

Navigating the Absurd in Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir* (2005) Through Albert Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942)

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Abstract

This paper explores the application of Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd, as articulated in "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), to Paulo Coelho's novel *The Zahir* (2005). It investigates how Camus's existential concepts of absurdity, revolt, freedom, and passion resonate within Coelho's narrative of personal obsession and spiritual awakening. The analysis highlights thematic parallels between Sisyphus's eternal struggle and Coelho's protagonist's quest for meaning amidst an indifferent universe, framing *The Zahir* as a modern literary embodiment of absurdist philosophy. It demonstrates how the protagonist's journey mirrors the Sisyphean struggle against the absurd, reflecting human resilience and the quest for authenticity. By juxtaposing the existential dilemmas faced by Camus's Sisyphus and Coelho's narrator, this paper underscores their shared resistance to despair and acceptance of life's inherent contradictions. The study further reveals *The Zahir* as a transformative lens through which to reinterpret Camusian themes, bridging Mid-20th-century existentialism with contemporary explorations of love, freedom, and self-discovery. This synthesis affirms the enduring relevance of absurdist philosophy in understanding human experience across time and culture. The paper contains two main parts: the first part throws the light on Camus's absurd as presented in "The Myth of Sisyphus". The second part is an analysis of Coelho's *The Zahir* through the lens of Camus's philosophy, looking for instances where Coelho's characters or narrative elements align with or diverge from Camus's concepts.

Key Words: Sisyphus, Camus, The absurd condition, Coelho, *The Zahir*.

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استكشاف العبث في رواية "الزهير" لباولو كويلو (2005) من خلال "أسطورة سيزيف" (1942) لألبير كامو

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المستخلص

تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية تطبيق فلسفة العبث - كما صاغها ألبير كامو في مقالته "أسطورة سيزيف" (1942) على رواية باولو كويلو "الزهير" (2005). وتتناول كيفية تجسيد مفاهيم كامو الوجودية المتعلقة بالعبث، والتمرد، والحرية، والشغف داخل السرد الخاص لكويلو الذي يدور حول الهوس الشخصي والصحة الروحية. وتسلط الدراسة الضوء على أوجه التشابه الموضوعية بين النضال الأبدي لسيزيف وسعي بطل كويلو لمعنى وسط كون غير مبالٍ، ما يجعل من "الزهير" تجسيداً أدبياً حديثاً للفلسفة العبثية. كما توضح كيف أن رحلة البطل تعكس صراع سيزيف مع العبث، مما يعكس صمود الإنسان وسعيه نحو الأصالة. من خلال مقارنة العضلات الوجودية التي يواجهها سيزيف عند كامو مع تلك التي يواجهها الراوي في رواية كويلو، حيث تؤكد هذه الدراسة على مقاومتهم المشتركة لليأس وقبولهما لتناقضات الحياة الجوهرية. وتكشف الدراسة أيضاً عن أن "الزهير" يمثل رؤية جديدة لإعادة تفسير موضوعات كامو، مما يربط وجودية منتصف القرن العشرين باستكشافات معاصرة للحب، والحرية، والتحول الذاتي. يؤكد هذا التوليف على الأهمية الدائمة لفلسفة العبث في فهم التجربة الإنسانية عبر الزمن والثقافات. ويتكون البحث من جزأين رئيسيين: يلقي الجزء الأول الضوء على فلسفة العبث كما قدمها كامو في "أسطورة سيزيف". أما الجزء الثاني فهو تحليل لرواية "الزهير" من منظور فلسفة كامو، بحثاً عن أمثلة تظهر مدى توافق شخصيات كويلو أو عناصر السرد مع مفاهيم كامو أو تختلف عنها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سيزيف، كامو، العبثية، كويلو، الزهير.

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The Myth of Sisyphus in Homer's *Iliad* (750 B.C.), Book VI has gained various philosophical interpretations over the centuries. The original Myth tells about King Sisyphus who challenged Zeus, revealed a secret, and tried to cheat Hades in order to escape death and return to life again. Gods condemned him to an eternal punishment in the underworld through which he had to endure physical as well as psychological suffering. As retold in Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), Sisyphus, a king in Greek mythology, was punished by the gods with an eternal task. He was doomed to repeatedly push a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down, forcing him to start over endlessly. Various myths explain why Sisyphus angered the gods, but they generally involve his defiance.

