Survey of Parables in an Absurdist Library

The parable is a tool used traditionally to convey aural moral lessons. We often search for meaning in the everyday, in the cut-and-dry, but parables seek to disrupt those elementary inclinations and dig deeper into our own psyche and perspectives. It seeks to find meaning in a paradoxically chaotic world. Absurdism is the idea that all life's purpose comes from an "abstract concept or religion" and that ultimately, "life is meaningless… in an irrational universe" (Pereira 1). It explores humanity's mission to learn the actual value of life, but it does so in a way that might render us without results. The field of thought emerged in the twentieth century along with existentialism. When world wars, crises, and large societal shifts plagued the mind of the average person, escalating emotions contributed to the rise of parabolic, absolutist ideology– if nothing matters, anything can happen. All understanding of the world was destined to be proven false, and with that resolution, comes a humorous and aloof perspective on what it means to be alive. It makes sense that the parable, the meaning of which is something only we can determine for ourselves, and the absurdist text, the meaning of which is abstract or illusory, can be married with one another into something complicated and potent. While we should not contend that a parable is always absurd, we should contend that an absurdist story is always parabolic. Parables are traditionally aural, so the idea that this storytelling convention can be anything but aural is absurd! Looking into the most famous absurdist works and analyzing their parabolic nature will prove that the parabolic "reversal" must originate from the works' absurdist elements.

Parables of Literature

Albert Camus operated in an environment between two world wars. With the motivation to write alongside his lingering sense of danger came an embracing of the absurd, where Camus takes the opportunity to "describe absurdism to expose the realization of the meaninglessness of

human life in literary work" (Abdullah and Sakonso 34). In Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Meursault navigates a monotonous life lacking meaning and value. He does not care about the world around him and the norms they seek to reinforce, and he demonstrates this with how he reacts to his mother's death in light of societal pressures, how indifferent he is to the prospect of marriage, and how he complies with the abuse of another's loved ones. When his mother died, and he chose to attend her service, the iterative pressure he got from others to care more than he did possibly made the caring itself all the more absurd. Meaning is often lost in repetition, and what little care he might have had for showing up in the first place was gone before the end of the service. Later on, Meursault finds himself taking the life of an Arab man with whom he had quarreled, but for a reason he himself cannot explain. The sun was beating down on him, and amid that haze and the sweltering heat, he shot a man he hardly recognized. Merusault's later consciousness of the absurdity of the murder itself, having been influenced by the sun to take a human life, allows him to reach a certain freedom most would overlook. He was lost in his own mind, and fate claimed him just as he claimed the life of the Arab man.

Invitation to a Beheading goes a step beyond Camus' surrealist novella and instead surgically rips apart the fabric of the book's established reality. Vladimir Nabokov makes his "literary characters appear to rebel against the constraints of the setting and plot" and conflict by repeatedly turning reality topsy-turvy (Pifer 46). The entire story is a parabolic reversal because no event that precedes another is expected. The main character, Cincinnatus C., goes through the motions of a protagonist because his conflict is metaphysical– not that he is a man on death row, but because those are his written circumstances. He ruminates over the fact that he believes himself to be the only real person truly alive, despite the irony of being sentenced to die. His primary proof of this lies within the heinous crime he committed, described as "gnostical

turpitude," which can only be understood as simply possessing secretive knowledge (Nabokov 2). He further confounds the supporting cast and reader through various fourth-wall breaks, indicating to his mother that she is a fraud making a pantomime of his execution. Every literary device is an antagonist to Cincinnatus: the stage is his prison, and his supporting leads are his enemies, so eager to execute the plot of the story: his death. However, at the conclusion of the story, it finally dawns on him that his life is a parable. He questions the reality of his situation aurally, asking the audience of his decapitation: "Why am I here? Why am I lying down like this?" (Nabokov 191). Before his executioner can situate him again, the world falls away, and Cincinnatus effectively exits the story– thus ruining his postulate world with his perspective alone. The parable of *Invitation to a Beheading* is the essence of the story itself and how "men misuse their perceptions and animate the parody, giving it power. Thus, Nabokov's assessment of reality is as subversive to realism as his literary methods" (Pifer 52). In order to break the rules properly, one must command them fully.

While the previous two examples' proximity to parabolic form are a little more abstract, Franz Kafka is a writer famous for parabolic and absurdist work. His parables were entirely personal and meant to remain within his notes, but were unfortunately published in the few years following his death. Kafka's background in parabolic thinking "creates wholly original narrative patterns of his own, unprecedented psychological parables of the highest intrinsic potency" (Luke 244). In other words, drawing from his askew perceptions of himself and the pessimistic way he viewed the world, Kafka infused his parables with messaging that was not only real and personal but topical and universal. After understanding Kafka's experiments with the absurd and subverting the reader's expectations, the interplay of myth and allegory, the books he meant to publish are given an entirely different connotation– namely, *The Metamorphosis*: Kafka's most

famous and arguably most existential work. The premise of *The Metamorphosis* is already quite the tall tale: Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning transformed into a bug, so he and his family must learn what this rebirth means in the context of his life and their relationships. Despite the story's inherent drama, Gregor's response to his transformation is fairly tame. He does not weep or cry but instead accepts and resigns to his new way of living. He even prepares himself for what his family's reception might be, choosing indifference in the face of either outcome: "If they got frightened, then Gregor would have no further responsibility and could be calm. But if they accepted everything calmly, then he, too, would have no cause to be upset" (Kafka 18). His mild behavior subsequently juxtaposes how his family lashes out at his exterior:

> On the other side of the room his mother had torn open a window despite the cool weather, and, leaning out, was pressing her face into her hands far beyond the window frame. Between the street and the stairwell a strong draught was created, the window curtains flew up, the newspapers on the table rustled and a few sheets blew across the floor. Implacably the father urged him back, uttering hisses like a savage (Kafka 23).

