EXISTENTIAL REVOLT IN ALBERT CAMUS’S “THE RENEGADE”

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses existential revolt in Albert Camus’s short story “The Renegade”, showing the stages that pushed the protagonist of the story to the rebellious edge where he was desperately searching for “a happy death” to add a meaning to all his sufferings and misfortune. We aim at examining the existential death wish as an escape from the world of meaninglessness in Camus’s fictional work. The Missionary in the story finds closure through death like a martyr who saved the savages from turning into “good people.” The story explicates the absurdity of religious faith by linking religion to suicide and death, and thus meaninglessness and suffering. The story, we argue, dramatizes Camus’s philosophical engagement with the question of death in terms of a rejection of philosophical death as religion, a rejection of physical death as suicide, and then an embrace of rebellion, revenge, and revolt leading to a happy death. This way, meaning is found not in religion as a leap of faith or in passive suicide but rather in a happy acceptance of suffering and destructive behavior as revolt against meaninglessness.

Key words: Existentialism, Death Wish, Camus, “The Renegade”, French Literature, Religion, Suicide, Revolt, Defiance

1. INTRODUCTION: DEATH AND SUICIDE

Being unstable, confused and suicidal could be a conclusion of living under violence, injustice and cruelty. In that case, man is left up with nothing except looking for a way out. This exit may be fulfilled through having a wish to die, whether in killing or committing suicide, to put a closure to all confusion and misery. Actually, death is a philosophical question par excellence. However, it is also a lived reality for those who undergo its thrones or those who witness dying from a close distance. Commenting on our occupation with death, the critic Lois Tyson argues that “Taken to its logical extreme, this relationship to death will result in suicide. My intense fear of losing my life makes living so painful and frightening that my only escape is death” (23). Sometimes, however, death could leave this invisible touch of happiness on the confused mind, the renegade.

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example, he wrote against capital punishment and public execution from a social, ethical stance. In his 1957 essay "Reflections on the Guillotine", Camus considers it "useless" and "definitely harmful" (Resistance 134) because human nature is not stable and this punishment itself is not intimidating. Therefore, he condemns it as a form of "revenge" (Resistance 150). In this article, we are concerned, however, with death wish as an existential reaction to the encounter with the absurd, irrational universe.

Existentialism, as a 20th-century philosophy and true to its name, focuses on the analysis of existence and on the way humans find themselves existing in the world. It is often associated with S. Kierkegaard, K. Jaspers, M. Heidegger, J. P. Sartre, G. Marcel, and many others. In literature, existential philosophy can be found in the work F. Kafka, S. Beckett, F. Dostoyevski, S. de Beauvoir, among others. Although this philosophy was shaped through the 20th century, its roots can be traced over 3000 years ago in the thought of ancient philosophers like Socrates, who motivated man to cherish his uniqueness and his individuality by ‘knowing himself’. The Stoic and the Epicurean philosophers of the Hellenistic period pursued the meaning of existence of mankind to help them achieve happiness here and now and in the hereafter, primarily focusing their attention on ethical questions and discovering the proper way to live one’s life.

Knowing that ‘life without meaning is intolerable’, the existentialists seek to find the real meaning behind man’s existence, which is more a matter of decision than of discovery. But, of course, one is not making these choices blindly and without criteria. Death wish, or suicide, falls under freedom of choice when in death only one can achieve meaning and true happiness if he was trapped in a world of meaninglessness, isolation, violence and despair (Solomon, 2006). In that case, whether life is or is not worth living, death is the end of life, and life itself is a ‘race which daily hastens us toward death’ (Camus, Myth of Sisyphus 7). After all, pain is the other side of life just as death is the other side of pleasure. Sigmund Freud in Civilization and its Discontents argues that civilized life is based on the renunciation of instincts like sex and aggression/destruction in service of culture, which Freud called “Eros” and the “death instinct” (73). This aggressive instinct for Freud is “an innate, independent, instinctual disposition in man” (74). Death is the other side of life, a force responsible for much of our unconscious behavior. It might be ironic to see the aim of life as death, but the truth is that life does move toward death. As human beings, we progress toward death with each day that passes in our lives and as we get older.