In one tale, he enraged Pluto by imprisoning Death. Additionally, before his death, Sisyphus instructed his wife to discard his unburied body in a public space, a test of her devotion. When she followed his instructions literally, Sisyphus, offended by her actions, secured Pluto's permission to return to the living world to condemn her. However, upon his return, Sisyphus became fascinated with life and earth's beauty and refused to go back to the underworld. Eventually, Mercury was dispatched to capture him, and once he was back in the underworld, Sisyphus was confronted with his unending punishment of rolling the boulder. Thus, in Roman and Medieval thought, it has been seen as a cautionary tale about the dangers of hubris and the inevitability of fate, and Sisyphus is referred to as an immoral character who deserves punishment for defying the god.¹

According to Matthew Pianaalto, "Lucretius is warning us that those who have vain desires can never be truly happy. Sisyphus, who seeks to overcome death, suffers a fate worse than death: an eternity of inescapable and futile drudgery" (6). Also, Sisyphus has been regarded as a symbol of the human struggle against the forces of nature and the futility of trying to defy the gods. Jens Lauschke explains that Greek writers considered "impiety" as the cause of Sisyphus punishment (2). He also adds that his crime resulted from "closed

mindedness (the wrong attitude towards the mysteriousness of human nature)”, and the refusal to accept the inevitability of death (2).

However, In the 20th century, existentialists like the French philosopher Albert Camus, Richard Taylor,² and others handled the symbolic references in the Myth to life meaninglessness in different ways. Camus wrote “The Myth of Sisyphus,” in which he used the original myth as a metaphor for the human condition. He argued that Sisyphus’ eternal struggle to roll the boulder up the hill only to watch it roll back down, was a symbol of the human struggle to find meaning and purpose in a seemingly meaningless and purposeless world (Karpouzios 1; Pölzler 478, 484). He also saw Sisyphus as a heroic figure who, despite the futility of his task, continued the task with determination and defiance- an object of resistance and rebellion against that absurd condition.

Myth, in its broadest sense, refers to a traditional narrative imbued with symbolic meaning that explains natural phenomena, cultural practices, or the mysteries of human existence. As defined by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, myths serve as archetypal stories that articulate the collective wisdom and existential inquiries of a society (xxiii, 3). They often embody a dual character: on one hand, they provide a comforting framework for understanding the order of the universe, and on the other, they invite critical reflection on the nature of existence itself (221). In this light, myth is not merely an artifact of primitive thought. Rather, it is a dynamic narrative form that evolves to express the enduring conflicts between order and chaos, meaning and meaninglessness (202, 228). Albert Camus recontextualizes this traditional concept to highlight the paradox of human existence, where the search for inherent meaning clashes with the indifferent reality of the universe.

In Camus’s interpretation, the original myth transcends its conventional role as a medium of higher order to become a powerful allegory for the absurd. Unlike traditional myths that offer consolatory narratives of divine order or cosmic

purpose (Campbell 202), Camus's Sisyphus epitomizes the modern human condition. The reconfiguration of myth underscores his philosophical assertion that the very act of rebellion constitutes a form of existential triumph. By transforming a myth traditionally associated with punishment and despair into a symbol of resilience, Camus not only challenges conventional mythic narratives, but also reinforces the existential imperative to forge meaning amidst life's inherent contradictions.

Camus's philosophy of the absurd, as articulated in "The Myth"³ provides a compelling framework through which to analyze Paulo Coelho's novel, *The Zahir* (2005). By applying Camus's concepts of the absurd; *revolt*, *freedom*, and *passion* to Coelho's narrative, deeper layers of meaning in the protagonist's journey can be uncovered. The approach illuminates how Coelho's work deals with the same fundamental questions of meaning and purpose that Camus addressed, and how uncertainty and absurdity are frequent features of humanity's quest for meaning. In addition, this analysis reveals how *The Zahir* embodies a modern exploration of existential themes,⁴ demonstrating the relevance of Camus's philosophy in contemporary literature. In this sense, *The Zahir* will be treated as a mirror of human experience, highlighting the significance of personal freedom, decision-making, and the pursuit of purpose throughout absurdity. The novel thereby offers an insight into the evolution of existentialist thought in literature from the mid-20th century to the early 21st century.

"The Myth" is considered the cornerstone upon which Camus bases all his works (Karpouzios 4; Lane 1), and *the absurd condition* is its basic key aspect. Basically, in his book, Camus declares that he uses the character of Sisyphus not as an attempt to find a solution for the absurd, but as an allegory to question the possibility of living in full awareness of the fact that life is meaningless ("The Myth" 4).⁵ Sisyphus, according to Camus, is a powerful icon of this apparent meaninglessness of life. However, he proposes that Sisyphus, fully aware of his futile effort, chooses to accept that fate. He

clarifies this saying: “no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness” (36). Hence, “The Myth” indicates that life can often feel like a series of meaningless tasks, devoid of any ultimate purpose. The repetitive nature of Sisyphus’ struggle refers to the human condition, where individuals may find themselves engaged in routines, or what Camus calls a mechanical life, that seem pointless (Valeria 12).

