

# Camus and Sartre on the Absurd

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

There has been growing interest in Albert Camus's philosophy in the past two decades, and as a result, the relationship between Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre has been garnering more discussion. However, most discussions focus on their political differences or their personal falling out, leaving their differing philosophies relatively underanalyzed. In particular, the literary implications of their different ideas of the absurd have not been widely discussed. In this paper, I show how their different philosophies of the absurd led Sartre into a philosophically motivated misreading of *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*). Sartre is right that *The Stranger* generates the feeling of the absurd, but he has missed how it does so. He overlooks how *The Stranger* creates for the reader an impasse; the reader is forced to make a judgment about Meursault, but there is no satisfactory judgment to be made. The error, however, is not a simple oversight but a revealing indicator of philosophical differences. As we will see by the end of the paper, Sartre considered the absurd a failure of a project, while Camus considered the absurd a product of lucidity. Sartre fails to grasp Camus's method of generating the feeling of the absurd because he conceptualizes the absurd differently.

I will start by reviewing and evaluating Sartre's interpretation of *The Stranger*. Section 3 puts forward an alternative reading of the novel which shows how the two-part structure of the novel produces the feeling of the absurd by pulling the reader in incompatible directions. In section 4, I will unpack the Camusian absurd and show why narrative fiction is best suited for its explication. In section 5, I will recap the Sartrean absurd and show how it affected his reading of *The Stranger*. And finally, in section 6, I will conclude by pointing to a broader thesis about philosophy and literature — that sometimes literature provides the only viable way to fully introduce a philosophical concept.

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## 2. Sartre's Review of *The Stranger*

Upon *The Stranger's* publication in 1942, Sartre wrote an illuminating commentary connecting the novel to Camus's philosophy of the absurd. Among the foremost insights of the commentary is the distinction Sartre makes between conveying an idea and conveying a feeling; he claims that the aim of *The Stranger* is to convey the feeling of the absurd while it is the aim of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*) to convey the idea of the absurd.<sup>2</sup> If conveying the idea amounts to telling us about the idea, conveying the feeling amounts to generating the feeling. However, Sartre leaves the distinction between the idea and the feeling at an intuitive level and doesn't make the distinction between a work telling us something and a work generating something.

Sartre also seems to assume that he and Camus share the same conception of the absurd. However, "the absurd" is a technical term for both philosophers, and they do not mean the same by it. Briefly, the Camusian absurd is a mismatch between theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning that stems from our theoretical reasoning becoming impotent in the face of questions we must answer (and give practical answers to) in virtue of living. For instance, we cannot help but affirm life simply in virtue of continuing to live, but there is no theoretical basis on which we can do so, and the world reveals itself to be indifferent, if not hostile, to our practical interests.

The Sartrean absurd, in contrast, is our theoretical inability to explain contingency or existence. The groundlessness of being — the fact that things exist without a reason or an explanation — is the absurd. Sartre misses that the Camusian absurd is essentially a tension between a need and the inability to meet the need, which is why he misses how *The Stranger* generates the feeling of the absurd by fictionally positioning the reader to become aware of a need for judgment and her inability to make a satisfactory judgment.

According to Sartre, *The Stranger*, as a project aimed at communicating a certain feeling, does not explain, prove, or justify the absurd.

2. Sartre, "Commentary," 86.

"Camus merely presents something," Sartre writes, "and is not concerned about justifying what is fundamentally unjustifiable."<sup>3</sup> Sartre then points to the short, unconnected sentences of *The Stranger* as one vehicle through which Camus shows the feeling of the absurd. Sartre notes that the *passé composé* "emphasize[s] the isolation of each sentence unit."<sup>4</sup> The verb tense describes actions as completed and self-contained, so the sentences have "neither ramifications nor extensions."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most memorable line from Sartre's review concerns Camus's prose: "The sentences in *The Stranger* are islands. We tumble from sentence to sentence, from nothingness to nothingness."<sup>6</sup> Consider the beginning of chapter 4: "I worked hard all week. Raymond stopped by and told me he'd sent the letter. I went to the movies twice with Emmanuel, who doesn't always understand what's going on on the screen. So you have to explain things to him. Yesterday was Saturday, and Marie came over as we'd planned."<sup>7</sup> There is no connection between the sentences except to form a sequence of action. No emotions arise from having worked hard all week, Raymond's news, and having to explain movies to Emmanuel. There is no meaning that emerges out of the stringing together of sentences, and so Sartre argues that the feeling of the absurd is shown through these sentences.

