

A Brief Analysis of the absurdity in Camus's *Plague* from the Existentialism

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ABSTRACT: Albert Camus is a representative of French existentialism in the 20th century. His representative works include *The Outsider* and *The Fall*. If *The Myth of Sisyphus* is Camus' interpretation of the concept of absurd philosophy, then the epidemic situation described in *The Plague* is a concrete expression of the specific content of the absurd philosophy. As Camus himself put it, "I tried to use the plague to show the suffocation we suffered and the threatening and exile environment we endured." From *The Plague*, we can see that absurdity is an inescapable way of survival or attitude towards life for various characters. In real life, how should we deal with the conflict between this absurd world and human individuals? From the perspective of absurd philosophy, Camus divides the attitudes of human beings into three types: one is physical suicide, the other is philosophical suicide, and the third is persistence and rebellion. Next, the author will specifically analyze the different coping strategies adopted by different characters in *The Plague* to deal with the plague, so as to provide some reference for us modern people to cope with when the fate of mankind is threatened.

Keywords- Absurdity, Albert Camus, Existentialism, Humanity, Plague

I. INTRODUCTION

The word "existentialism" comes from the Latin *existentia*, from which we can see that there is meaning of survive, existence, etc(1). It does not, however, show the infinite beauty and hope of life in our existing society. On the contrary, absurdity, nihilism, meaninglessness, destruction are the main ideas surrounding the existentialism. And *The Plague* is such a work. The story takes place in Oran, a provincial city on the coast of French Algeria. One day in April, the plague suddenly struck the city. The article described the different living conditions of different people facing the plague after the outbreak of the plague. The first part of this passage describes some people who chose to commit suicide in face of this absurdity. The second part is talk about how some chose to escape from it in mental aspect. And the third part is expound a large number of people, represented by Dr. Rieux, chose to fight hard in the face of the plague. They told us that the only way to escape from absurdity is to rise up to resist. They vividly demonstrated the true warrior spirit who dared to face the bleak life, and demonstrated the free humanitarian spirit in absurdity and in despair. That can provide some reference for us

modern people to cope with when the fate of mankind is threatened.

II. Physical Suicide

How to solve the absurd problems that people face in their lives, one is to seek the hope of life, and the other is to commit suicide. When a person is defeated by the cruelty and pain of social reality in the process of seeking life, and loses the hope of life and ideals, then the method of achieving self-liberation by committing suicide is his only choice. Camus himself once said, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that there is but one only 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 (2). Suicide is a way for a person to evade reality after consciously thinking and realizing that the meaning of life is meaningless. When people die, the absurdity disappears.

From the beginning of the article, there was a detailed description of the place where the epidemic occurred—the town of Oran. “The town itself, let us admit, is ugly... How conjure up a picture, for instance, of a town without pigeons, without any trees or gardens, where you never hear the beat of wings or the rustle of leaves—a thoroughly negative place in short?”(3). This is a deathly still and lifeless city, where people have no goals other than their empty and boring daily lives. For example, there has a dapper little old man who walked out of the balcony in the hot afternoon in Tarrou’s records, he used fine paper scraps to fall from the balcony to attract the attention of some cats. Once he seized the opportunity, he would spit vigorously at the cats and then he will laugh unconsciously. It is worth noting that the time he came out was when the whole city had stop and entered into a nap. His life pattern is completely opposite to that of the town of Oran, which shows that he is living outside the public life circle, being occupied with nothing and fooling along. What makes people is able neither to cry nor to laugh is that spitting at the cats is the happiest thing in his all day. However, The sad thing is that as the rats die in large numbers, the cats also disappear. “The little old fellow opposite is quite disconsolate... hence the old boy’s plight. His hair isn’t as well brushed as usual, and he looks less alert, less military. You can see he is worried”(3). According to Tarrou’s the following record, the short old man, living in depression and disappointment, had his windows locked after a few weeks and never came out again. The author is here to make a bold speculation that maybe he chose to commit suicide to end this nihilistic life.

In addition, in such a lifeless and depressed city, Cottard in the article also chose to hang himself—the most direct way to escape the state of emptiness in life, just as like Grand called Cattard—Desperate Man, he has lost his pursuit of survival and has no hope for reality. Cattard is an extreme individualist, and his happiness is based on the suffering of the people in the city. Before the plague ravaged the city, “Cottard was a silent, secretive man... some rather mysterious coming and goings— there were the sum of Cottard’s days”(3). And now he likes the plague. When everyone is suffering from parting with relatives, lovers, and friends, and is immersed in the "sense of exile" brought about by the plague, he lives a luxurious life and give full rein to his low passion. He didn't want the plague to end sooner than everyone else in the city. Because in the face of a national disaster like the plague, the police did not have the time and energy to take care of the cases he committed before the plague. Camus said that there’s no reason for it to stop, now. This town’s going to be in an unholy mess, by the look of things” (3).