The simple idea of the *absurd* suggests that it stems from life’s meaninglessness. On the contrary, Camus’s philosophy proposes that the nature of absurdity is based upon the extreme contrast between humanity’s “wild longing for clarity,” meaning, and “order”, and the universe’s indifference to this desire (Camus, “The Myth” 15). He notes that “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (20). To him, life has a value, but no meaning. He also describes the world’s answer to any attempt towards meaning as “an infinite number of shimmering fragments” (14). Then, he illustrates this fact saying: “between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance; the gap will never be filled. Forever I shall be a stranger to myself” (14).

In this respect, Robert DeLancey explains that Camus’s *Absurd* can be mainly interpreted through three steps (1954). First, there is the absence of Purpose. Camus characterizes this as “the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering” (Camus, “The Myth” 6). This is also illustrated in “The Myth” where Camus asserts that the central philosophical question is whether life is worth living, which is tied to the existence or nonexistence of a higher purpose (DeLancey 1954). Second, comes the absence of explanation, continues DeLancey, as the other face of absurdity. It is the belief that the universe cannot explain our existence or experiences, and the sense of ridiculousness is exaggerated by this ignorance (1955-1956). At last, there is the tension between purpose and purposelessness. People experience

severe worry or anger as a result of this duality. That is because they are forced to face the possibility that their lives do not offer the satisfying answers they are looking for (Blackford 1-4; Camus, "The Myth" 13, 20; Khachiche 6; Zaretsky 13-14).

Having interpreted the absurd condition, *rejection of suicide* appears as another basic key aspect in "The Myth". Camus opens two possibilities for Man: to be overcome by despair, or to try to avoid it. He comments on the common strategies for "eluding" the absurd, explaining that "hope" and "suicide" come as the most common fruitless measures. They entail either a denial of the absurd reality- religion-, attempts to hide it through imaginary promises of a better future-hope-, or even getting rid of the absurd life altogether, escaping through death ("The Myth" 7-8). Yet, Camus declares his rejection of suicide as a primary aspect of his vision of the absurd, the thing which requires a rebellion, or what he literally calls, "Consciousness and revolt" (37).

However, there are some concerns about the views of Camus. For example, it may seem confusing as, logically, continuing in or even embracing the absurd without an attempt to change it is itself a defeat. Sisyphus is just a helpless prisoner in the underworld who is supposed to cry for mercy or seek redemption as much as man is in the meaningless life, but he does not. Yet, a close look at the situation reveals how far Sisyphus is ironical, neglecting and offending of the gods. As there is no chance for a respectful change, he insists on accepting his fate, sticking to his beliefs even through the acceptance of suffering- a type of revolt that brings inner triumph and happiness. In this concern, Russell Blackford concludes that "The gods can punish [Sisyphus], but they cannot overturn his values. To that extent, he is superior to them and can scorn the fate they have inflicted" (4).

But, from another perspective, this surrender to one's suffering is violating the religious and human revolutionary ideas that assert the importance of having hope till the last moment of one's life. Camus sees attempting these ideas of

hope and religion as a “psychological suicide,” a mental as well as psychological destruction in a man’s world that has no reasonable traits and is full of chaos (“The Myth” 20-28). On the contrary, we can triumph over that universe when we see how far it is alien to us. We gain an inward peace and unexpected sense of joy through two primary means: first, through considering the absurd universe impersonal, neglecting its oppression, and continuing in our destined liked route. Second, this universe should allow us to live freely and create our personal meaning according to our values (Blackford 4).

Moreover, according to Craig DeLancey, this approach includes several fundamental concepts that contradict widely accepted assumptions about life and meaning (1959). Camus suggests that we can survive in a seemingly irrational world through some key ideas that constitute the *Absurd Existence*. These are: *Embracing the absurd*, *revolt against the absurd*, *creation of personal meaning*, *living with the absurd*, and *finding beauty and value in life*. In this concern, instead of turning to “delusions” or “mystical ideas” (Khachiche 10, 15), Camus summarizes these ideas in three comprehensive aspects. When they are available together, they result in an *absurd hero* like Sisyphus. He notes, “I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my *revolt*, my *freedom*, and my *passion*.⁶ By the mere activity of consciousness (...) I refuse suicide” (“The Myth” 42). These features, comments Karpouzios, bring out clearly how the individual may confront the Absurd and affirm his or her existence in the face of a lack of inherent meaning (4).

