

Research on the Relationship Between The Outsider and Existentialism

Yushan Gao^{1,a,*}

¹Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, Henan, 450001, China

a. 1561773526@qq.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: As a masterpiece of existentialist literature, *The Outsider* occupies an important position in the literary genre and offers profound insights into the nature of human existence. Based on the literature review and qualitative analysis, this article explores the existentialist qualities of loneliness, alienation and free choice shown in *The Outsider*. The article affirms the work's inheritance of the existentialist literary tradition, by emphasizing the meaninglessness of individual existence, the weight of free choice, and the portrayal of a dystopian world. It also delves deeply into the evolution and innovation of existentialism, with a particular focus on narrative techniques and characterization. For example, it challenges traditional morality through the protagonist Meursault's indifference and employs a minimalist style to reinforce existentialist themes and enhances the communication of existentialist ideas within the text.

Keywords: the *Outsider*, existentialist literature, Camus, Meursault, free choice.

1. Introduction

Existentialist literature is an important literary genre that has attracted the attention of countless readers since its inception with its in-depth exploration of themes such as individual existence, free choice, and absurdity. The development of this literary tradition, from early figures like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard to middle period writers like Sartre and Camus, and on to many later period authors, has formed a rich and expansive literary vein. Within this tradition, *The Outsider* has blossomed in history with its unique artistic appeal and profound ideological connotations. In Sartre's existentialist philosophy, the world is deemed "absurd". According to his viewpoint, not only is the emergence of man himself accidental, but the existence of all things in the world is accidental and unpredictable. Due to the domination of chance, the objective existence becomes meaningless, and life becomes meaningless as well. And this sense of meaninglessness ultimately leads to an overwhelming feeling of nothingness and absurdity [1].

The Outsider is considered one of the major works of the French writer Albert Camus, a typical representative of existentialist literature. Existentialist literature is a prominent school of literary thought that gained popularity in France, Europe, and America during the 20th century. It encompasses various branches, with atheistic existentialism being the most significant one, as exemplified by the works of Sartre and Camus [2].

The work depicts the protagonist's cold stare at his environment, arising from his own posture as *The Outsider*, from the experience of strangeness to the world. The man is completely disconnected

from his surroundings: he is a stranger to his own existence. The world around him is of no relevance to him, and the world regards the being as *The Outsider* [3].

The purpose of this paper is to explore how *The Outsider* embodies the core themes of the state of individual existence, the notion of free choice, and the perception of absurdity in existentialist literature. By analyzing the existentialist qualities of the protagonist Meursault, as well as the themes of free choice and responsibility in the work, and examining the sense of absurdity within the plot setting, we can uncover a close connection between this work and the existentialist literary tradition. Furthermore, the paper also examines how *The Outsider* develops and innovates the existentialist literary tradition through unique narrative techniques and characterization, while building on tradition. The paper concludes with an evaluation of *The Outsider's* position and influence in the existentialist literary tradition and explores its value in the history of literary development.

Studying the relationship between *The Outsider* and the existentialist literary tradition not only enhances our understanding of the artistic value and ideological connotation of this work, but also sheds light on the influence and development trend of the existentialist literary tradition in modern literature. Through an in-depth analysis of *The Outsider*, one can explore how it inherits and develops the core concepts and themes of the existentialist literary tradition, and then evaluate its unique position in this tradition. At the same time, drawing inspiration from this work can provide new ideas and methods for subsequent literary studies.

2. The Place and Influence of *The Outsider* in the Existentialist Literary Tradition

As one of the masterpieces of existentialist literature, *The Outsider* holds a significant position in literary history. It not only inherits the core concepts and themes of the existentialist literary tradition, but also develops and innovates upon them. This uniqueness and innovation make *The Outsider* stand out within the existentialist literary tradition, rendering it an important subject for later writers to study and learn from. Furthermore, *The Outsider* has also had a profound influence on subsequent generations of existentialist writers and works, thereby promoting the development and innovation of existentialist literature.

3. Overview of the existentialist literary tradition

Existentialist literature, as an important trend of thought in the field of literature in the 20th century, has not only limited its influence to literature itself, but has also profoundly impacted various other fields such as philosophy, psychology and social thought. It originated from a deep contemplation on the state of human existence and a keen understanding of the spiritual dilemmas faced by individuals in modern society. In this literary tradition, the themes of individual existence, free choice, and absurdity have been given a central place and become its unique symbols.

3.1. Existentialist literature emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of individual existence

In existentialist literature, characters are often regarded as solitary beings, with their connection to society is downplayed, and the inner world of the individual becomes the focus of attention. This focus on individual existence reflects existentialist philosophy's penetrating insight into human nature, i.e., the insignificance and helplessness of human beings in the universe and the powerlessness of individuals in the face of fate.