Sartre also appeals to a "glass partition" effect in *The Stranger* to explain how the absurd is shown in the novel.<sup>8</sup> Having declared there is nothing more absurd than the gestures of a man inside a telephone booth, Sartre explains Camus is going to "insert a glass partition between the reader and his characters," which is effective because glass

3. *Ibid.*, 79.

4. *Ibid.*, 79.

5. *Ibid.*, 96.

6. *Ibid.*, 94.

7. Camus, *Stranger*, 33.

8. Sartre, "Commentary," 91. "Glass partition" is actually Camus's own phrase. Sartre is picking up from Camus's example about seeing a man talking in a telephone booth in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. More will be said about what Camus meant in section 5.

lets everything through except the meaning of gestures. Sartre continues: "Like all artists, [Camus] *lies*, because he pretends to reproduce raw experience, and because he slyly filters out all the meaningful links that are also part of the experience."<sup>9</sup> Sartre thus attributes the source of the feeling of the absurd to Meursault's narration which filters out meaningful connections between events. More will be said about the glass partition in section 5, but for now, it should be noted that Sartre relies on his conception of the absurd (existence without explanation) to develop the glass partition explanation of the novel's effect. He argues that the lack of meaningful explanations in *The Stranger* shows the feeling of the absurd, which is to attribute to Camus his own conception of the absurd.

Lastly, Sartre mentions the "clever structure" of the novel in relation to the feeling of the absurd. Writing that the work was meant to be a novel of discrepancy, divorce, and disorientation, he describes part I as "the amorphous, everyday flow of reality as it is experienced" and part II as "the edifying reconstruction of this reality by human reasoning and speech."<sup>10</sup> Sartre is right to emphasize their structural division. However, he does not successfully trace the emotional effects of disorientation back to the two-part structure and, as a result, overlooks how the two parts generate tension within the reader. I will argue that parts I and II create the need to make judgments about Meursault while also destabilizing the values on which we might base our judgments, and this impasse generates the feeling of the absurd.

Moreover, Sartre's claim that *The Stranger* illustrates the absurd by blocking out meaning (via unconnected sentences and the glass partition) is in tension with his emphasis on "the clever structure" of the novel. According to the first claim, part I would suffice to show the absurd if meaning-filtering alone were sufficient to show the feeling of the absurd. Part I gives us a narration of a life that is devoid of internal reasons or narrative causality, and surely this already gives a sense of

9. Ibid., 92.

10. Ibid., 86.

the absurd, that nothing is connected and that actions do not add up to some meaningful whole. This threatens to make part II extraneous to the purpose and effects of the novel. As Sartre himself sees (with his "clever structure" remark), the differences between parts I and II are in fact crucial to the novel's effect. In particular, part II is set up to create a certain emotional and intellectual tension for the reader, and again, it is this tension that she feels in relation to part I that induces the feeling of the absurd for the reader. This firsthand generation of the feeling is the genius of *The Stranger*, something that goes beyond a novel's ability to describe what the feeling of the absurd is like. Ultimately, Sartre's account of how the feeling of the absurd is conveyed in *The Stranger* does not explore fully the "clever structure" of the novel. I will present another account that aims to do so.

### 3. A New Reading of *The Stranger*

At the heart of our experience of *The Stranger* are the emotions and the resulting judgmental paralysis induced by the novel. Writing that "[b]eginning to think is beginning to be undermined," Camus was skeptical of reason's ability to give answers to life's fundamental questions.<sup>11</sup> Given his general distrust in reason's (or words') ability to convey deep truths, it is natural to consider emotions the vehicle through which Camus explores the absurd in *The Stranger*. The novel invites the reader into a fictional world, and a genuine involvement with the fictional world induces certain emotions whose interplay introduces the reader to the feeling of the absurd. Through the individual emotions each reader feels, the abstract truth regarding the absurd is made concrete to the individual. In this way, the absurd is not a state or a fact one can passively observe; rather, it is a phenomenon experienced firsthand.