Revolt, that indicates a conscious confrontation, is a basic concept of Camus’s absurd, and a first step in “the feeling of the absurd” (“The Myth” 77). It refers to the constant awareness and rejection of the absurd without trying to escape or change it but always admitting its existence—embracing the absurd. According to Phillip H. Rhein in his (1989) book, *Albert Camus*, “we experience the absurd as the unique and vital link between the world and us. And through the absurd we know what we desire, what the world offers,

and what unites us with the world” (qtd in Shobeiri, et al 5). In the same respect, Maria Genovese defines revolt as a creative, non-violent “continuous, expanding cycle of affirmation and rejection” that focuses on the present moment, and with a total respect to human dignity (4).

Similarly, Melissa Payne states that similar to Sisyphus, Man creates his own fate every day as he pushes his rock up the hill. As they work toward the top, Man and Sisyphus are happy, but as the voyage comes to an end, they both recognize that they will not succeed (12). Yet, these *awareness and acceptance* can be both paralyzing and liberating at the same time. They challenge our assumptions about existence and compel us to seek meaning in a world that inherently lacks it (Khachiche 3, 21,25; Zaretsky 11).

However, Baptista Valeria relates that Sisyphus’s defiance of the gods, his refusal to accept his fate passively, and his determination to continue pushing the boulder symbolize a rebellion against the arbitrary nature of existence and a call to find meaning in the act of living itself (2-4). Accordingly, this act of revolt becomes a key aspect of the Absurd hero, who confronts the meaninglessness of life with courage and insistence upon survival (Foley 6,10-13). In this way, revolt, concludes Camus very simply, “gives life its value” (“The Myth” 36).

The second concept in Camus’s treatment of the absurd is *freedom*. He believes that revolt, attached to recognizing and accepting the absurd, is the source of true freedom. It liberates man from illusionary hopes and allows him to live aware of his mortality and the absence of inherent moral values. Hence, individuals are encouraged to embrace their responsibility to create their own meaning and values (Genovese 4). This is achieved through encouraging “freedom of action” (Camus, “The Myth” 38). So, instead of succumbing to despair or nihilism, recognizing life’s absurd nature can inspire a passionate and authentic approach to living (Foley 6, 10; Khachiche 3, 25; Zaretsky 12, 85).

Accordingly, the lack of inherent meaning does not diminish the value of life. Rather, it empowers individuals to find joy, purpose, and connection in their experiences and relationships (Baltzer 71-74; Foley 11). Camus illustrates this idea through suggesting at the end of “The Myth” that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (78). He embraces his eternal struggle, symbolizing the human condition of striving for meaning in an absurd world. Hence, this perspective encourages a life lived with intention and authenticity, despite the absence of universal truths or guarantees (Foley 9-10; Payne 11; Zaretsky 58).

It is notable that Camus portrays Sisyphus as ‘happy’ not because he finds joy in the act of moving rocks, but because he triumphs inwardly over his fate. His happiness stems from his ability to maintain his inner freedom and values despite the punishment inflicted upon him by the gods. The inner revolt against his condition and the subsequent freedom are what make Sisyphus a figure of pride and resilience (Blackford 4). Then, they bring about a relieving conclusion that “all is well” (Camus, “The Myth” 77).

This idea, therefore, offers a philosophical insight into encouraging one to enjoy the processes in which he engages, and then enjoying the experience of being alive, rather than seeking a definitive meaning in life. Putting such a value on life, one can be taken to urge that the value of life should neither be taken nor conceptualized in an objectivist way (Genovese 12). By believing that ‘all is well’, Sisyphus and so is everyman, will be able to live life tolerably as it is, with all its contradictions and absurdities. This, in turn, brings about the third concept of Camus’s absurd namely, *passion*, as *revolt* and *freedom* lead people to live life in full with a passion, embrace experiences, and fully engage with their surroundings.

Correspondingly in 1942 Camus wrote his novel, *The Stranger*,⁷ which bears his philosophical views previously illustrated in “The Myth”. *The Stranger* tells the story of Meursault, an emotionally indifferent man who finds himself involved in a murder trial after killing an Arab. The narrative

is straightforward, revolving around Meursault's isolation, alienation, experiences and thoughts on life, death, and social norms. The trial critiques societal expectations and the arbitrary nature of human judgment. However, the novel ends with the same realization and philosophy that Sisyphus gained at the end of "The Myth" and bears a lot of parallelism to Coelho's *The Zahir*.⁸

Therefore, the second part of the paper, which analyzes *The Zahir* in the light of "The Myth", will include some parallel references to Camus's *The Stranger*. These references are not intended to concentrate on Camus's novel. Rather, they illustrate how far Coelho's work is a near perfect reflection of Camus's philosophy as illustrated in "The Myth", and to what extent Coelho's protagonist is a literary adaptation of Camus's Sisyphus.