3.2. Existentialist literature highlights the importance of free choice

In existentialist literature, characters are often confronted with a variety of choices, and these choices are often of great significance. Free choice is not only the embodiment of individual existence, but also

the pursuit and realization of individual self-worth. However, this freedom is not unconditional; it comes with responsibilities and obligations. While making choices, individuals must also bear the corresponding consequences, reflecting the profound thinking of existentialist literature on the relationship between freedom and responsibility.

3.3. Existentialist literature has a unique understanding of absurdity

In existentialist literature, absurdity is not only manifested in the absurdity and irrationality of the real world, but also in the solitude, helplessness and despair experienced by individuals within it. This sense of absurdity serves as existentialist literature's criticism and reflection on modern society, unveiling the alienation, indifference and alienation between people in contemporary times, as well as the individual's feelings of isolation and helplessness within this societal framework. In fact, a dystopian world is not something that can be created overnight nor can it be altered by a single individual alone.

4. Existentialist Literary Elements in *The Outsider*

As Camus's masterpiece, *The Outsider* profoundly embodies the core elements of existentialist literature. Through the experiences of the main character Meursault depicted by Camus, this novel presents the individual's state of existence in modern society, his profound reflection on free choice, and his realization of the absurdity of the real world.

4.1. Individual state of being

Meursault exemplifies a typical "*The Outsider*", who maintains a detached relationship with society and others. His attitude towards life is indifferent, and he shows no concern for the things around him, as if he were in a world having nothing to do with him [4]. Meursault's refusal to confess to the priest reflects his belief that it ultimately does not matter whether he is sentenced to death or not, as life was not worth living. He thought that it would be fine as long as, at the execution, "*there were many watchers who greeted me with shouts of hatred.*" This state of loneliness and alienation is typical individual survival state in existentialist literature. Meursault's existential condition mirrors the alienation and indifference among people in modern society, along with the individual's sense of solitude and powerlessness within it. The themes of free choice and responsibility are important elements of existentialist literature.

In *The Outsider*, Meursault is confronted with a multitude of life choices, all of which carry profound moral and philosophical implications. Throughout the novel, Meursault displays a strong sense of indifference; however, this indifference should not be misconstrued as ignorance towards life or a lack of thinking about its complexities. On the contrary, it becomes evident to the reader that Meursault is a precursor of his time, and experiencing and recognizing the absurdity of the world more consciously than anyone else [5].

His indifferent behavior at his mother's funeral, his interactions with his girlfriend on the beach, and his self-defense in court all reflect his quest for free choice. But this freedom is not without conditions; it comes with responsibilities and obligations. As Meursault makes choices, he must also face the consequences. He is sanctioned by the law for his actions, and this sense of responsibility reflects the moral responsibility that individuals must assume when making free choices.

4.2. The sense of absurdity is closely linked to the plotting of *The Outsider*

The novel illustrates the absurdity and irrationality of the real world through a series of absurd plot settings. Meursault's indifferent behavior, his encounters in prison, and his eventual death all carry a

sense of absurdity. This sense of absurdity is not only reflected in the specific plot, but also more profoundly in the theme and meaning expressed in the novel. It reveals the alienation, indifference and estrangement among individuals in modern society, as well as their profound sense of loneliness and helplessness within it. This sense of absurdity is existentialist literature's criticism and reflection on the real world, prompting readers to contemplate deeply about modern society.

In *The Outsider*, Camus, through the character of Meursault, portrays the individual's state of existence in modern society, the pursuit of free choice, and the realization of the absurdity of the real world. These elements are fundamental to existentialist literature, and *The Outsider* skillfully integrates them with its unique artistic techniques and profound ideological connotations. Through Meursault's experiences, readers can deeply engage with the themes and meanings explored in existentialist literature, encouraging deeper reflection on modern society [6].

5. The Outsider's Inheritance and Development of the Existentialist Literary Tradition

5.1. Inheritance of Traditions

The Outsider represents a profound inheritance of the core ideas and themes of the existentialist literary tradition.

5.1.1. The concern for the human state of being in the work

The loneliness, indifference and alienation of the protagonist Meursault is a vivid embodiment of the concept of "individual existence" in existentialist literature. He is indifferent to the death of his mother, and holds a detached attitude towards love, friendship and social norms. This state of "*The Outsider*" is a profound revelation of the loneliness and alienation of human beings in modern society.