The core idea of my reading is this: the feeling of the absurd is induced by *The Stranger* when the reader feels ambivalent about the values on which the court judges Meursault's actions, thereby making it impossible to make a satisfactory judgment regarding Meursault. The

11. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 594.

novel forces a decision because it subtly changes the way we relate to our everyday practices and values. First, in part I, the novel induces us to take up Meursault's way of conceiving and interacting with the world, which is markedly different from our own customary ways. In part II, the novel applies our everyday perspective to Meursault by showing us how the court judges him. The combined effect is one of disorientation from both Meursault's and the court's (i.e., our normal everyday) perspectives. The kind of ambivalence that is induced is special because the reader is led to feel committed to *and* skeptical of the way the court judges Meursault by the time she reaches part II. *The Stranger* shifts the reader's sympathy back and forth, first introducing the story through Meursault's first-person point of view, creating distance by highlighting how different Meursault is from the average person, and showing us that the prosecutor we find too severe in part II is someone we would have agreed with had we not been exposed to Meursault's psyche in part I. This is why it is crucial that the novel is divided into two parts; though the parts' narrative standpoint remains unchanged, the dynamic created by their juxtaposition and overlap in content lead to a deep sense of ambivalence that induces the feeling of the absurd.

In part I, we are introduced to Meursault and the way his mind works. This immediately has a mildly disorienting effect. For instance, we see that Meursault has a peculiar tendency to downplay seemingly important events. After describing a telegram he received notifying him of his mother's death, he immediately says, "That doesn't mean anything." He repeats the sentiment, that the death "didn't mean anything," after meeting Marie as well.

Part I, when read in light of part II, suggests that Meursault is honest when he says he had not premeditated the murder of the Arab and that he had shot the Arab "because of the sun." In particular, the emotional rapport the reader builds with Meursault during part I is integral to the interpretation that part I is an artless chronicle of a few days' events. Because it is written in the first-person perspective, which "usually encourages and even obliges the reader to actively

participate," part I immediately draws us into Meursault's psychology, which is driven and occupied by sensory data.<sup>12</sup> The indexical nature of the "I" used throughout the first half of the novel and the fact that we see everything from Meursault's point of view create the feeling that we have special access to Meursault's mind. Everything we learn about him and his world we learn through his perspective — and it is a part of "commonplace narrative theory" that "an internal perspective best promotes character identification and readers' empathy."<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, we attribute a kind of childlikeness to his delight in the simple sensations of life, so we imagine Meursault as a candid and guileless clerk. (However, there is a repeated give-and-take of sympathy throughout the novel, and from the get-go our sympathy is qualified. The novel starts with a sentence that invites sympathy — "Maman died today" — with the use of a childlike language and the loss of a loved one, but the opening is immediately followed with a calloused "Or yesterday maybe, I don't know." More will be said about these unstable sympathies.)

The sympathy we are induced to feel for Meursault has important implications for the interpretation of the novel. For instance, because we have become acclimated to and even appreciative of Meursault's simplicity, we take Meursault to be telling the truth when he speaks to the court. Lying, especially about one's motives, requires a kind of reflectiveness we have not seen from Meursault; not once does he seem to think about the future or the past. In addition, because the trial concerns the killing and events leading up to it, there is a significant overlap between Meursault's personal account of what happened in part I and what the witnesses recount for the court in part II. As a result, our reaction to the court in part II is framed in terms of what we have encountered in part I through Meursault's perspective.

12. Fitch, "Aesthetic Distance," 280.

13. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, 96. Keen actually points out that existing experimental results suggest such an association of technique and reaction is not robust, but in Meursault's case, the repetition in conjunction with the internal perspective seems to promote empathy.

Repetition also leads the reader to trust Meursault. It is widely recognized that a deliberate repetition is strewn across part I as the sun and its effects on Meursault are mentioned over and over again. The first chapter spans from the telegram to the end of the funeral and packs in quite a few sun references. By the end of the fourteen-page chapter, the reader has repeatedly noticed, in first person, Meursault's sun-related sensations and physiological reactions. His sensitivity to the sun thereby becomes a marked part of Meursault's psychology. Because we witnessed firsthand how Meursault always notices the sun, the reader is prepared to accept the otherwise implausible claims about the power of its effects — including, most importantly, the claim that the sun had overwhelmed Meursault when he shot the Arab.