The Zahir is a novel that illustrates themes of love, obsession, and self-discovery. The narrator of the story is the protagonist⁹- a wealthy and famous, yet unsatisfied author living in France. His wife, Esther, a war reporter, disappears without a clear reason. This sudden unjustified disappearance is the start of what the narrator will need to discover about his experience with Esther and life in general. It also leads him to face the question of what love and the capacity for freedom mean, and what real life could be. The protagonist becomes fixated on the idea of the Zahir,¹⁰ a word in Arabic that means "visible, present, incapable of going unnoticed. It is someone or something which, once we have come into contact with them or it, gradually occupies our every thought, until we can think of nothing else" (Coelho 5). This obsession represents both Esther and the protagonist's internal struggles, as he finds himself torn between thoughts of freedom versus attachment, and love versus possession.

During his travels in search for his wife, he encounters Mikhail, a young man from Kazakhstan, who also knew Esther and then finally leads him on his search. Through Mikhail's guidance, the protagonist starts a transformative journey that takes him far from his routine life and superficial relationships. He learns that Esther had sought deeper spiritual

enlightenment and community with people who embraced mysticism and soul searching- elements that were missing from their marriage.

Mikhail invites the narrator to join him on a pilgrimage to Central Asia, the land of Esther's spiritual rebirth. This journey symbolizes the protagonist's Sisyphean path from ignorance to awareness. The physical journey across cultures also challenges him to abandon his ego, confront his fears, and embrace the unknown. Through the *Zahir*, the narrator represents an inner journey toward spiritual awakening. Besides, Coelho explores deep philosophical questions about the nature of love, freedom, personal transformation, and appreciating life. And he concludes illustrating that true fulfillment comes from within and often requires us to lose something- such as attachment-to find something greater: inner peace and wisdom.

The first evidence of the existence of the *Absurd* in *The Zahir* is the similarity between the novel's setting and the time when Camus wrote "The Myth." Both contexts have given rise to the *Absurd* that signals a crisis of principles, as traditional beliefs and ideologies were challenged by modernity, science, and the horrors of wars. Camus wrote "The Myth" during the aftermath of World War II, a period characterized by disillusionment and the decline of religious faith. This decline led to a sense of existential crisis among individuals, prompting a reevaluation of life's meaning and purpose (Foley 8-10; Valeria 2).

Likewise, in Coelho's work, Ether is a war reporter. Her disappearance and transition from France to Kazakhstan uncovers a life of meaninglessness and the struggles between traditional ideologies and the modern indifferent world. All through the protagonist's journey there are references to wars in different regions of the world with obvious emphasis on soldiers and death. Then, this is emphatically manifested near the novel's resolution, when the protagonist who has always been indifferent like his world arrives home and describes his new vision of Paris:

I could see again the religious massacres, the bloodlettings, the kings, the queens, the museums, the castles, the tortured artists, the drunken writers, the philosophers who took their own lives, the soldiers who plotted to conquer the world, the traitors who, with a gesture, brought down a whole dynasty, the stories that had once been forgotten and were now remembered and retold. (154)

Besides, Coelho does not provide a specific name for the protagonist. He is simply referred to throughout the novel as 'the narrator', a technique that is adopted by the novel's narrator himself in his writings. When he contemplates his Zahir he remarks, "in my article, the names of the characters (...) are omitted" (Coelho 133). This lack of a name allows readers to view the protagonist as an everyman figure, making it easier to relate to his journey of self-discovery and spiritual awakening.

Moreover, *The Zahir* parallels "The Myth" as the novel also explores the idea of an *absurd condition*, with the protagonist on a metaphysical journey to find fulfillment and meaning. After his presentation in a literary competition, Coelho's narrator expresses a realization of the existential thought. He comments on the audience reactions saying that "some people (...) accept that the world they're living in doesn't exist, and that they are failing to keep up with the things that matter" (Coelho 161). Like Sisyphus, the protagonist is in a conflict between demanding desires and existential doubts, striving to be sincere with himself in the struggle to overcome his own absurd condition (Andayani & Asy'ari 35; Khan 6-7; Makwana 2384). This primarily, puts *The Zahir* under the category of *Absurdist fiction* that centers on "the experiences of characters in an absurd situation where they cannot find an authentic purpose or meaning in their lives, often associated with completely meaningless events and actions" (Khachiche 14). Here starts the quest for meaning and confrontation with the absurd in the protagonist's life.

In his unanswered questioning about the unexplained absence of his wife, and in his refusal to succumb to despair, the narrator seeks to understand and transcend his circumstances. This existential inquiry is a hallmark of existentialist thought, where individuals engage in self-reflection to understand their existence and the choices that shape their lives (Singh 224). Like Sisyphus, the protagonist is fully overwhelmed by an obsession- the Zahir. His Zahir is his wife, Eather, that could be considered a symbol of his earlier self-centered thoughts and personal desires. He declares this when he says, “she fills everything. She is the only reason I am alive” (Coelho 35). So, much of his actions and ideas are driven by this obsession. This obsession, by the plot progression and character development, highlights his inner suffering and the psychological effects of loss (Sinaga& Togatoropl,196-197).

