

The absurd in two dimensions: a comparative study of the expression and creative intent of 'absurdity' in the works of Camus and Kafka

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Abstract. "Absurdity" emerged as a core theme in 20th-century Western literature. This study compares Albert Camus's and Franz Kafka's interpretations of absurdity, focusing on their representative works *The Stranger* and *The Metamorphosis*. Methodologically, it adopts a comparative analysis combining textual interpretation and genre theory. In terms of expression, Camus portrays absurdity as an inherent existential tension between human aspirations and the world, manifested through emotional and ideological alienation. Kafka, by contrast, employs surreal narratives (e.g., Gregor's transformation into an insect) to highlight the absurdity of modern life. Regarding purpose, Camus, as an existentialist, emphasizes individual freedom and the need to embrace absurdity for self-actualization. Kafka, a modernist, critiques societal alienation and dehumanization in modernity. This study reveals the multifaceted nature of absurdity, enriching understanding of 20th-century literary explorations of human existence.

Keywords: absurdity, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, existentialism, modernism, alienation

1. Introduction

In Western languages, the term "absurd" is derived from the Latin word "absurdus", meaning "out of tune" or "senseless". According to Baidu Baike, the concept of absurdity and the sense of the absurd have a clear trajectory in the development of human thought: before the 20th century, the absurd occupied a general and secondary position among various literary themes; however, after the 20th century, people began to frequently use the term "absurd" to describe human life ("荒谬").

This article aims to compare the different "absurdity" in the works of Albert Camus and Franz Kafka. One is a representative writer of French existentialism and a leading figure in the philosophy of the absurd; the other is a pioneer and master of Western modernist literature who frequently employs the art of the absurd in his works. How do Camus and Kafka differ in their interpretations of the "absurdity"? This article will primarily distinguish and interpret the two writers' understandings from two aspects: forms of expression and intended purpose.

2. Forms of expression

In the works of both writers (taking Camus's *The Stranger* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* as examples), the reader's sense of the "absurdity" arises from the "alienation" between their literary worlds and the real world. However, even though both involve "alienation", their forms of expression are different.

2.1. Camus's expression of absurdity

The sense of the absurd in Camus's works mainly reflects in the "alienation" of individuals or groups in terms of emotions and thoughts. For example, in *The stranger*, at the end of the story, Camus explores the theme of absurdity through the protagonist's reflections:

Everyone was privileged. There was no one who wasn't privileged. All those others, they too would one day be condemned to death. He as well, he too would be condemned to death. What did it matter if accused of murder he was executed for not crying at his mother's funeral [1]?

From this passage, it is not difficult to see that the protagonist's understanding of "sin" and his contemplation of the value of life have reached an almost "absurd" level. The mention of "accused of murder he was executed for not crying at his mother's funeral" further highlights the crowd's indifference to human emotions and humanity in the work. This extreme "alienation" is vividly portrayed.

Camus's expression of the absurd stems from his feeling of the absurd. As Thomas Pözlner mentions in his academic paper *Camus' Feeling of the Absurd*: From cases such as these Camus concludes that the essence of the concept of the absurd is a tension between human aspirations and a disappointing world [2]. Similarly, Camus also provides a simple explanation of his understanding of the "absurd" in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation [3].

'It's absurd' means 'It's impossible' but also: 'It's contradictory'.

Thus, for Camus, absurdity is not merely a superficial manifestation of reality. Camus believes that absurdity is an inherent attribute and essential feature of human existence in this world, and it is an inevitable subjective feeling of individuals. Under this concept, the meaning of human life is doomed to be nothingness, the harmonious relationship is doomed to be lost, and the relationship is doomed to be alienated.

2.2. Kafka's expression of absurdity

In the opening of *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka describes Gregor Samsa's absurd transformation in a remarkably calm tone:

When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin [4].

The absurdity of this scene is in how Gregor's transformation is described so calmly, as if turning into a giant insect were completely normal. This calm way of telling the story sharply contrasts with the absurdity of the transformation itself, highlighting the unreal nature of the story.