Part I thus powerfully illustrates the effect the sun has on Meursault, and it is only in this context that Meursault's claims about the sun in part II make sense. Being familiar with Meursault's tendencies prevents us from reacting with disbelief and confusion when he claims the sun had made him shoot the Arab. When Meursault meets with the magistrate, he claims "it was all pretty simple" when repeating the story of "Raymond, the beach, the swim, the quarrel, then back to the beach, the little spring, the sun, and the five shots from the revolver." It is significant that the sun is the last thing to be mentioned before the shots — it is as if the shots came from the sun. Meursault also recounts being asked to defend himself upon the prosecutor's motion for the death penalty: "I blurted out that it was because of the sun. People laughed. My lawyer threw up his hands." It is understandable that the court should laugh; if we were to serve on a jury and heard a man offer the moon as the reason or cause for his crime, we would laugh as well. However, because we had access to a first-person account of how the beach encounter took place, and because we do not believe Meursault capable of lying, we come to interpret his sun claims as genuine in part II. Since Meursault's confessed account of events to the court matches the account we encountered at the end of part I, we assume Meursault to be telling the truth. The way the sun is treated in part II is

impossible to appreciate fully or correctly without Meursault's discussions of the sun in part I.

As mentioned, the reader encounters the novel's events in Meursault's first-person narration. However, the reader "retains [her] awareness as a reader because [s]he cannot come to identify [her]self fully with Meursault."<sup>14</sup> We are forced out of his perspective when we encounter events through his perspective in a way that makes us realize we would have felt or acted differently. For example, we cannot help but notice Meursault's extreme lack of emotional intelligence when he is unable to intuit what Marie is feeling, let alone to say the "right" things, when Marie asks him whether he loves her.

Similarly, the reader is led to both endorse and reject the prosecutor's sentiments regarding Meursault's character. When placed side by side with part I, the judgments of Meursault on offer in part II feel severe. However, part II displays exactly our ordinary way of thinking and living, i.e., a life in which the assignment of meaning to everyday events — as a matter of routine and without any particular difficulty — happens all the time. Part II puts on trial the everyday social and cultural practices we have become accustomed to by pitting them against the new norms we have inhabited through Meursault's consciousness in part I. The feeling of the absurd is induced by having our everyday commitment suddenly alienated from us.

Competing emotions of endorsement and indignation are provoked in the reader when it comes to the prosecutor's portrayal of Meursault, and the cross-temporal dynamic of our reactions together with the tension created by ambivalence are mechanisms through which the feeling of the absurd is induced by *The Stranger*. We sympathize with Meursault's lawyer when he poignantly asks whether Meursault is on trial for shooting a man or for not having cried at his mother's funeral; there seems to be something arbitrary and unjust about making a big fuss of Meursault's emotional reactions. However, we also understand why the court takes recourse to his indifference

14. Fitch, "Aesthetic Distance," 279.

at the funeral to assess his conduct at the beach, which is difficult to understand. We understand the prosecutor's indignation when Marie admits that they had seen a comedy the day after the funeral. The conflicting emotions and judgments regarding both Meursault and the court confuse the readers as to what should be normal, which leads to an internally destabilizing place. The need to make some kind of judgment of Meursault's conduct remains, but the reader is without a satisfactory guide — e.g., a set of values or commitments — as to how the judgment should be made.

A judgment on Meursault is forced because the novel had changed our relation to our own world. Part II comes in with the backdrop of part I and gives us a perspective we lacked before, and therefore our relation to our own sets of values are changed because we see ourselves feeling and reacting differently to things than we would have had we skipped part I. We are genuinely pulled into Meursault's point of view while also feeling the pressure of the unacceptability of that point of view. We are thereby challenged in our comfortable understanding of how legal and social conventions work and pressured to reject the acceptability of these conventional arrangements. Had we not read part I, our agreement with the court in part II would come much more easily and quickly. However, part I destabilizes our allegiance to the legal system by making us feel the court is being unsympathetic. At the same time, while we condemn the prosecutor and the jury, we see that we would have done the same were we in their shoes — thus, we see something partly right about the judgment we find too harsh, and we are caught in a deep ambivalence regarding our opinions of both Meursault and the court. *The Stranger* demands a decision in a sense that we need to decide what relation we want to bear to our own world and values. It is impossible to fully avoid the question; since there has been a change in one's attitude towards one's own way of life, doing nothing would be to accept the change. Ultimately, in *The Stranger*, the need for judgment and the impossibility of making a judgment induce the feeling of the absurd.

