

The Absurd and Revolt in The Sense of an Ending

Yuguang Zhang

Shenzhen Mingde Experimental School, Shenzhen 510008, China

Abstract

The Sense of an Ending is a novel written by Julian Barnes. This paper aims to probe into the novel from the perspective of Albert Camus's philosophical contemplation on the absurd and revolt. By analyzing the novel, the absurdity is revealed and the revolt of the hero is presented, which denotes Barnes's concerns towards the existential crisis of humanity.

Keywords

The Absurd; Revolt; The Sense of an Ending.

1. Introduction

Julian Barnes is one of the most versatile writers in contemporary British literature. with the distinctive feature of French connection, he is quite familiar with French literature, and Camus is one of his favourite French writers when he was young. In an interview in 1986, Julian Barnes said that while he was at university he liked Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Gide, Camus and Sartre, etc. Barnes in a way is an existentialist. Many characters he shaped in his works are heroes like Hemingway and Sisyphus in the postmodern context. It is the same when it comes to his novel *The Sense of an Ending*.

Published in 2011, this novel was awarded the Men Booker Prize in the same year. One can easily notice the influence of existentialists, especially that of Albert Camus. The novel is divided into two parts with Tony Webster as the narrator. The first part mainly recalls his early school life, focusing on his friendship with Adrian and his love relationship with Veronica. And the second part recounts his present life and the subversion and reconstruction of his previous memories. Although Tony does not claim that he himself is an existentialist like Camus, he does use Camus's logic to analyze the philosophical meaning of Adrian's suicide. Adrian, who reads Camus, also quotes Camus's words when they discuss Robson's death. "We discussed this until Adrian redirected our interests. 'Camus said that suicide was the only true philosophical question.'" [1]

As evidence of Albert Camus's influence keeps emerging in this novel, the probe into it from the perspective of Camus's philosophical contemplation on the absurd and revolt is attempted in this paper. During the analysis of the novel, Barnes's concerns towards the existential crisis of humanity is derived.

2. The Absurd in The Sense of an Ending

2.1. Camus's Philosophical Contemplation on the Absurd

The absurd was first used as a philosophical term by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. While for existentialists, the basic idea of absurdity is that "life is bound to be lonely, the world is absurd, and living is senseless". [2] While for Camus, who elaborates the absurd in the book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, claims that the absurd is a kind of personal life experience. And the absurd that he deals with is an absurd sensitivity that can be found widespread in the age- and not with an absurd philosophy which our time, properly speaking, has not known. For Camus, the fact is true that we constantly encounter and struggle in the world of the absurd,

and more often than not, we are hopeless in this fight. Without hope, however, is not the same as despair. To make it more clear, he puts forward that the absurd is not an ending but a starting point. Just as what he puts in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "But it is useful to note at the same time that the absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a starting-point." [3] He thinks that the sense triggered by the absurd is not necessarily an ending, and that even if it is absurd, life is still worth living. It can be a new beginning or another possibility of life.

2.2. Alienation as a Manifestation of the Absurd

Barnes is a writer with a keenly skeptical sensibility, one whose novels limn a world of contingency, trauma and absurdity. [4] Alienation as the most prominent manifestation of the absurd can be traced in this novel.

Adrian is much a loner. He is a shy boy, who always keeps distance from others, even his friends. He talks little, and keeps all secrets to himself. People barely notice him for the first few days. Even after he becomes friends with Tony, Colin and Alex, he is not close to them, nor friendly either. In fact, he does not even act like a friend to them. For instance, wearing a watch with its face upside down on the wrist is a symbol of their friendship. Even if the other three keep doing so every day, Adrian does not follow suit, as if he is not one of them.

While Adrian's alienation is revealed in his personal relationships, Tony's alienation is manifested from his life attitude. Tony's aloofness towards life makes him somewhat look like the character of Meursault in Camus's work *The Stranger*, who cares nothing around him, who does not know on which date his mother dies, and who does not drop a single tear at his mother's funeral. When his girlfriend comes to ask him if he will marry her, he says that he doesn't mind. In this novel, the hero Tony also shares the similar trait in some way. After graduating from university, Tony goes backpacking to America, leaving nearly no contact information but his last destination to his parents. He does not care what his parents might feel. He is so alienated from his parents that when they learn the death of Adrian, they do not know how to reach him. In addition, Tony is indifferent to his marriage. He gets married and then gets divorce but without much emotional involvement. He says he feels neither happy nor sad. The divorce to him means nothing. Perhaps he is just benumbed, and life to him is senseless. All that he can feel was empty. He confesses that after divorce his life become "more emptied", which indicates that he thinks that his life is empty before the divorce, and the divorce only makes it emptier. He tries to find himself something to do, and terms them "projects", but none of them came to anything. For him, however, "that's no matter, or any part of my story".

3. Revolt in The Sense of an Ending

Camus generalizes three kinds of attitude. The first kind is the physical suicide. People holding this kind of attitude reckon that since one cannot find a way to escape the absurd during one's whole life, and that even the existence of humans is doomed to be absurd, then the easiest way to end it is to commit suicide so as to relieve the burden of the absurdity and get rid of the meaningless life. This kind of attitude is no doubt a passive one. The second one is the philosophical suicide. This attitude is a kind of escape in spirit. They put all their hopes on the God that may not even exist. They treat the mystic heaven as the paradise where they can escape from the absurd. Camus is explicitly against these two kinds of attitude. The attitude he strongly proposed is to keep fighting and resisting against the absurd. He explains this kind of life attitude through reinterpreting the myth of Sisyphus in a different way. [5] In Camus's point of view, Sisyphus is a hero of the absurd. Although he has to bear the toil and bore for all the eternity, he accepts it peacefully. He defies the gods, and has great passion for his own life. Therefore, the revolt here is not only a mild acceptance of the absurd, but an acceptance that is

full of scorn and defiance. For Camus, practicing revolt is the only way to fight against the absurd. To be more specific, the way of revolt means to create something meaningful out of this absurd world.