Gregor's life after his transformation further illustrates the absurdity in Kafka's works. His family cannot accept his transformation, gradually distancing themselves from him and even seeing him as a burden:

His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked.

3. Intended purpose

To understand the intended purposes of these two writers, it is first necessary to understand their genres. Camus is the representative writer of existentialism, Kafka is the representative writer of modernism. The two schools are different, so the use of absurdity in the writing process are bound to be different. So in this section I will focus on the two writers' doctrines and genres to analyse their intended purpose.

3.1. Camus and existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement of the 20th century, primarily focusing on themes of individual existence, freedom, and choice. Existentialists believe that individuals must find their own meaning and purpose in a world that is meaningless and uncertain. The core ideas of existentialism include existence precedes essence, individual freedom, loneliness, and absurdity.

Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the main representatives of existentialism. In his work *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre elucidates the core viewpoints of existentialism. Sartre posits that "existence precedes essence", meaning that a person first exists and then defines their own essence and meaning through their choices and actions [5].

In the novel *The Stranger*, Camus vividly portrays a character who does not adhere to social norms and is indifferent to traditional morals and religious beliefs, exploring the themes of absurdity and existentialism. Ronald Aronson, in Camus's '*The Myth of Sisyphus*': A 50-Year Retrospective, points out that Meursault's indifference and his calm acceptance of the meaningless of life reflect Camus's philosophical contemplation of absurd existence. Aronson believes that *The Stranger* is not merely a novel but a concretization of Camus's philosophical ideas, illustrating the human condition in an absurd world [6]. Meursault's trial and eventual condemnation are less about the murder he committed and more about his failure to conform to societal expectations, emphasizing the absurdity of the human condition.

In line with existentialist thought, Camus also emphasizes the importance of individual freedom and choice in *The Stranger*. Meursault's life is defined by his choices, and he remains true to his personal truth, regardless of societal pressures. This is evident in his refusal to lie or pretend emotions he does not feel, even when it could have saved him from execution. His actions underscore the existentialist belief in the primacy of personal authenticity and the individual's responsibility to define their own essence.

Meursault's confrontation with death is the ultimate test of his existential beliefs. In the final pages of *The Stranger*, as he awaits execution, Meursault comes to a profound realization about the nature of existence. He acknowledges the inevitability of death and the absurdity of life, yet he finds a sense of peace in this acceptance. This mirrors Camus's idea that one must imagine Sisyphus happy, as embracing the absurd allows for a form of existential liberation. Scholar David Sherman, in his article *Camus, Philosophy, and the Absurd*, highlights this acceptance of death as a key moment in Meursault's character development, symbolizing his full embrace of absurdist philosophy [7].

In short, Camus emphasized man's free will and responsibility. In his works, he explored the meaning of human existence and the importance of free choice. In fact, human beings are looking for the meaning and purpose of existence in a meaningless world. Emphasis on the individual's responsible attitude towards their own lives and actions.

3.2. Kafka and modernism

Modernism is a cultural movement that profoundly influenced 20th-century literature, art, architecture, and philosophy. It is not only a rebellion against traditional forms, but also a profound reflection on modern life

and human existence. The core ideas of modernism include the questioning of modern society, the exploration of human loneliness and alienation, and the concern for inner experience, etc.

As Habib wrote in his work *The History and Concept of Modernism*, in literature, modernism alludes to souls' ambiguous and challenging utterances, sometimes at odds with one another and full of melancholy, doubt, and resignation. Of course, Kafka was also influenced by these ideas of modernism. His work is full of isolation and alienation, doubt and resignation. Not only the ambiguous expression of soul, but also the clear purpose of writing - the criticism of modern society.