#### 4. The Camusian Absurd

The absurd must be experienced firsthand if one is to truly grasp it at all. Because the Camusian absurd stems from the limits of theoretical reasoning, there is a particular sense in which the absurd is better learned by feeling (say, the result of failure of reasoning) than thinking — and a firsthand experience is an effective way to demonstrate what the feeling of the absurd amounts to. In fact, Camus argues that one must feel the absurd before being able to talk about the idea of the absurd; the feeling “lays the foundation” for the notion.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, it is telling, just as Sartre suggested, that Camus published *The Stranger* before *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

The philosophical point of *The Stranger* is in the effect it has on the reader, and emotion is the “point” of a novel; “although a ‘notion’ is usually stated explicitly while a ‘feeling’ is merely suggested, it is hard to see why a thesis may not be contained in a ‘feeling’ just as it can in a ‘notion.’”<sup>16</sup> In the case of *The Stranger*, the feeling of the absurd is right there, so to speak, since it is born out of the conflicting emotions and commitments the reader feels. This has important implications for the “correct” or “intended” way to engage with *The Stranger*: what one needs to really *get* the absurd is not an argument but a certain feeling — and so to fail to feel that something is amiss while reading the novel is to miss the point of the novel.

In this way, the absurd is a tension, so an aesthetic treatment of it should have a similar character. “Belief in the meaning of life,” Camus writes, “always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences,” while belief in the absurd discards value judgments.<sup>17</sup> *The Stranger* makes us alienated from our own scale of values, choices, and preferences, and in this sense, our “chain of daily gestures is broken” while reading.<sup>18</sup> The absurd is seeing that one's life takes place in a “measure-

15. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 515.

16. Brombert, “Camus,” 119–120.

17. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 541.

18. *Ibid.*, 541.

less universe,” and immersing in the world of *The Stranger* gives us a taste of what it is like to question all our standards as arbitrary.<sup>19</sup>

For Camus, the absurd is a special human predicament that arises from our need for meaning and coherence being unmet. We cannot help but crave meaning, but the concepts or reasons with which we understand those meanings are often lost. R. Jay Wallace writes that meaning in life centers around things that are “intrinsically worthwhile, and hence capable of being acknowledged interpersonally as meriting our interest and attention.”<sup>20</sup> What Wallace and Camus question is the degree to which meaning-giving values or activities are intrinsically worthwhile, i.e., worthwhile in a way their meaningfulness cannot be doubted. When we see that the meanings we project onto the world are arbitrary (i.e., not inherent), or that there are aspects of the universe that simply defy our attempts to make sense of things, we face the absurd. Despite the impossibility of making judgments that we can be satisfied with in this condition, not making judgments is not an option either, because “living, and eating, for example, are in themselves value judgments” insofar as choosing to remain alive is to “recognize that life has at least a relative value.”<sup>21</sup> The philosophical question, Camus argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, has to do with suicide because living requires practical answers to value-laden questions we often lack the resources to respond to — and even when we do manage to respond, we can have no expectation that these responses truly reflect the world.

The feeling of the absurd generated in *The Stranger*, dynamically created by our experience of the need to judge Meursault yet being unable to do so, parallels this aspect of our need to see the world as rational yet being confronted with an indifferent universe as laid out in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The absurdity involved in our experience of *The Stranger* is also like the absurdity involved in *reductio ad absurdum*

proofs in that we find ourselves with two mutually incompatible conceptions of Meursault’s character. *Reductio* proofs lead us to reject a prior assumption in order to avoid a contradiction, and *The Stranger* makes us question the prior (practical) assumptions we have made regarding societal values and practices in order to avoid having contradictory judgments about Meursault. We cannot reject either of our reactions to Meursault — that he is a hapless clerk who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time or that he’s a soulless monster — until we have rejected an assumption that is their common source. This assumption, however, is our everyday way of living, and so rejecting this “assumption” outright is near impossible. Thus the tension — the aesthetic correlate of the absurd — remains.