3.1. Adrain's Revolt

To Adrian, living his own life to the fullest is his way to revolt. At least this is the doctrine he firmly sticks to before his tragic death. Adrian has quite positive life attitude, and he is in general a serious person, who takes everything seriously. His positive attitude and his "seriousness" is more or less influenced by Camus, for he is a faithful reader of Camus as is mentioned by the narrator of the story. And professor Wu Wenquan also holds a similar argument. He points out in his essay "On the Motif of Death in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*" that Adrian's positive attitude to life, his so-called seriousness, is apparently convinced by the Camusian view of revolt as against the absurdity of existence. [6]

One can justify his seriousness by a glimpse of the details of his daily life. His three friends, namely Tony, Alex and Colin have nothing in common with him in this aspect. They are all cynical, and refuse to take account of any activity that is not hedonistic. On the other hand, however, Adrian is the one who pushes them to guide their actions with principles. For instance, while the other three treat the morning prayers perfunctorily, Adrian can be heard joining in the responses. And while school sports are regarded as "a crypto-fascist plan" which is made to stifle their sex impulsion by his friends, Adrian does not think in the same way. He chooses to join the fencing club and takes part in the high jump. And for the music class, he even brings his own clarinet to the classroom. What's more, he is strong in academic as well. No matter in history or English class, he can excellently answer the teacher's questions and convincingly argue with teachers with his unique and clear logic. Old Joe Hunt, the history teacher, even asks him to fill in his position after he retires. All the text evidence rightly justifies that Adrian takes his life seriously. It is his seriousness that makes him stand out from his peers. He is the one who tries hard to revolt against the meaninglessness of the absurd world by living to the fullest.

Adrian's revolt can be seen from his positive attitude towards his broken family as well. Though his mother has walked out from the family for years, he does not blame his mother or father for this family tragedy. Instead he says that he loves his mother and respects his father, which is totally out of his friends' expectation, for they think that this family tragedy should have made him become pessimistic and misanthropic. What is more, Adrian is a man who believes that one should apply philosophical thoughts to daily life. Given the fact that he "had read Camus and Nietzsche", it is safe to say that unlike his three friends, who are always complaining about their parents and their families, Adrian, by reading Camus, has found a way to deal with this family trauma, and learned to move on. Though he has realized the absurd world around him, he decides to revolt the absurdity actively by taking things seriously and holding positive life attitude. He tries to live a meaningful life out of this meaningless world. His seriousness and his positive life attitude is his resistance against the absurd world he lives in.

3.2. Tony's Revolt

Tony's memory reconstruction is his revolt against the absurd world. In the second part of the novel, Tony begins to talk about his present life, which is dull, aimless and meaningless. One day, a letter from Mrs. Sarah Ford, Veronica's deceased mother, breaks the situation. Together with the letter, there is a bequest of 500 pounds and two documents, one of which is still kept by Veronica. In order to seek out the truth, Tony tries every means to get in touch with Veronica again. As things happen and memories flash back intermittently, Tony reconstructs his memory bit by bit, and re-evaluates what he has done 40 years ago. When he finally seeks out the truth, he decides to take up his responsibility.

Through the reconstruction of his earlier memory, he tries to seek the truth of his own life story, making his life more meaningful out of this absurd world. It is during this process that Tony he finds his true self as a real human being, other than someone who is alienated and cares about nothing. Existence, memory and witness are the three key words of Camus's aesthetics thoughts. He refuses to deny the meaning of human existence and the instrumentalization of human beings. What he spares no effort to do is to bring back man's humanity. The real mission of being exist, in Camus's point of view, is to quest for a meaningful life.[7] And this is exactly what Tony does in the novel. After he finally recalls what he does to his friends, he bravely shoulders the responsibility of his own, though he might have to face the great unrest ahead of him. It is the memory reconstruction that makes his life meaningful rather than "empty" in the absurd world.

4. Conclusion

Barnes presents readers a world of the absurd in the novel *The Sense of an Ending*. Like Albert Camus, he deeply concerns about the existential predicament of humans in facing of the permissive absurdity in the postmodern world. Though the absurd is something one cannot escape from, one can revolt against it like Tony and Adrian and be a hero of the absurd like Sisyphus, for the process of revolt itself is enough to fill a man's heart.

References

- [1] Barnes, Julian: *The Sense of an Ending* (Vintage Books,U.S. 2011), p.15.
- [2] Yuan Li: *Albert Camus's Neo-Humanism Philosophy* (Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, China 2007), p.103.
- [3] Albert Camus, O' Brien Justin, Trans. : *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Penguin Group, UK,2005), p.1-4.
- [4] Sebastian, Groes and Childs, Peter: *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Continuum, London 2011, p.52.
- [5] Mingjiu Liu: *The Complete Works of Albert Camus(Novel)* (Shanghai Translation Publishing House, China 2010), p.22-25.
- [6] Wenquan Wu: *On the Motif of Death in Julian Barnes' The Sense of an Ending*, Canadian Social Science, Vol. 11(2015) No. 3, 2015, p.87-95.
- [7] Hongchen Wang: *The World of Thought in Albert Camus* (Guangxi Normal University Press, China 2011), p.186.