In addition, like Sisyphus, in the pursuit of meaning in an indifferent universe, Coelho’s protagonist represents an *awareness* of the absurd as a path to passionate engagement with life. This quest reflects the human struggle to impose meaning on an inherently meaningless situation- a central theme in Camus’s philosophy. Just as Sisyphus must find meaning in his endless task in a silent world, the narrator embarks on a quest- with no responses- to find meaning in his life after Esther’s disappearance. Camus’s absurd which he exemplified in the routine life activities as in Sisyphus’ repeated task is echoed very early in *The Zahir*. When the protagonist recalls a previous conversation with his wife and his question to her about happiness, there is a reference to the futility of people’s life routines. He recounts:

“So, according to you, no one is happy?”

“Some people appear to be happy, but they simply don’t give the matter much thought. Others make plans (...) As long as they’re busy doing that, they’re like bulls looking for the bullfighter (...) with no idea where the target is (...).

“I don’t know if everyone is unhappy. I know they’re all busy: working overtime (...) I ask: ‘What makes you happy?’ (...) Answer: There is no answer. They change the subject.” (Coelho 25)

This mirrors Sisyphus’ eternal struggle, symbolizing the futility of human endeavors, as well as the acceptance of that absurd condition he is in. However, the narrator’s realization of the reality of life’s absurdity has started very early during his struggle. In this he relates, “we don’t always choose the best solution, but we carry on regardless, trying to remain upright and decent, in order to do honor (...) to the empty space inside” (Coelho 35). Hence, he declares his embracement of the absurd despite the apparent futility: “I accept the Zahir and will let it lead me into a state of either holiness or madness” (36).

Furthermore, Camus’s rejection of suicide-philosophical or physical- as a means to escape the absurd is echoed in *The Zahir*. Regarding psychological suicide, in the manner of Sisyphus, Coelho’s narrator is clear in his refusal to deny or rely on future hopes- means of psychological suicide- to escape the absurd. He explains how time passes while man loses his years chasing dreams that will never come true. For instance, after an accident, in the hospital he tells the nurse that when he dies, he wants his epitaph to be: “He died while he was still alive” (98). Then he continues by explaining his philosophy regarding life, hopes, and death. He tells her:

That might sound like a contradiction in terms, but I knew many people who had ceased to live, even though they continued to work and eat and engage in their usual social activities. They did everything *automatically*,¹¹ oblivious to the magic moment that each day brings with it, never stopping to think about the miracle of life, never understanding that the next minute could be their last on the face of this planet. (98)

In this sense, Coelho’s protagonist is much like Camus’s Mersault. Mersault reaches a form of happiness with the

realization that there is nothing beyond simple pleasures to which man deserves, and that death is inevitable (Payne 18). He expresses this embracement saying that “one never changed his way of life; one life was as good as another, and my present one suited me quite well. (...) I saw no reason for changing my life. By and large it wasn’t an unpleasant one” (Camus, *Stranger* 52). Near his death, Meursault declares his satisfaction with the absurd when he says, “I have never been able really to regret anything in all my life. I’ve always been far too much absorbed in the present moment” (125). Both protagonists, like Sisyphus, accept the absurd and manage to live life as it is. This, in accordance, exposes the importance of living in the present without the burden of hope or future aspirations.

Correspondingly, Coelho’s narrator makes it very clear that death-and so is physical suicide- has never been a solution to life’s absurdity. When the nurse has been assessing his mental state, he suddenly asks her if she realizes that sooner or later, she is going to die. Then, he continues, that if so, then let’s live and enjoy living to the end (99). Here, Makwana comments that Coelho encourages the readers to shift their focus from questioning why they are unhappy to exploring how they can increase their happiness (2387). Thus, the narrator expresses his comfort at this realization, as well as his sense of achievement saying: “That night, I went to sleep smiling. The Zahir was disappearing, (...) despite all that had happened in my life, despite all my failures, (...) the injustices I had suffered or inflicted on others, I had remained alive until the last moment” (Coelho 99).

The protagonist’s objective awareness and acceptance of the absurd manifest his *revolt* against it. It is noteworthy that he has an opportunity that Sisyphus had never have, which is to explain himself and justify his actions. But in the parallelism between the suffering of both, Coelho’s protagonist could be working as an active interpreter of Sisyphus. In his obsession with finding Eather and getting meaningful responses for her disappearance, he is usually faced with the universe’s silence.