The crucial element of the novel that undermines any basis on which we might judge Meursault is the mutually reinforcing relationship between parts I and II. Part I normalizes Meursault, whereas part II normalizes the court, and the absurd is “lived” as the reader feels disoriented from being pulled in incompatible directions. It is noteworthy that Meursault is accused of parricide by the prosecutor. The father figure, according to psychologist Erich Neumann, is an archetype of law and tradition,<sup>22</sup> which suggests that the court condemns Meursault for undermining the sets of values we live by.<sup>23</sup> The court tries to counteract Meursault — or lawlessness — by imposing their own ways of thinking, but the reader comes to feel that the court’s values are arbitrary and its reasoning harsh. It is interesting to note that every major novel written by Camus includes a character who has a negative experience with a court: In *The Stranger*, Meursault is condemned to death by the court; in *The Plague (La Peste)*, Tarrou begins his lifelong campaign against the death penalty after a traumatic observation of his father as a prosecutor; and in *The Fall (La Chute)*, Clamence was once a prominent defense lawyer who now considers himself the “judge-penitent.” Camus’s interest was also motivated by his experience as a

19. Ibid., 510.

20. Wallace, *View from Here*, 196.

21. Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 160.

22. Neumann, *Origins and History*, 140.

23. Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 87.

court reporter, not to mention his commitment to justice through his involvement with Algeria.<sup>24</sup> Given his deep involvement with the law, perhaps it is unsurprising that Camus uses our practical commitment to legal reasoning and procedures to generate the feeling of the absurd.

It is surely not the case that every instance of ambivalence leads to the feeling of the absurd. However, there is more than emotional ambivalence at stake in *The Stranger*. More specifically, in *The Stranger*, we are led to feel ambivalent about things we believe we should not feel ambivalent about. There is an intuition that we cannot afford to be ambivalent about guilt or punishment because there are lasting consequences, or because they concern matters we otherwise take quite seriously. In addition, the very values on which we base our assessment of Meursault are questioned, and we are alienated from our everyday ways of living. *The Myth of Sisyphus* constantly refers to the “practical assent and simulated ignorance which allows us to live with ideas which, if we truly put them to the test, ought to upset our whole life.”<sup>25</sup> Feelings no doubt can be left mixed — but the need to make judgments and the impossibility of making a satisfactory judgment induce the absurd in *The Stranger*.

I also do not mean to imply that every two-part novel shows, let alone generates, the feeling of the absurd. After all, many fictional works have a two-part formal arrangement, yet not all those novels address the absurd nor intend to. *The Stranger* makes specific use of the two-part structure by giving us a perspective by the end of part I that will come in tension with the perspective we *would have* read part II with had we not read part I.

### 5. Reading *The Stranger* with the Wrong Notion of the Absurd

Unlike Sartre’s account, my account of *The Stranger* explains not only the indispensability of part II but also the vital role parts I and II play in relation to each other. Though Sartre notes the difference between

parts I and II, he misses the way they interact to create the need for judgment and show the impossibility of making the judgment. In Sartre’s reading of *The Stranger*, it is unclear what part II has to add to the aim of the novel. If the feeling of the absurd is shown or generated through meanings being filtered out or the reader being “brought face-to-face with simple reality” or encountering “the amorphous, everyday flow of reality,” it seems that part I would be sufficient.<sup>26</sup> A reading that leaves unaccounted the latter half of a novel — arguably the more complex and rich half — cannot be an adequate reading.

The Sartrean analysis of *The Stranger* indicates a fundamental disagreement between Sartre and Camus regarding the nature of the absurd, and understanding their divergence makes it clear that Sartre read *The Stranger* with his own conception of the absurd in mind. For Sartre, the absurd is a beginning point that can be overcome with imposition of meaning, a real but abstract problem that human activity can allay. For Camus, however, the absurd is an inescapable predicament, a “sum total of human existence,” the “beginning and the end.”<sup>27</sup> This key difference separated Camus from the existentialists, and it was noted early on; Francis Jeanson, whose review of *The Rebel* catalyzed the Camus-Sartre fallout, wrote that “Sartre thought humans could in some way overcome absurdity, whereas Camus insisted on its centrality to all human experience.”<sup>28</sup> According to Camus, the existentialists “cheat” because their philosophies begin and end at different places, i.e., they transition from a thesis of meaninglessness to one of freedom, (subjective) meaning, and responsibility. For Camus, the fact that we can endow the world with meaning does not mitigate the problem of the absurd; any meaning that we bestow onto some feature of the world would still be arbitrary, and those features will again “lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them.”<sup>29</sup> A “lucid”

26. Sartre, “Commentary,” 87.

27. Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 43.

28. Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, 138.

29. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 504.

24. Guerin, “Camus the Journalist,” 80.

25. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 507.

mind sees the ad hoc nature of all meaning, whether unconsciously or consciously bestowed.

Sartre's and Camus's differing conceptions of the absurd explain why Sartre sees meaning-filtering as Camus's main strategy for conveying the feeling of the absurd. In Sartre's *Nausea*, it is only when the mind is confronted with existence that has no rational basis, when reason cannot explain why a certain tree trunk exists in the manner it does, that the absurd arises. For Sartre, the inability to explain existence is the experience of the absurd; the root is striking because it "existed in such a way that [Roquentin] could not explain it," its properties and functions "below all explanation."<sup>30</sup> We see this idea repeated in Sartre's interpretation of *The Stranger* when he argues that "our inability to conceive, using our concepts and our words, what occurs in the world" is "the source of the feeling of the absurd."<sup>31</sup> The fact that the notion of absurdity in *Nausea* becomes the notion of contingency in *Being and Nothingness* — that humans and things are simply there with no explanation or reason — shows the theoretical (as opposed to practical) underpinning of the Sartrean absurd.<sup>32</sup> "Chance, death, the irreducible pluralism of life and of truth, the unintelligibility of the real — all these are extremes of the absurd," Sartre writes, each example highlighting our inability to answer "why" questions regarding chance, death, the myriad lives and truths, the seeming unreachability of the real.

Sartre also believes there is only relative absurdity in reality. For him, the absurd is not a global phenomenon but rather isolated and contingent phenomena arising from a temporary loss of meaning because he thinks meaningful links are parts of experience (so that filtering them out is a lie). This is why he focuses on the glass partition analogy: when we see people talk behind a glass, the natural interpretation is not that meaning is absent but that meaning is epistemically unreachable for the time being because we lack an encompassing

30. Sartre, *Nausea*, 129.

31. Sartre, "Commentary," 86.

32. Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 57.

context. According to Sartre, the meaning of an action is settled by the network of meaningful connections to other actions, and the failure to organize one's experience in a way that enables one to understand it leads to the absurd. Meaning is drained from things when we are no longer practically engaged.

To see how the Camusian absurd differs, we should revisit the passage Sartre is responding to: the first time Camus mentions the glass partition and alludes to Sartre. After talking about the "denseness and the strangeness of the world" that arises from it "becom[ing] itself again" — that is, stripped of endowed meaning — Camus turns to humans and writes:

Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. This discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this "nausea," as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd.<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to note that Camus's take on the glass partition metaphor highlights the subject's *lucidity*, and not failure, that leads to the recognition of the absurd. It should also be noted that people's gestures are seen as "meaningless pantomime" even when they're not inside a telephone booth. Lastly, meaningless actions make silly neither the actors nor their gestures, but "everything that surrounds them." Though it would be fascinating to develop his thoughts further, I should highlight the main point, which is that in Camus's original passage, the glass partition does not stand for a situation in which we are alienated from a context that would give us meaning. For Camus, the glass partition is a generalized metaphor for interpreting others'

33. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 504.

actions without meaningful standards. And Sartre, again, assumes that causality and meaningful links are normal parts of reality as we experience it and thus writes that the world of *The Stranger* is “carefully stripped of its causality and presented as absurd.”<sup>34</sup> This is consistent with the fact that he treats absurdity as a mere starting point of his own philosophy, something from which the philosopher can move on and propose a solution for. Thus, Sartre thinks absolute absurdity can only be found in the realm of art (which can admit untruths): “there are only relative absurdities that exist solely in relation to ‘absolute rationalities.’ However, we are dealing with a matter of not honesty, but of art.”<sup>35</sup>