5.1.2. Emphasizing the importance of free choice

As a master of existentialism, Camus not only exposes the absurdity and anguish of life in *The Outsider*, but also arrives at a profound understanding of the absurd nature of society. He embodies his own attitude towards the sense of absurdity in this novel: the principle of "free choice" in existentialist philosophy [7]. In the face of life's decisions, Meursault always adheres to his own inner truth, remaining unaffected by external influences. His refusal to defend himself in court stems from his belief that his actions are determined by his own will, rather than social norms or moral standards. This emphasis on free choice is one of the central ideas in existentialist literature.

5.1.3. The Outsider also inherits the exploration of absurdity in existentialist literature

Many plots in the novel appear to be absurd, such as when Meursault accidentally killing an Arab on the beach and subsequently being sentenced to death for it. This absurdity is reflected not only in the plot, but also in the characters' relationship with society. As *The Outsider*, Meursault's behavior and way of thinking are alien to the entire society, and this absurdity constitutes a profound reflection on the real world.

5.2. Developing innovations

The Outsider develops and innovates the existentialist literary tradition through several key elements. Firstly, the novel employs a unique narrative technique by adopting a first-person perspective to fully explore the inner world of Meursault. This narrative technique not only enhances the novel's sense of reality, but also enables readers to deeply understand Meursault's loneliness and alienation.

Meanwhile, numerous episodes in the novel utilize symbolism and metaphor, such as the portrayal of sunlight and shadows on the beach, which symbolize his internal loneliness and struggle.

The Outsider also made innovations in characterization. The figure of Meursault breaks through the traditional heroic image in literature. He is not a perfect man, but an ordinary man full of flaws and contradictions. His indifference and loneliness are not motivated by malice or selfishness, but stem from his detachment from society and his contemplation of his own existence. This realistic and complex characterization makes *The Outsider* more authentic and profound.

Through the figure of Meursault, *The Outsider* also criticizes and reflects on certain ideas in the existentialist literary tradition. For example, while Meursault emphasizes the importance of free choice, he is also aware of its limitations. Confronted with death, he comes to realize that his choices cannot alter his fate. This reflection on free choice makes *The Outsider* present a depth of thought that transcends tradition while inheriting it.

6. Conclusion

After an in-depth discussion of the relationship between *The Outsider* and the existentialist literary tradition, this paper uncovers the important contribution of this work in upholding the tradition while also fostering innovation. By analyzing the existentialist qualities of Meursault, the themes of free choice and responsibility, and the sense of absurdity in *The Outsider*, it becomes evident that Camus has skillfully interpreted the fundamental concepts of existentialist literature in this novel, and also demonstrated his unique literary style and narrative techniques.

In terms of inheriting the tradition, *The Outsider* is undoubtedly a powerful inheritance of the tradition of existentialist literature. It continues existentialist literature's focus on the themes of individual existence, free choice, and absurdity, and vividly demonstrates man's loneliness, alienation, and longing for freedom in society through the archetypal character of Meursault. Additionally, the concept of free choice and the sense of responsibility it brings in the novel further emphasizes the importance of existentialist literature on individual choice.

The Outsider does not simply inherit tradition; rather, it develops and innovates on the basis of tradition. Through unique narrative techniques and characterization, Camus successfully combines traditional existentialist literature concepts with the real problems of modern society, giving the work a more profound ideological connotation and contemporary value. In particular, *The Outsider* presents a deeper understanding of the absurdity of the real world through its absurd plot setting and calm narrative style, thus providing readers with insight into the sense of absurdity. Of course, there are certain limitations and shortcomings in this study. For instance, it may not provide a deep and comprehensive enough analysis of *The Outsider* in comparison with other existentialist literary works. In addition, this paper also neglects to address the influence and value of *The Outsider* in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, future research should aim to expand the scope of the study in order to thoroughly explore the status and value of *The Outsider* in global literature.

References

- [1] Wang BJ. *An Analysis of Existentialist Philosophical Views in The Outsider*[J]. *Shanxi Youth*, 2019, (05): 70.
- [2] Chen, Danyi. *Talking about the Existentialist Literary Characteristics of The Outsider*[J]. *Literature and Education Materials* 2016(35):131.
- [3] Fan Fai. (2006). *Themes of Existentialist Literature from The Outsider*. *Journal of Kaifeng College of Education*, 2006(26): 20.
- [4] Wu Xiaodong. *Selected Foreign Literary Works of the 20th Century* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2002.
- [5] Li Yuhui. *Try to compare the absurd consciousness in the works of Sartre's Nausea and Camus' The Outsider*[J]. *Beauty and Age (Next)*, 2016, (07): 82-83.
- [6] Bao Yingping. *Analyzing Camus's Existentialism and Resistance - Taking The Outsider and The Plague as an Example*[J]. *Masterpiece Appreciation*, 2016, (21): 14.

[7] Yuan Zhonghui. *The Absurd Consciousness of Existentialist Literature*[J]. *Educational literature*, 2007, (next): 180.