He has gained new life and hope under this chaos where normal people cannot live. he believed that I've been feeling much more at ease here since the plague settled in(3). He started to get along well with people and made a fortune through smuggling cigarettes and wine. The purpose of helping Rambert to escape from the town is only to seek a debt of gratitude, when the police came to trouble him after the epidemic, Rambert could help him. However, when the plague was about to end, he was in panic all day long, fearing that one day the case that he had been submerged by the epidemic would resurface. He slowly withdrew from everyone's sight, withdrew from social occasions, and only sneaked out at night. It was an abnormality for Cottard after experiencing an abnormal

life and he returned to the normal society before. This subversive change made him lose his reason. At the end of the article, he went crazy to those near his house opened fire. Cottard's life is the absurd portrayal of Camus works. The chaos of the plague brought him hope, and once the order and regularity returned, his short-lived hope was shattered with the end of the plague. As Camus said, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that "in a universe suddenly divested of illusion and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy man having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death" (2).

III. Philosophical Suicide

In his preface to Camus's Book-*The Collectives of Camus*, the domestic scholar Liu Mingjiu said: "Philosophical suicide is a phenomenon in the spiritual field, it is not to face up to absurdity, but to escape to god that does not exist, to look forward to the paradise and a future world, with the false mysterious kingdom of heaven as a paradise to escape absurdity, which is the suffocation and self of self-rationality." Paneloux is a Jesuit priest who converted to Catholicism, and in his heart, faith teach him forgiven himself, satisfied himself, and allowed himself to exist honestly in the world. As the Christian doctrine says, "Humans can be redeemed by faith". He believed that plague was God's punishment for humanity, that our long-standing happiness and stability had been sheltered by God, but we had now lost The Light of God to fall into such a situation that all we needed to do was pray piously, the day the God heard our warm call, He will leading us through the dark valley of fears and groans towards the only silence, the well-spring of all life(3). Chestov. A commentator make a remark that to be precise, there is only one real way out, and that is the way out that the common people and the world can't see. If not, why do we still need God? People turn to God only when they ask for the impossible. Lu Xun has also said that he most painful thing in life is to wake up with no way to go. Father Paneloux chose a path to get rid of everything through God's salvation when there was no way out in real life. He and Rieux witnessed the painful death of a child infected with plague, which he believed was given by God, and we must accept it unconditionally, "Thus and thus only the Christian could face the problem squarely and, scorning subterfuge, pierce to the heart of the supreme issue, the essential choice. And his choice would be to believe everything, so as not to be force into denying everything"(3). Paneloux believed in God until death and did not waver in his faith. He was working on a short essay entitled *Is a Priest Justified in Consulting a Doctor?* Although the book does not explicitly tell us whether the priest should see a doctor when he is ill, but when was infected with plague, he did not let the doctor to look at him, When he was placed in hospital in a coma because of a high fever, "Paneloux did not utter a word. He submitted passively to the treatment given him, but never let go of the crucifix"(3).

IV. Persistence and Rebellion

It is better to use the word "resistance" directly from Camus's *The Rebels* to interpret its meaning. Resistance is the process of conflict between one force and another and making a series of confrontations against it. Resistance is accompanied by the birth, reproduction and disappearance of mankind. In ancient Greek mythology, Zeus prevent human from using fire, but Prometheus saw the inconvenience and pain of human life and stole the fire from Mount Olympus. Zeus, in order to punish Prometheus, locked him on the cliffs of the Caucasus Mountains, sent an eagle to eat his liver every day, and let his liver grow again every day, so that he suffered day and night by the evil eagle whose eating liver. From this we can see Prometheus' resistance to Zeus, Zeus' resistance to Prometheus.

Similarly, we can see Prometheus-style persistence in Dr. Rieux. He fought the plague hard to bring people back

from the edge of death. Rieux was a man of sacrifice and work ethic for the sake of the sick. Like Rambert, he suffers from the pain of being separated from his lover, but he has no time to take care of affection between men and women in the face of a dire situation. When Tarrou asked Dr. Rieux what the plague meant to him, he replied that "a never-ending defeat" (3). But even so, it's not a reason to stop fighting it. Even if failure is inevitable, hope exists forever, and it has become part of human existence (4). Like Sisyphus in ancient Greek mythology, Sisyphus angered the gods by kidnapping death. In order to punish Sisyphus, the gods asked him to push a boulder to the top of the mountain, because it was too heavy, it fell down before pushing it up the mountain. Sisyphus knew that his repetitive behavior was meaningless and doomed to failure, but in the face of this absurdity he continued to do it day after day, he just wanted to prove to the gods that he did not give up with that force that never gave up. The same is true of Rieux, who doesn't know when the plague will stop, perhaps in summer and winter, or when the next spring comes, or forever. At this invisible end, Dr. Rieux does the same process of diagnosis, discovery, observation, etc. in day after day. But he never said to give up, he endured the pain of separation from his loved ones, concealing the feeling of commiseration of the dead people.

