Absurdism and Nihilism

Nikpreet Singh, Mu’az Abdul-aziz, Tiffany Ma, Colin Ludwig
Absurdism
1) History of absurdism
2) Theory
3) Absurdism in *The Stranger*

Nihilism
1) History of Nihilism
2) Theory
3) Nihilism in *The Stranger*

Discussion Questions
“The absurd is the essential concept and the first truth.”

- Albert Camus
Absurdism

*noun.*
A philosophy based on the belief that the universe is irrational and meaningless and that the search for order brings the individual into conflict with the universe.
Now that I know
Existence is one big joke,
Absurdism became popular in the 20th century alongside nihilism. Two main authors: Søren Kierkegaard (free will and existentialism), and Albert Camus. Kierkegaard took a spiritual approach and is thus out of line with modern absurdist philosophy. Most absurdists are atheists or apatheists.
The universe is inherently random and meaningless, and therefore any attempt by humans to find meaning is considered **absurd**.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states “the absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”

Thus, we are all free. Structures, rules, laws etc. are all simply attempts to impose order in an orderless world.

The three methods to resolve absurdity:

- **Suicide**: “There is but one serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide,” (Camus, *An Absurd Reasoning*).
- Embracing a meaning framework through spirituality or religion (Kierkegaard)
- Acceptance (Camus): “I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself — so like a brother, really — I felt I had been happy,” (Camus 122).
Absurdism in *The Stranger*

- It is very apparent how absurd the world that Meursault lives in, is. Throughout the book his indifference reveals partially his understanding of the chaotic universe. It takes the entire novel for him to accept the absurd.
  - Meursault: “I was slumped against a soldier who smiled at me and asked if I’d been traveling long. I said, ‘Yes,’ just so I wouldn’t have to say anything else,” (4).
  - “Maman died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know,” (Camus 1).

- Meursault also understands the inevitability of death and points to its insignificance often.
  - “She said, ‘If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill in the church.’ She was right. There was no way out,” (Camus 17).
  - “‘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,” (Camus 117).
“The modern mind is in complete disarray. Knowledge has stretched itself to the point where neither the world nor our intelligence can find any foothold. It is a fact that we are suffering from nihilism.”

- Albert Camus
Nihilism

noun.
1. The belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated.
2. The belief that conditions in the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake.
Basic foundations were found in skepticism among ancient Greeks. The original foundation of nihilism was that “Nothing exists. If anything did exist it could not be known” (Gorgias).

There are many different forms of nihilism in modern philosophy:
- Existential nihilism.
- Ethical nihilism.
- Political nihilism.
- Epistemological nihilism

In the 20th century, the most popular outlets for nihilism are philosophy, social criticisms, and art pieces.

The most notable nihilist is Friedrich Nietzsche.
During the rejection of religion, nihilism was produced as a rejection of morality and values.

- “God is dead, and we have killed him” (Nietzsche).

Religion has for so long propped up our society, but with advances in science, industry and society, religion serves no purpose as a framework for meaning. Nihilism fills this void.

Because nihilism is a form of extreme skepticism in which nothing in this world has a real existence, morals and values and good/bad dichotomies don’t exist.

Active vs. Passive Nihilism:
- Active: pursuing your own desires without recourse (Nietzsche).
- Passive: rejection of all societal values and choosing something like asceticism (Schopenhauer).
Nihilism in *The Stranger*

- Meursault’s life is a good example of nihilism
  “He said that he had peered into it and that he had found nothing, gentlemen of the jury. He said the truth was that I didn't have a soul and that nothing human, not one of the moral principles that govern men's hearts, was within my reach. ‘Of course,’ he added, ‘we cannot blame him for this. We cannot complain that he lacks what it was not in his power to acquire. But here in this court the wholly negative virtue of tolerance must give way to the sterner but loftier virtue of justice. Especially when the emptiness of a man's heart becomes, as we find it has in this man, an abyss threatening to swallow up society’” (Camus 101).

- Camus believes that you can find happiness in a meaningless world
  Nihilists find the search for meaning hopeless.

- Meursault still finds purpose and happiness in his death
  Nihilists reject the notion of having a purpose that gives someone happiness
Discussion Questions
Discussion Questions

- Can an absurdist, like Meursault, live a nice, meaningful life without believing in the possibility of it rationally?
- How does absurdism influence Meursault’s view of an afterlife?
- How does absurdism influence Meursault’s view of an afterlife?
Can an absurdist, like Meursault, live a nice, meaningful life without believing in the possibility of it rationally?

No. There is no truth. no certainty, or laws in life. Due to this, it is considered **absurd** to pursue such impossibilities.

“The prosecutor...would like to know whether I had gone back to the spring by myself intending to kill the Arab. “No” I said. Well then why was I armed and why did I return precisely to that spot? I said it just happened that way” (88).

This shows an absurdist view on events that occur during their lifetime. Meursault simply believed he had no control over this or other irrational events. He believes it was just incidental and it had no meaning to him.
How does absurdism influence Meursault’s view of an afterlife?

According to an absurdist, death makes all men equivalent. Therefore, no one man is privileged over another. As Meursault reflects about the afterlife, it is clear that he will feel free of all the responsibilities and atrocities of everyday life.

“I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again” (123).

Meursault finds peace with the fact that he is going to be executed and he is looking forward to the afterlife where he will not face the struggles that exist in the world.
The Stranger demonstrates the differences between Nihilistic and Absurdist philosophy through Meursault. Meursault is seen as a Nihilist because of his denial of objective truth and rejection to common laws. However, he is an absurdist through the story as he did not show any emotion to his mother's death and the way he is passive and detached from society.

“A soldier smiled at me and asked if I’d been traveling long. I said “Yes” just so I wouldn't have to say anything else” (2).

This demonstrates that Meursault is passive about his actions. He purposely acts in a way in which limits the amount of interaction he has between other people.

01 Nov. 2015.

Shmoop Editorial Team. "The Stranger Theme of Philosophical Viewpoints: The Absurd."