However, instead of turning to despair, he decides to continue the search despite its apparent futility, not expecting any positive reaction to his efforts from the surrounding society. For example, in his conversation with his friend, Mary, the protagonist utters what seems to be the ultimate Sisyphean philosophy when he states that “suffering and tragedy (...) happen because they’re part of life and shouldn’t be seen as a punishment” (Coelho 37). Besides, Coelho presents the concept of suffering as a valuable and transformative experience (Makwana 2385). To Coelho, the narrator claims that suffering serves “to console [people] for their miserable lives” and continuous losses (Coelho 37).

Coelho also emphasizes the idea that destiny is not a fixed path but rather a journey shaped by personal choices and actions regardless its results. Like Sisyphus, as the protagonist navigates his quest, he begins to understand that he has the power to influence his own destiny through his acceptance and through the decisions he makes. Therefore, he emphasizes Camus’s conclusion that “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols” (Camus, “The Myth” 78). This realization, relates Makwana, supports his rebellion and empowers him to take control of his life and pursue what he truly desires, rather than merely following societal expectations or external pressures (2387).

Meanwhile, it can be said that Coelho adhered to the nature of Sisyphus’ suffering to an extent that Camus himself did not. Camus preferred to personify the Sisyphean absurd with its concepts and contradictions in the character of his indifferent Meursault. In contrast, Coelho has been more consistent in representing the existential concept through life’s realities, characters, and suffering. Although *The Stranger* and *The Zahir* both explore existence and meaning, they do so from different perspectives. Camus faces the absurd with Meursault’s detachment and societal critique, whereas Coelho presents a narrative of love and self-

understanding as the protagonist actively searches for meaning in a turbulent world.

Like *The Zahir*, Camus starts his novel creating “a situation with which all of his readers can identify” (Payne 15). His protagonist, Meursault, is overwhelmed by everyday routine activities, but unlike Coelho’s narrator, he is not searching for meaning or purpose. According to Payne, Meursault “does not know why he does something or what is the significance of his actions’ ramifications. He does not even entertain feelings or ideas that most people enjoy. This protagonist subscribes wholly to the notion of the Absurd” as he is, characteristically, one face of the absurd (16).

Additionally, Sisyphus is punished- partially- for his emotions, and Coelho’s narrator is introspective and actively seeks love and meaning. On the opposite side, lack of emotions is a characteristic sign of the existence of the absurd in *The Stranger*. Meursault’s emotional detachment is significant, he records events without commentary or interpretation, which is clear in his indifference during and after his mother’s funeral. For instance, the novel opens with Meursault’s indifferent view of life and death declaring, “Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure” (Camus, *Stranger* 1). After the funeral he comments “Mother now was buried, and tomorrow I’d be going back to work as usual. Really, nothing in my life had changed” (30). His inability to conform to societal expectations of grief and mourning underscores the absurdity of social norms and the isolation that can result from nonconformity (Chernysheva & Kostikova 1201, 1202).

Moreover, *The Stranger* highlights a clash between human desires and a universe that appears uncaring, underscoring that life has no inherent meaning. Meursault’s acceptance of this absurdity brings him a kind of existential clarity, where he finds satisfaction in simply existing (Payne 18). On the other hand, both Coelho’s narrator and Sisyphus find satisfaction in persistence.

At this stage of existential clarity, the final stages of confronting the absurd start. By rejecting and revolting against the absurd, Coelho's protagonist starts to comply with the senselessness of the world, and to experience *freedom and passion*. This stage of the absurd represents a liberation from the need for definitive answers. Besides, it marks the steps towards creating personal meaning in the face of uncertainty. Sisyphus decided to turn his punishment into a source of personal freedom. In the same manner, when the protagonist finally realizes that the Zahir has always been a form of mental imprisonment, he decides to get rid of it and transform it to a source of freedom. He tells Mikhail that he wants to free himself from his past thoughts, attitudes, and actions (Coelho 154).

In addition, the protagonist comes to terms with his relationship with Esther near the novel's end, and he realizes that freedom is a necessary component of real love. He also realizes that in order to fully enjoy what one has, "it is so important to let certain things go. To release them. To cut loose" (120). This conclusion, in contrast to his previous obsession, literally echoes Camus's 'all is well', and represents a mature understanding of love and life in general (Sinaga & Togatorop1 196).

Moreover, at this stage, the protagonist begins to fully characterize Camus's *absurd man*. With his new realizations and tolerance, he lives with honesty towards his existence. He recognizes the futility of his obsession, of seeking meaning where none exists, and this honesty grants him a sense of freedom and happiness. By the end of *The Zahir*, and *The Stranger* as well, the protagonists' sincerity is brought out and every man can begin to identify himself with them. Both Meursault and Coelho's protagonist are other versions of Sisyphus. They present the essence of a lesson: face absurd situations in life with perseverance, find beauty in nature, and live each day with determination- without the need for hope.