Scholar Peter Childs, in *Modernism*, points out that modernists believe the fast pace and high competition of modern life lead to individual isolation and alienation [8]. Kafka vividly portrays this sense of loneliness and alienation through Gregor's transformation into a gigantic insect in *The Metamorphosis*. After his transformation, Gregor's family and society are unable to accept him, highlighting his profound isolation and helplessness. This depiction reflects the individual loneliness and alienation that modernists emphasize. After transforming into an insect, Gregor does not resist his new state but instead tries to adapt to his new body and environment. This attitude reflects the modernist themes of doubt and resignation, as noted by scholars Bradbury, Malcolm and James McFarlane in *Modernism: 1890-1930*: modernist works often express skepticism towards absolute truths and fixed values, emphasizing relativism and uncertainty [9].

After his transformation, although Gregor's body undergoes a significant change, his inner world remains complex and ambiguous. His love and sense of responsibility towards his family are intertwined with his despair and helplessness regarding his situation, forming a contradictory and complex inner state. This ambiguous and challenging expression of the soul is a key feature of modernist literature. Scholar M.H. Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, points out that modernists discard the traditional objective view of reality, instead emphasizing the importance of subjective experience and personal perspective [10]. Kafka deeply showcases this modernist feature through Gregor's inner monologues and psychological depictions.

Kafka expresses a profound critique of modern society through *The Metamorphosis*. He reveals the alienation and objectification of interpersonal relationships in modern society through Gregor's transformation and his situation within the family. Before his transformation, Gregor is the economic pillar of the family, but after his transformation, he is seen as a burden. This objectification of interpersonal relationships reflects the utilitarianism and coldness in modern society. Scholar Marshall Berman, in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, points out that modernists have ambivalent feelings towards modernity; they are both attracted to the dynamics and possibilities of modern life and deeply worried about its destructive impacts [11]. Through *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka profoundly critiques this alienation in modern society.

In general, as a representative writer of modernism, Kafka pays attention to the individual's powerlessness and despair in the face of the force of fate. His works reflect the conflict and estrangement between the individual and the authority and the bureaucracy in modern society.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, both Albert Camus and Franz Kafka use their respective works, *The Stranger* and *The Metamorphosis*, to explore the theme of absurdity, albeit in different ways. Camus, through his existentialist lens, portrays the absurd as a fundamental aspect of human existence. In *The Stranger*, Meursault's indifference to social norms and his ultimate acceptance of the meaningless of life underscore Camus's belief that individuals must find their own meaning in an indifferent universe. As Meursault reflects, "What did it matter if accused of murder he was executed for not crying at his mother's funeral?". This highlights the absurdity of societal expectations and the existentialist notion that life is inherently meaningless, a concept

further elaborated by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation".

On the other hand, Kafka uses strange and modern methods to show how absurd and difficult human life can be. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa turns into a huge bug and feels very alone and helpless. This shows how modern life can make people feel isolated. Kafka writes, "When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin". This change represents how modern society can make people feel less human, which is a big idea in modernist literature. Gregor's loneliness and feeling like an object show how relationships can be cold and practical in the modern world, a point that Walter Sokel talks about in his book *The Myth of Power and the Self: Essays on Franz Kafka*.

Ultimately, both Camus and Kafka provide profound insights into the human condition through their exploration of absurdity. Camus emphasizes the importance of individual freedom and the need to confront the absurd with acceptance and defiance, as evidenced by Meursault's existential awakening. Scholar Robert Zaretsky highlights this acceptance of death as a key moment in Meursault's character development, symbolizing his full embrace of absurdist philosophy [12]. Kafka, meanwhile, delves into the inner turmoil and existential despair that arise from the alienation and dehumanization inherent in modern society. Scholar Stanley Corngold points out that Kafka's works often reflect the psychological and existential dilemmas faced by individuals in an indifferent world, a feature Kafka masterfully showcases through Gregor's inner monologues and psychological depictions [13].

Through their unique methods, both Camus and Kafka reveal the multifaceted nature of absurdity and its profound impact on human beings. Their works have struck a chord with readers, leaving a lasting reflection on the complexities and challenges of modern life in the history of world literature.

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