a representation of the manner in which we are to approach the mundane.. the absurd.. our rock. The ethical demands of absurdism are symbolized by Camus's juxtaposition of Meursault and Sisyphus – when confronted with the inherent meaninglessness of existence, one's ability to maintain agency is paramount to adequately acknowledge, confront, and consciously rebel against the absurdity of their environment as well as resist the temptation for both physical and philosophical suicide.

The implications of the contrast between our two protagonists is the foundation for the inspiration behind a proper engagement with the absurd. However, one must understand the inevitable struggle that comes with adopting this task. The absurdity of daily life is inescapable as repetition and futility are at the forefront of human experience – we relentlessly chase conventional routes of education, religion, friendships, career and romances in hopes they provide some transcendent purpose to our lives. Day-in and day-out, we routinely engage with these conventions, but are unable to obtain any resolutions to our fundamental questions of existence. As such, it becomes all too easy to adhere to articles of faith or other forms of philosophical suicide to derive any sort of meaning from our humanly purpose in a universe devoid of any. Camus's literature confronts the reader with the absurd environments and experiences of his protagonists, which elicit reflection into the nature of our own lives: what habitual processes do we mindlessly accept as reality and allow to impede our agency? Are we

Meursault – perhaps aware of the absurdity of existence, but relinquishing our control through a submission to external pressures? Or are we Sisyphus – fully cognizant of the meaninglessness behind life, yet embracing this reality and rebelling in order to acquire a personal truth? The juxtaposition between these characters reinforces the ethical demands of absurdism and proposes the “higher fidelity” of living to be rooted in a conscious rebellion despite the seemingly hopeless nature of existence.

And so, we can now value the importance of absurdism, and the ultimate guidance that adopting this method of thought and action could bring to humankind. Serge Doubrovsky elaborates on the implications of a proper engagement with the absurd:

Lacking that logical coherence which so often is only superficial and illusory, the warnings, the cries, the call possess an internal cohesion born of an unshakable certainty. If it goes deeply enough, analysis uncovers not a mine but an outpouring, a vital spring. There we must take our arguments to be refreshed. It seems that for Camus this is what constitutes all ethics. (Doubrovsky 164)

Absurdism implores humankind to plunge into the depths in pursuit of consciousness, that state of constant awareness from which rebellion is born. To these vital springs of the mind we must bring every construction of humankind: religion, art, racism, culture, politics, education, war, health, nationalism – whether they are paradigms that have wrought suffering, or those that have advanced existence, the ethical demands of absurdism require a constant exploration of how to best improve human thought and action. With this mental framework, the absurdity of one’s environment and existence becomes insignificant. Whether on a beach subjected to the blistering sun, eternally toiling up a starry skied mountain with our rocks, or within any context where the futility of human life becomes blatantly evident – existence is struggle. However, to combat this

strained endeavor with a system of thought and rebellion that refuses to accept any supreme way of being is to engage with a more profound approach to life that results in our rocks becoming worlds in themselves – worlds from which humankind can continually draw inspiration and progress toward a greater level of conscious existence.

ⁱ See Albert Camus's, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, particularly the sub-section "Absurdity and Suicide" (3) for further insight into the difference between absurdism and nihilism.

ⁱⁱ See *The Myth of Sisyphus*, particularly the sub-section "Philosophical Suicide" (28) for a deeper analysis of this concept.

ⁱⁱⁱ Here, Camus interprets Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*.

^{iv} See Stephen Eric Bonner's book *Camus: Portrait of a Moral*, section *The Absurd*.

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