This article aims at examining the existential death wish as an escape from the world of meaninglessness and as an ultimate form of revolt in Camus’s short story “The Renegade”. The analysis will be divided into three main sections focusing on the major character in the story, the Missionary, with a deep analysis of the first phase of his mission, the triggers of his death wish and, finally, the second phase of his life after being a victim of extreme torture. We link suicide as death wish to religion as a futile endeavor the Missionary easily shifts without serious conviction. The argument shows that the story dramatizes Camus’s philosophical engagement with the question of death in the form of a rejection of self-murder as passive suicide, a rejection of religion as a response to meaninglessness, and finally a move toward murder and revolt and an embrace of a happy death. In other words, the story—in an existential fashion—dramatizes a rejection of philosophical death (religion), a rejection of physical death (suicide), and finally an embrace of the absurd through revolt, defiance, hatred, and a happy acceptance of death.

2. IN THE GUTTER SEARCHING FOR THE SUN

The narrator of the story is the protagonist himself. He is telling the story in flashbacks without any rational order of the events and within a confessional vein. Towards the beginning of the story, the Missionary is impatiently waiting in the desert for the other missionary that will take his place in Taghása, a city where he was sent earlier to promote Christianity as the true faith to the citizens, who are atheists and worship a Fetish god: “go out to the savages and tell them: “Here is my Lord, just look at him, he never strikes or kills, he issues his orders in a low voice, he turns the other cheek, he’s the greatest of masters” (Exile and the Kingdom 36). When the Missionary went through his journey, he was a believer in the Christian God; yet he wanted to be eccentric in order to be noticed in his busy society, even if he was punished:

I went out of my way for punishments, I groused at the normal, in short I too wanted to be an example in order to be noticed and so that after noticing me people would give credit to what had made me better, through me praise my Lord. (our emphasis; Exile and the Kingdom 37)

The Missionary was forced to witness savageness just as Camus did. He was just a normal man in a world that was meant to be plain and normal. The Missionary had a family in his home land, and he left them behind for a ‘good cause’ which is trying to find the sun he has always been dreaming of. Regardless of the risk of his mission, he, like many philosophers, “realized that life does not follow the continuous flow of logical argument and that one often has to risk moving beyond the limits of the rational in order to live life to the fullest” (Flynn, 2006). He wanted to escape the prison of his family to pursue a better life where snow and cold wind do not exist:

When I was home on that high plateau of the Massif Central, my coarse father, my boorish mother, the wine, the pork soup every day, the wine above all, sour and cold, and the long winter, the frigid wind, the snowdrifts, the revolting bracken—oh, I wanted to get away, leave them all at once and begin to live at last, in the sunlight, with fresh water. (Exile and the Kingdom 35)

The Missionary knew that he will be sent to savage people, where he would be tortured and offended, but he wanted to go there to prove that he has a free will even in being offended, whether in his ‘normal’ society by

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the “girls in the cotton dresses”, or by the savages. From an existential point of view: “it is likely that decisions to live or die, especially in contexts of interminable suffering and a sense of indignity, will become more personal” (Davies, 2005). In rejecting the banal everyday life he used to live, the Missionary is enacting a revolutionary and defiant lifestyle. In other words, he is acting “heroically” as an existential character. At the same time, he is still driven by a belief in the power of religion as a way out of meaninglessness. From an existential viewpoint, the Missionary finds that his life has no meaning for him except as he can create meaning through bravely acting on this life (Harmon & Holman 203).

The Missionary was indifferent for the offence he might get; in fact, he saw it vital to his success: “They would offend me, of course, but I was not afraid of offenses, they were essential to the demonstration, and as a result of the way I endured them I’d get the upper hand of those savages like a strong sun” (Exile and the Kingdom 39). The Missionary was theorizing his survival methodology as if he was quoting Spinoza: “To live alone one must be either a beast or a god, says Aristotle. Leaving out the third case: one must be both – a philosopher” (Flynn, 2006). In fact, the Missionary can be seen as negotiating death as fear of abandonment by trying to relate to the tribal people. Socializing with the tribal people is supposed to give meaning to the Missionary’s otherwise banal life just as religion and the spirit of adventure “supposedly” do.