Sartre’s treatment of the absurd as a beginning point also predisposes him to think that the absurd is something presentable, something which already exists for human consciousness to stumble upon, and something that the human mind can move on from. This is why he talks about the feeling of the absurd being shown (i.e., not generated from scratch). When he writes that *The Stranger* “plunges us without comment into the ‘climate’ of the absurd,” Sartre suggests the absurd is already in the novel, waiting for the reader’s consciousness to reach it.<sup>36</sup> He compares the absurd to a certain landscape, already laid out to be seen. However, this understanding of the absurd, too, is in tension with Camus’s description. Camus repeatedly states that the absurd is neither in humans nor in the world but in their presence together.<sup>37</sup> This emphasis is deliberate as Camus sought to distance himself from Sartre and his view that the absurd has “one sole meaning” that is “the inexplicable and unjustified existence” of things.<sup>38</sup> The Camusian absurd goes beyond the mystery of existence; it challenges our ability to live coherently because it arises from our meaning-giving concepts

34. Sartre, “Commentary,” 97.

35. *Ibid.*, 91.

36. *Ibid.*, 85.

37. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 517, 506.

38. Sagi, *Albert Camus*, 56.

and practices becoming impotent. Though we can distract ourselves from clearly seeing the absurd, admitting our inability to supply the kind of essential and non-arbitrary meaning in our lives keeps us plunged in the absurd. We have no theoretical answer to the practical questions “How ought I to act?” or “How ought I to live?” and we cannot help *but* act and live as long as we are alive, so there is no moving beyond the Camusian absurd in which we face questions neither reason nor the world can answer.

For Camus, because the absurd is not “out there” as a readily available feature of the world, the absurd must be “discovered” by each individual.<sup>39</sup> To personally discover the absurd is to experience the impossibility of fulfilling a need, and *The Stranger* induces the discovery of the absurd by producing in the reader deeply ambivalent emotions and judgments. *The Stranger* thus goes beyond representing the absurd by, in an important sense, genuinely creating the absurd. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that *The Stranger cannot* represent the absurd because the absurd has no independent existence to be represented. Instead, Camus allows the reader to discover the absurd by inducing her to *feel* the absurd first.

## 6. Conclusion

Camus and Sartre’s philosophical differences affected the way they understood each other’s literary works, and more specifically, Sartre didn’t quite understand how Camus generated the feeling of the absurd in *The Stranger* because his conception of the absurd differed from that of Camus.

For Sartre, the absurd is a breakdown of one’s engagement with the world, a kind of theoretical and practical failure. For Camus, the absurd is a way of being clear-eyed about reality and is thus a kind of philosophical success. Examining together Camus’s and Sartre’s works as philosophers, novelists, and literary critics helps us gain a nuanced understanding of both their philosophies and their literary works. It

39. *Ibid.*, 592.

also challenges the conventional ways of relating philosophy and literature. Usually, “literature is placed in the role of supplying concrete, sensual images, of providing the content to the abstract truths that philosophy distills,” while philosophy is “given the task of revealing the general principles underlying particular instances.”<sup>40</sup> However, this division of labor fails to account for how formal aspects of literature, such as parthood, contribute to an adequate explanation of philosophical concepts.

*The Stranger* is an example of literature providing the only viable way to fully introduce a philosophical concept. Since the Camusian absurd is a lived tension at its core, theoretical explanation alone (i.e., what we find in *The Myth of Sisyphus*) would be incomplete. Camus uses *The Stranger* to elicit firsthand the phenomenon his philosophy concerns.<sup>41</sup> Generating the feeling of the absurd is not merely ornamental, or something done for art’s sake. The immediate experience of the feeling of the absurd is the only way to fully grasp the Camusian absurd, so *The Stranger* plays an indispensable role as both philosophy and art. *The Stranger* is an instance of a literary work “explaining itself” as “both the communicating vehicle and the thing to be communicated.”<sup>42</sup> The novel is “the instrument of that simultaneously relative and inexhaustible knowledge,” relative because each reader has to experience the absurd for herself and inexhaustible because words will only gesture towards, but never fully describe, the absurd.<sup>43</sup> The Camusian absurd had to be induced, not shown or told, and *The Stranger*, through its literary devices, makes this possible.

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42. Brombert, “Camus,” 121.

43. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 575.

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