And this sense of accomplishment and happiness brought by rebellion against reality is, in Camus' words, "the hard work required to climb to the top of the mountain is enough to make a person feel full in his heart." Even if the boulder will eventually fall, the process of pushing the boulder forward will eventually be happy. Perhaps this is why Camus said Sisyphus is happy. In the same way, Dr. Rieux was also happy. Camus mentioned in his *The Rebel* that I rebel, therefore I am. When a sense of resistance develops in a person's mind, it means that he has completed a series of free thinking activities. A person's thinking ability is the prerequisite and precondition for the existence of a person, and it is also unique from animals. To have a mind means to have a clear and enlightened understanding of this absurd and bizarre world, and this knowledge is our weapon against this absurd and futile world, and resistance arises from this.

Camus said, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that in an absurd experience, suffering is personal. But from the action of rebellion, suffering has a collective consciousness, and it has become a risky action for everyone (2). Tarrou was also a member of the collective and the group that raised the flag of resistance. He was the first to propose organizing volunteers to prevent the epidemic. The people who join this team may not be someone who has made major contributions, or someone who holds real power. They may be a waiter, a small vendor, a worker, etc., like Tarrou and Rieux, they are completely unknown or unrecognized in their own position on the dedication of light and heat. They know that fighting the plague is the only road to escape from it, this is not just a matter for doctors and nurses, not just for scientific researchers who are on the front line, it is everyone's business. "we do not congratulate a schoolmaster on teaching that two and two make four, though we may, perhaps, congratulate him on having chosen his laudable vocation" (3). Tarrou and the others should also be praised for choosing a noble path and going through fire and water for it. The same is true for Grand. Camus said, in *The Plague*, that Grand was the true embodiment of the quiet courage that inspired the sanitary groups. He had said 'Yes' without a moment hesitation and with the large-heartedness that was a second nature with him (3). Just like national novel coronavirus, Academician Zhong Nanshan, countless medical staff, and party members and citizens across the country worked tirelessly and walked the front line of fighting the epidemic regardless of safety. The whole country is united and cast a copper and iron wall to stop the novel coronavirus.

"Thus the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile... It was undoubtedly the feeling of exile—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). If this is a painful feeling of exile for the citizens who have lived in Oran for a long time, then for Rambert, there is also an extra layer of worry about parting from their homeland. Rambert is a journalist commissioned by a newspaper in Paris to investigate

the living conditions of the Arabs and their health conditions. Rambert live in Cao camp but with his heart in the Han camp. Even though he is in Oran, his heart has already flown to his girlfriend in Paris. He tried every means at all costs, "he had gone the round of offices, taken every step that could be taken, and realized that for the present all avenues of that kind were closed to him"(3).

He said to Rieux, that "the truth is I wasn't brought into the world to write newspaper articles. But it is quite likely I was brought into the world to live with a woman"(3). He is a more individualistic person who puts personal happiness above all public interests. He repeatedly reiterated that he was not refusing to join the anti-epidemic organization because of fear and cowardice. He just wanted to "For nothing in the world is it worth turning one's back on what one loves. Yet that is what I'm doing-though why I do not know"(3). He believes that everyone has their own choices they want to insist on. At the same time, he also believes that the so-called anti-epidemic volunteers are nothing more than some heroism. But when he learned that Dr. Rieux had suffered from lovesickness to his wife as much as he did, but he still struggled day and night and was still on the front line. He was shocked by Rieux's noble behavior, he said "For nothing in the world is it worth turning one's back on what one loves. Yet that is what I'm doing-though why I do not know"(3). He finally chose to join the anti-epidemic organization and fight side by side with Rieux and the others. And when he finally had the opportunity to leave Oran City to meet his sweetheart, he still chose to stand side by side with everyone. The reason why Rambert chose to stay was not because he had been separated from his wife for a long time and lost his memory of each other, but because he was integrated into the city while fighting side by side with everyone. He participated in the chaos and panic in the city, also participated in the rescue and resistance of this city. "Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that's I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business"(3). Having a shared memory is itself part of identity.

Sartre said that, in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, "When we say that man choose himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all me. For in effect, of all the actions a man may takes in order to creat himself as he wills to be, there is no one which in not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen"(4). No one is born a coward, and no one is born a hero. "It is the coward who turns himself into a coward, and it is the hero who turns himself into a hero. A coward can cheer up and stop being a coward, and a hero can stop being a hero. What matters is to take responsibility as a whole..."(4).

V. CONCLUSION

From tuberculosis in the Neolithic age 6000 years ago to the epidemic of smallpox in 165 BC and to the COVID-19 that swept the world in 2020. Looking through the history, human beings have always been threatened and persecuted by epidemics. In ancient China's earliest written inscriptions-Oracle bone, there have been records of related diseases such as 'worms' and 'malaria'. Whether it's written records or real life, For thousands of years, human behavior during the raging epidemic has basically been unable to escape these patterns: panic, fear, selfishness, shirking responsibility, hoarding daily necessities, idolatry, always paying attention to the death toll of the epidemic in news reports, and doing nothing during the closure. Through the description of the three ways of response to the epidemic situation, we can see the warmth that shines in human nature and help us to find the right way to deal with the predicament we faced in the future. This passage, however, has its limits. Because it is difficult to change people's ingrained mind of how to deal with the epidemic or something difficult position through this passage. As the old man playing the chickpea game said, "But what is the plague? It's just life."

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