The Missionary was on his way to the city of salt, where everything looks white but sharp in taste. It is like the underworld where Sisyphus was stuck for the rest of his life rolling a stone to the top of a mountain as his punishment. The space around the Missionary was just a “hollow desert”, with a fierce sun that makes his life even more miserable. The Missionary had a great love to earth; he wanted to leave his cold country to live under a warm sun. Like Sisyphus condemned by gods to carry out hopeless labor, he comes to the same conclusion and enacts absurd heroism. What Camus says of Sisyphus can also be said of the Missionary: “Sisyphus acts absurd heroism, but without the “scorn” of the gods at this stage: “His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth” (Myth of Sisyphus 89). Such an encounter with an alien surroundings and heathen people makes the Missionary question the value of religion and the purpose of his life. The Missionary’s vocation as a man of religion justifies his being, but it will also—paradoxically though—cause him to suffer punishment. The next section shows how the Missionary’s “élan vital” and attachment to life and religion begin to be countered by a death-wish once he is subjected to torture and before he acts in defiance at the end of the story.

3. THE STRAW THAT BROKE THE CAMEL’S BACK

Collective violence can be defined as the individuals’ engagement in violent activities at a group or institutional level such as riots, revolutions, and gang warfare which are typically viewed as local events, tied to a specific cause or geographical region. The Missionary is like an outsider to the inhabitants of Taghaza; that is why they are aggressive to him; later on, his mental and psychological wellbeing are highly jeopardized. Added to this state are his shaken moral identity and the leap of his spirituality. David Carroll argues that the Missionary is equally violent and mad, just like the natives, as he is “already devoted absolutely to an absolute Truth” (125). Both parties can be accused of extremism and madness as a result just as the story shows the overlap between politics and religion and the terror/madness associated with them (Carroll 125).

The Missionary, against the warning of his mentor, arrived knowing that he will be offended, but he never imagined how severely he was punished: “it wasn’t the city of salt, the white walls under the blinding sun that struck me in his account, but the cruelty of the savage inhabitants” (Exile and the Kingdom 38). He did not have that death wish prior to severe punishment. He was chained, beaten and imprisoned for nothing; he could not say a word because he was not speaking their language, and they do not understand him either, which caused more tension and anxiety for both parties leading to a severe non-stop violence: “oh yes, they’re like the sun that never stops, except at night, beating sharply and proudly, that is beating me hard at this moment, too hard, with a multitude of lances burst from the ground” (Exile and the Kingdom 40). This excessive violence heightens the absurd side of the story and triggers a shift toward a new phase in the existential makeup of the story.

Freud treated death as a self-destructive drive he called Thanatos (Tyson 22). This destructive drive as obsession with killing or resignation to death is a case of the death drive Freud elaborated. Initially, the Missionary finds meaning to his life in being abused and exposed. Paradoxically though, the futility of his task as a missionary exposes the meaninglessness of what justifies his life, his vocation as a man of religion. Should he, then, commit suicide or accept the futility of religion and live with it or transform it to a new end? Should he wait to be killed by the natives? This is the absurd crux of the story.

Aside from physical punishment, the Missionary was also forced to worship the Fetish god. The Sorcerer came in his prison with some female dancers and took him to the House of the Fetish. Even though he was in a great deal of pain, he was a vivid observer of what is going on around him, as if he were interested in what happens on this earth. Despite life’s absurdity, the Missionary has not abandoned his instinct to exist yet:

Suddenly appeared the Sorcerer with his raffia hair, his chest covered with a breastplate of pearls, his legs bare under a straw skirt […] and women wearing heavy motley gowns that […] I turned around and saw the Fetish, his double ax-head, his iron nose twisted like a snake. I was carried before him, to the foot of the pedestal, I was made to drink black, bitter, bitter water, and at once my head began to burn, I was laughing, that’s the offense, I have been offended. (Exile and the Kingdom 46)
The greatest punishment the Missionary got was cutting his tongue, because he touched the girl that the Sorcerer placed in front of him in the House of the Fetish. Everything he had encountered before that moment was absurd and a reason to laugh at, but this was not a joke at all. Life’s absurdity shocked the Missionary when he desperately tried to give a meaning to his existence, to find a reason to cling to life regardless of what he has been through; he resorted to the physical pleasure as compensation to his sufferings, as a meaning to this life after all:

the Sorcerer was lying in wait for me, they all entered and tore me from the woman, beat me dreadfully on the sinful place, what sin, I’m laughing, where is it and where is virtue, they clapped me against a wall, a hand of steel gripped my jaws, another opened my mouth, pulled on my tongue until it bled, was it I screaming with that bestial scream, a cool cutting caress, yes cool at last, went over my tongue. (Exile and the Kingdom 53-54)