Like Sisyphus and Meursault, Coelho's protagonist expresses his joy at his endless endeavor and realizations. He tells Mikhail: "Don't expect to get anything back, don't expect

recognition for your efforts, don't expect your genius to be discovered or your love to be understood. Complete the circle (...) Stop being who you were and become who you are" (Coelho 120). Later, in his emotional outburst, he tells Eather- in the most Sisyphean manner- that he does not have the slightest intension to stop working, or to give up his struggle, because he enjoys what he is doing (135). Finally, confronting their absurd realities enables the three characters- Sisyphus, Meursault, and Coelho's narrator- to redefine their lives and pursue authenticity, which empowers them to act and find meaning amid chaos.

Conclusion:

Paulo Coelho and Albert Camus lived in different generations and came from very different cultures, yet they both capture the most relevant topics to human reality with their writings. Written in the shadow of WWII, "The Myth of Sisyphus" draws upon the idea of the absurd. It illustrates how humanity's constant quest for meaning opposes our understanding that we exist in a universe that is totally indifferent to this quest. Camus wrote "The Myth" and later, reflected his philosophy in *The Stranger*. Yet, Coelho has succeeded in surpassing Camus himself in mirroring Sisyphus with his struggles and personal suffering.

Though Coelho's protagonist bears many similarities with Camus's Meursault in *The Stranger*, still Coelho's work is a more real to life representation to Sisyphus. Camus stressed the character's indifference from the beginning, showing the absurd basically through the protagonist's eyes. Coelho, on the other hand, introduced live characters, real setting of time and place, and internal conflict, together in a plot progression. That plot progression helped in throwing the light on the protagonist's character development, in addition to characters' relationships with each other and with their universe. Hence, Coelho could reflect the Absurd condition that was earlier interpreted through Sisyphus by the most real Camusian portray of life absurdity.

With Coelho, the similarly existential themes of the early twenty-first-century writing become transformed into a more mystical and spiritual realm. This becomes obvious when evidence of a spiritual side, self-exploration, and personal growth comes through *The Zahir*. Both “The Myth” and *The Zahir*, have stylistic differences, time eras, and relatively different cultural backgrounds. However, they give humanity an insight into human nature and the search for meaning in an apparently nonsensical world. Reading *The Zahir* through the lens of the philosophy set forth by Camus in “The Myth” illuminates new meanings for each work, but also reveals a pattern of existentialist themes evolving and reappearing in literature over time and across cultures.

In *The Zahir*, Coelho brilliantly, claims through his protagonist that uncertainty, instability, and absurdity are sometimes necessary players in the circle of humanity searching for meaning. It is this quest for meaning in a soundless world that makes life significant. Through this lens, the protagonist’s obsessive quest can be interpreted not merely as a search for his missing wife, but as a Sisyphean struggle against the absurdity of existence. And therefore, *The Zahir* stands as a powerful mirror that reflects human life, since individual freedom and choice are all that matter to us in the insanity that our lives are.

Notes

1 See Lucretius, *On the Order of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001).

2 See Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2000).

3 “The Myth” will be used all through the paper to indicate Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

4 Existentialism highlights the belief that existence does not have a predetermined essence, and people are free to choose their paths and create their own meanings in life.

5 Camus originally published “the Myth of Sisyphus” in France in 1942, and it was first translated into English in 1955. The paper uses Vintage Books (1991) edition, and all cited

quotations in the paper will be from this edition. It is to be noted also that there are two books by Camus cited in the paper: “The Myth of Sisyphus”, and the second book is *The Stranger*- and *Stranger* will be used for in- text citation.

6 Italics are mine for emphasis.

7 The novel was originally published in 1942, but the paper utilizes Vintage Books (1958) edition.

8 *The Zahir*- italicized- refers all through the paper to the title of the novel, while the Zahir- only capitalized- refers to the concept itself that overwhelms the protagonist.

9 The two words, ‘The narrator’ and ‘the protagonist’ will be used alternatively to indicate the novel’s protagonist.

10 Coelho borrowed the concept from Jorge Luis Borges’ short story *The Zahir* (1949), originally appeared in his collection *El Aleph*. In Borges’ work The Zahir comes from Islamic tradition and spread during the 18th century. It is to be noted here that, in the paper, the meaning and reference of the word must be dealt with away from religious beliefs, or, else, the novel wouldn't be acceptable according to the Islamic traditions- as happened with its first publication in Iran.

11 Italics are mine to stress the routine lifestyle, which is a feature of the absurd.

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