Existential Authenticity in Albert Camus' The Stranger and The Fall

الأصالة الوجودية في روايتي ألبرت كامو "الغريب" و "السقوط"

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Abstract

The paper discusses existential authenticity as perceived by one of the most prominent novelists in modern literature. The paper examines Albert Camus' The Stranger , and The Fall, and focuses on Camus' concept of existential authenticity. The aim of the paper is to determine whether or not existential authenticity, as seen by Camus, is attainable.

ملخص البحث :

يناقش البحث موضوع الأصالة الوجودية عند علم من أعلام الرواية الغربية الحديثة و هو ألبرت كامو، حيث يتناول البحث بالدراسة الشخصية الرئيسية في كل من روايتيه " الغريب " و " السقوط". يركز البحث على عرض فكرة كامو الخاصة عن الأصالة الوجودية، و يستعرض أحداث الروايتين بغية التوصل إلى ما إذا كانت نظرة كامو للأصالة الوجودية قد تحققت من خلال بطلي الروايتين.

The concept of authenticity looms large in the history of existential philosophy and literature, from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – the 'original existentialists' of the nineteenth century – through Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Frankl, and others. A multiplicity of varying interpretations have been attached to it, from Nietzsche's characterization of the 'will to power' as an 'adult morality' by which we formulate our own sets of ethical and moral values, to Viktor Frankl's notion of 'self-actualization' through 'self-transcendence' (Frankl 115), which can be explained as the affirmation of a sense of individual meaning through a personal engagement with a set of external causes beyond the immediate orbit of our own narrow self interest. As it is beyond the scope of this paper, however, to undertake a review of the various interpretations of what constitutes authenticity, I shall be confining myself to an examination of the two main protagonists, Meursault and Clamence, in, respectively, Camus' The Stranger (1942) and The Fall (1956). In doing so, my aim will be to illuminate various aspects of what does, and does not, represent authenticity of character.

According to Camus, authenticity is attained through existential absurdity, which is the separation between the individual and the world, the detachment and dissociation from feelings, the acceptance of the nihilistic connotations of absurdity, and the total liberation from all deterministic principles. Within this framework of thought, the individual gets to invent his pattern, creates his self, and his meaning, only after undergoing a series of absurd events.

Camus's approach to the existential absurd is very personal in nature. The anxiety provoked by the meaninglessness of the absurd leads to the initiation of a perception of life and its meaning and consequences, and allows the individual to arrive at the core of authentic existence, which is the meaning of responsibility. Camus believes that responsibility affirms rather than encumbers existence. Responsibility allows the individual to transcend his sense of helplessness, detachment, or entrapment, and provides him with a real chance for change. Thus, the authentic existentialist, as perceived by Camus, must acknowledge responsibility for his actions.

In Albert Camus' The Stranger, the novel begins with Meursault as he is preparing to go to his mother's funeral at an old people's home outside Algiers. His attitude towards his mother's death seems to be one of indifference and mild irritation at the inconvenience of having to leave the city for a day or so. At the funeral itself, he displays no visible signs of distress. On his return to Algiers – a day after the funeral – he goes to the beach, where he picks up, and later seduces a girl whom he has previously worked with. They visit the cinema together, where they watch a comedy. What follows in the novel is a further display of Mersault's oddly emotionally dissociated world. In quick succession, he colludes with his neighbor, Raymond, in the punishment of Raymond's erstwhile girlfriend, despite being aware of the fact that Raymond is habitually physically brutal towards her; he then fails to intervene when Raymond beats her up. He reacts to the offer from his boss of a new job in Paris with the same level of indifference he had earlier exhibited at his mother's funeral. When Marie, his girlfriend – bizarrely – proposes marriage to him, he agrees to it, commenting,

> I said it didn't make any difference to me and that we could [do it] if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I answered the same way I had the last time, that it didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't love her.... I explained to her that it didn't really matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. Besides, she was the one who was doing the asking and all I was saying was yes.
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> Then she pointed out that marriage was a serious thing. I said, "No." She stopped talking for a minute and looked at me without saying anything. Then she spoke. She wanted to know if I would have accepted the same proposal from another woman, with whom I was involved in the same way. I said "Sure." (Camus, The Stranger 41-2).

After this level of indifference and detachment, the first part of the book then culminates with Mersault murdering an Arab on a beach near Algiers.

Mersault has often been portrayed as an existential hero, whose brutal honesty in describing his dealings with - and emotional reactions to - others is a reflection of his existential authenticity. This equation of mere honesty with authenticity, is, I believe, an act of simplification

and arises out of a desire to **categorize and locate Meursault within the** pantheon of other existentialist heroes such as Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Dostoevsky's Kirilov and Sartre's Roquentin. If we accept the Sartreian view of authenticity as being irreducibly bound up with the realization of individual freedom, as well as the concomitant personal responsibility for one's actions and choices that such an apprehension entails, then Mersault, on the contrary is marked by bad faith in everything but his honesty. Rollo May characterizes him as,

A man who is a stranger in his world, a stranger to other people whom he seeks or pretends to love; he moves about in a state of homelessness, vagueness, and haze as though he had no direct sense connection with his world but were in a foreign country where he does not know the language and has no hope of learning it." (119)

Even when Meursault shoots the Arab on the beach, he attempts, by implication, to deny responsibility for his actions "My eyes were blinded… everything began to reel…. The trigger gave" (The Stranger 59).