Although the Missionary found some relief when he thought he was going to die, he could not accept the fact that another missionary will come over to take his place without paying for it: “and the fellow who was to come would not have his tongue cut out, he would show off his insolent goodness without paying for it, without enduring any offense” (Exile and the Kingdom 57). That was the straw that broke the camel’s back and changed the Missionary’s life; because the city is willing to accept outsiders now, who would come in to their city without being stopped or offended? The Missionary now enters a new stage of rebellion and hatred, what we can label as “existential revolt.” He does not want the “savages” to become nice, friendly or even Christian because he believes that all his past life was absurd, and now he finally got a meaning for his existence throughout his journey in the city of the savages. He is now a servant of the Fetish god, a killer and a suicidal man. In fact, the shift in his faith indicates how what used to give meaning to his life got easily and absurdly replaced by another religion, for there is no meaning in difference. This Missionary, after all, is not leading an authentic life justified by religion. He deserts Christ and comes to believe, instead, that the Fetish and hatred are the only good powers operating in the world. He wants to be punished and oppressed so that he can retaliate. In brief, the Missionary is now rejecting both religion and death as exits out of existential dilemma. He is transformed into an anti-Christ seeking revenge or a happy death.

4. THE LAST RESORT

The Missionary now has a new mission to do; he wants to find a meaning for all this absurdity and nonsense; he is looking for freedom through violent death. To him, he has no better way to achieve all this except by revenge and hatred, i.e. through existential revolt: “A wicked hope consumes me, I want to betray, I lick the barrel of my gun and its soul inside, its soul, only guns have souls—oh, yes! The day they cut out my tongue, I learned to adore the immortal soul of hatred!” (Exile and the Kingdom 51) The ultimate goal that he waits impatiently to fulfill is killing the new Missionary to come to Taghasa. Now that he rejected the religious institution he used to represent and refused to take off his own life, thus rejecting different forms of suicide (philosophical death as religion and physical death as suicide), he is ready to rebel.

One of the consequences of the Missionary’s misfortune in Taghasa was the leap of his faith. According to one critic, leap of faith is defined as “a leap from the edge of certainty, beyond where knowledge and reason can take me. It’s about embracing something I can only hope is true, envisioning something I can’t see” (Beal 213). The Missionary no longer appreciates Christianity because it did not give much meaning to him while he was searching for one. Although he was beaten, tormented and severely tortured for the sake of the Fetish god, he could find a meaning and significance for their actions; the Fetish people act of an invincible power aided by evil deeds and intentions that force other people to embrace their religion: “Yes, the Fetish alone has power, he is the sole god of this world, hatred is his commandment, the source of all life, the cool water, cool like mint that chills the mouth and burns the stomach” (Exile and the Kingdom 55). Instead of accepting Christianity as the only religion and thus opting for philosophical death, he comes to embrace a new pagan religion, thus choosing another form of philosophical suicide for a short while and before he resigns this new faith all together.

By way of moving beyond religion as a leap of faith out of meaninglessness or a passive acceptance of suicide, the Missionary decides on rebellion and defiance; he wants to kill the other Missionary who is to come to Taghasa because “there would be doubt again, again time would be wasted dreaming of the impossible good” (Exile and the Kingdom 58). Evil can only be the dominant, not the false dreams of goodness sold by Christianity. The Missionary has the power now; he is one of the savages who would kill anything that stops evil from being the dominant of the world, even if it costs him his life. His new vision is that of violence and murder.

The Missionary wanted to die when his tongue was cut off. He experienced a death-wish and found in death his own salvation and tranquility: “I wanted to rise, I fell back, happy, and desperately happy to die at last, death too is cool and its shadow hides no god” (Exile and the Kingdom 53). Having a wish to die is basically an acknowledgement of the absurd, just as religion, in Camus’s thought, is a refusal to acknowledge absurdity. In killing like a god who controls life and death, and in dying like a martyr, the Missionary grasped the significance of his existence; he knew exactly what he must do to die happily, and that is when:

“All youth will die out, and dumb crowds with shackled feet will plod beside me in the worldwide desert under the cruel sun of the true faith, I’ll not be alone […] I’m laughing, I love the blow that nails me down crucified.” (Exile and the Kingdom 60)
The Missionary hails death with masochistic thoughts about receiving punishment with laughter and love. We imagine him happy in death just as we "must imagine Sisyphus happy" (The Myth of Sisyphus 91) in his death in life and triumphant over the futile task that dominates his life. His realization of the absurdity of his life and his acceptance of such absurdity make him a heroic figure like Sisyphus. Camus in "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1943; trans. 1955) begins a crucial philosophical engagement with the problem of suicide because absence of meaning in life makes suicide a pressing issue to consider. Coming to the realization that life is devoid of value entails that it is not worth living. If we live it despite this realization, it is because of an act of revolt and defiance, by fully living despite life's absurd nature. Sisyphus in the famous myth moves beyond nihilism and lives despite the frustrating task that seems to invite death and suicide. Camus explores the relationship between "the absurd and suicide" (5). Should people faced with the meaninglessness of life opt for hope or suicide? Camus links the absurd with God and the existence (25). "The absurd, which is the metaphysical state of the conscious man, does not lead to God" (30). He describes the "existential attitude" as "philosophical suicide" (31). Here Camus views religion as a form of suicide because it entails giving up the absurd nature of this life and finding hope and meaning in God. Camus is not exactly existential if we consider his philosophy as one asserting rather than denying life (Raskin, para. 20). In the story, it is religion that causes the Missionary to suffer and get tortured. Thus, murdering the new missionary can be seen as one “positive” form of revolt (Raskin, para. 9). While confronted with the absurd, one can opt for religion "philosophical suicide" or death “physical suicide” but the option Camus offers is acceptance and embracing life, which is why we can imagine Sisyphus happy ("Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy"). Revolt and violence/murder are forms of heroically defying the absurd and courageously confronting it. Whether the Missionary is happy to accept death as a martyr or if he is ready to bring death to his rivals, he is moving beyond the existential problem one faces as a result of absurd circumstances that necessitate suicide or religion.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the existential death wish in Camus’ short story “The Renegade”, showing the stages that pushed the protagonist of the story to the edge where he was desperately searching for “a happy death” to add a meaning to all his sufferings and unfortunate existence. Here was the closure the Missionary was looking for, to die like a martyr who saved the savages from turning into “good people.” In Christianity, he could not find any tangible meaning for “goodness” and “love”, but he could “concretely” sense and “feel” what evil and pain are like. Consequently, being a slave for the Fetish god inspired him with the reason behind existence: to kill, to stop goodness from being the dominant force and to die for what he believes in. He wanted to die “nobly” as if he was applying what Alexander Smith said: “If you wish to make a man look noble, your best course is to kill him. What superiority he may have inherited from his race, what superiority nature may have personally gifted him with, comes out in death.” (our emphasis) A noble death is a heroic one, a defiant death rather than a passive one. In this sense, a defiant death is the ultimate form of a revolt enduring an absurd life with meaning.

Camus was not a Christian believer either; he witnessed the savageness of World Wars, and he could not find a “Higher Divine Reason” behind all that torture and death. Maybe Camus himself had a death wish; he did not really care when or how to die, and it seems that his wish came true when he died in a car accident when he was just 47 years old:

“What difference could they make to me, the deaths of others, or a mother’s love, or his God, or the way a man chooses to live, the fate he thinks he chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to ‘choose’ not only me but billions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brother... Every man alive was privileged; there was only one class of man, the privileged class. All alike would be condemned to die one day” (Camus, The Stranger).

The Missionary, as an existential hero of defiance, is similar to other characters in Camus's fiction. For example, Dunwoodie argues that Meursault in The Outsider lives and acts within a different system of values whereby past and future lack meaning and life is robbed of morality (xix). Upon his approaching death after he is tried for murder, he wishes to have a big crowd of people attend his execution and meet him with cries of hatred. For Dunwoodie, Meursault is a “stoical anti-hero” (xxv). Meursault is somewhat similar to the Missionary in the story under discussion. He is liberated at death and elated at his sense of indifference and the indifference around him. He realizes that he was always happy. The end of the novel is not surprising: "For the final consumption and for me to feel less lonely, my last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that they should greet me with cries of hatred (113). The Missionary too comes to believe in the power of hatred and disowns Christ. And as an anti-Christ, he becomes the antithesis of goodness. His attempts at the end to revert back to Christianity fail. This, in turn, proves the inadequacy of his religious fanaticism and foregrounds rebellion against social, religious, and ethical norms as the story’s main theme.

REFERENCES