The second part of the novel describes Meursault's imprisonment and subsequent trial. Little changes until the very end. Meursault continues to 'sleepwalk' through events, expressing annoyance at the fact that he has been arrested for murder. He professes to be "bored" by his own trial; he takes to talking to himself in his cell and sleeping for between sixteen and eighteen hours a day. There is the constant repetition of the "I didn't really understand what was going on", and "it didn't really matter" refrains during his interactions with others (68-9). Are these the responses of a fully emotionally engaged, fully 'conscious' (in Camus' terms), fully individuated, authentic being, acting and responding according to his own volition? Hardly. Mersault behaves more like an automaton, borne along in the wake of others' actions and wishes, as exemplified by his vacuous acceptance of Marie's marriage proposal and by his willing collusion with the appalling Raymond, and of his own instincts. In other words, he behaves like an exemplar of bad faith.

We are asked, through the eyes of Mersault, to believe that he is really convicted of murder on account of his lack of remorse at his mother's

death and because of his friendship with Raymond, when the truth is that he did, after all, murder a man in what amounted to cold blood. Is there, then, any final redemption for Mersault? Can he be rescued from the fog of inauthenticity that has enveloped him throughout the story? Yes - possibly. The remaining part of the novel might help answer those questions. During the final significant scene of the book, Mersault berates -indeed, in a paroxysm of rage, physically attacks the prison chaplain. So, at last, he fully engages emotionally with another human being, albeit in a way that isolates him even further. This cathartic act, though, as it is borne of reflection and conscious decision rather than of unthinking habit, can be interpreted as being an authentic one. If we accept that this is so, then Mersault's final conversion to authenticity is further emphasized by the way in which, in the final two pages of the novel, he responds – in uncharacteristically passionate and engaged fashion – both to natural phenomena and to his own impending execution "The wondrous peace of[the]sleeping summer flooded through me… For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman…. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again… And I felt ready to live it all again too." (122)

Like Mersault, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the sole main protagonist of The Fall, has uncomfortable truths to tell. Clamence relates his story in the environs of Mexico City, an Amsterdam dive frequented by criminals of all sorts, a place where he collars unsuspecting representatives of the international bourgeoisie in order to provide them with a pedagogical dose of – and model for – brutal self-revelation. The story takes the form of a broadly linear account of the events that led him to abandon his Parisian legal practice in favor of setting himself up as a self-proclaimed 'judge-penitent', a role via which he feels able to instruct others in the process of awakening to full 'lucidity'.

Clamence, with savage, self-lacerating mockery, dissects his life as a "Good Samaritan" type Parisian lawyer and prize hypocrite, a life in which he always enjoyed "the satisfaction of being right", and "the joy of self-esteem" (The Fall 18). He is, in short, a success in every sphere he inhabits, in his legal career, in his social milieu, and in his many dalliances with women. But then, one night, he hears the sound of

laughter as he is walking along the banks of the Seine. The laughter has no obvious source; the implication is that it is the sound of Clamence himself mocking "the handsome wax figure [he] presented everywhere" (94). Things then fall apart for Clamence. He comes to the realization that he is a monster of insincerity and manipulation but, nevertheless, continues his largely fraudulent existence, until he is engulfed by the memory of another, even more devastating occurrence which also took place on the banks of the Seine, some two or three years previously. On this occasion, he had been walking across a bridge when he heard the cries for help of a woman he had just passed and who had quite clearly just thrown herself into the water. Clamence pauses, but does not attempt to rescue the woman. In fact, he does not even turn round. He neither reports the incident nor reads any newspapers for the next few days. In this way, he manages to deceive himself into believing that she may not, after all, have drowned.

The aggregation of these experiences leads Clamence to a kind of breakdown in which "from all sides, judgments, arrows, mockeries rained upon me, inattentive and smiling. The day I was alerted I became lucid; I received all the wounds at the same time and lost my strength all at once. The whole universe then began to laugh at me" (80). The lucidity sounds very much like the birth of a kind of existential anxiety that, according to both Sartre and Heidegger, necessarily prefigures the dawn of genuine self-awareness, i.e., of authenticity.

Clamence, after a short period of travel, becomes aware that he has a task to fulfill , and closes down his legal practice, moving to Amsterdam, a city where, in effect, he is able to re-invent himself as a self-appointed 'judge-penitent'. He has finally been through his mask of self-delusion and self-deception and realizes that his task is to alert others similarly afflicted by the curse of bad faith to engage in the same painful process of self-examination and self-realization. Clamence instinctively recognizes, however, that this process must also include a fundamental acceptance of himself

> You'll find me unchanged. And why should I change, since I have found the happiness that suits me? I have accepted duplicity instead

of being upset about it. On the contrary, I have settled into it and found there the comfort I was looking for throughout life.... The essential [thing] is to be able to permit oneself everything, even if, from time to time, one has to profess vociferously one's own infamy. I permit myself everything all over again, and without the laughter this time.(141-2)

Is Clamence a true exemplar of authenticity? In classic authentic fashion, does Clamence apprehend his own bad faith? Yes, and at length. Does he take personal responsibility for all that he says and does? Yes, totally. Does he engage in a cause beyond his own immediate orbit? Yes, he seeks to educate others in whom he detects the same familiar odor of inauthenticity, but whom he also considers intelligent and self-aware enough to engage in the processes of self-judgment and psychological re-invention that are necessary in order for genuine authenticity to take root.

The figures of Mersault and Clamence provide what amount to case studies of, respectively, bad faith/inauthenticity and good faith/authenticity. The concept of authenticity, whether it is described as self-actualization, self realization, or any other term, is a fundamental tenet of existential thought, both because it serves to locate the individual within his own specific and unique psychological space, and because it is an essential part of what Irvin Yalom terms "existential freedom". He adds "To be taken in by any of those devices that allow us to flee from our freedom is to live 'inauthentically' (Heidegger) or in 'bad faith (Sartre). Sartre considered it his project to liberate individuals from bad faith and to help them assume responsibility"

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