His incongruous reaction is unexpected and thus much more impactful than if he reacted with the expected horror or fear. Gregor was once a significant provider for this family, but now incapacitated, Gregor's mind and body go in a way that makes him no longer useful. The loss of his mental facilities parabolically equates itself to the loss of his human body and powers of speech. Therefore, the story's absurdist premise actively lends itself to a parabolic nature. Each observable loss of his humanity is equally mourned by all except Gregor, who would wish for everyone to stop acting so callously. He may be an insect, but that was no excuse for his family to mistreat him.

A key pillar of a parable is that they are traditionally aural rather than textual. We can explicate greater parabolic form in literary media when we hear it aloud, like the unique experience watching a play might create. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* finds its absurdist center in all things Kierkegaardian, another renowned writer of parables. Kierkegaard actually derived the word 'absurd' himself, borrowing from the "mathematical term 'surd': that which cannot be fitted into the pattern" (Sharma 275). The entire plot revolves around the God-like character of Godot, whom the protagonists Vladimir and Estragon spend the entirety of the play waiting for. Godot is a phantom figure at the heart of the story, someone important and beloved. After all, if they are willing to spend an average runtime of two and a half hours waiting for him, he must be someone worthy of that time and space, and he must be certainly welcome. He is also a large topic of conversation, becoming his own vague character without ever having to participate. The setting is also indistinct, with only a tree and road keeping them company as they wait for a man they have only a faint impression of. That is the true parable at the heart of *Waiting for Godot*: waiting for someone who may or may not ever actually appear. Beckett concludes the play with this question, as Estragon and Vladimir decide to depart while simultaneously remaining waiting on page 125:

VLADIMIR: Well, shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

Our leads find themselves outside the constraints of reality and sensibility. For them, and conversely to the tormented Cincinnatus, waiting is "a process of becoming through which they seem to realize that they exist," although it is no epiphany or grand discovery (Sharma 277). It dawns on them as losing our glasses only to find them resting atop our heads would. They do not

move from their spot despite declaring their departure and Godot not yet arriving. They also decided prior to rendezvous in this liminal space again the next day to continue their waiting (unless Godot were to materialize sooner). The play ends with a punchline– a parabolic reversal in that there is no actual reversal. Given the play's title and length, we expect and anticipate that we might finally meet this Godot or perhaps conclude their waiting through other means, but it never ends. When we leave the theatre, we know there is still a world where these two men are ever waiting for Godot, nothing more and nothing less.

Parables of Film

Along the path of the aural experience and their involvement in parables, we can find further parabolic meaning in film and television. Movies are a primal landscape that many creatives use to explore absurdism and ideology visually, similar to the foundations of the parable. Although the content of *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze 1999) warrants an entire in-depth analysis on its own, the parabolic nature of the film is more concise. The opening sequence, for instance, is a parable. A puppeteer is given uproarious applause for his puppetry, only to reveal that he sits alone in his home with a soundtrack simulating an audience. Throughout the film, different characters enter and experience the world through the eyes and body of actor John Malkovich (John Malkovich) via door/portal. The movie suggests that even fame cannot satisfy us. Craig (John Cusack) and Lotte Schwartz (Cameron Diaz) both become intoxicated in the life of Malkovich. Craig's interest in puppetry, evolving into him taking over Malkovich's body like a puppet master, leads us to an important "discovery that Craig, too, is a puppet whose strings are being pulled by the symbolic order that governs the world he has entered" (Dragunoiu 4). Craig eventually sells the experience to others, persuading them to enter the door on the grounds of it being a unique, thrilling time. Through his business, Lotte finds she

enjoys her time in Malkovich's body more than with her own husband. Craig explains later that the existence of the portal "raises all sorts of philosophical-type questions about the nature of self, about the existence of the soul. Am I me? Is Malkovich Malkovich?" (Jonez 42:56). The answer to this question, given the logic of the movie, is our first reversal. As Malkovich grows insane at the constant commandeering of his own identity and every character literally becomes Malkovich, who they are depends on what point of view they see the world from. Malkovich's journey is parabolic: an actor going into his own mind and seeing the production of a narcissistic world where everyone looks like him, and the only word they know is his name. He meets this world with just horror and revulsion. Maxine (Catherine Keener), a woman having an affair with Lotte, hijacks Malkovich's life and turns it toward puppetry, hoping to manipulate Craig into a false sense of security as his real life in his actual, physical body still does not compare to the power of being John Malkovich. Craig remains anonymous while Malkovich's fame grows, and that anger leads him to try and take total command of the portal and Malkovich so as to live eternally in his body. This, however, backfires on him fatally. Therein, we find yet another reversal: where Craig was earlier selling this experience for pleasure, him being forced to spend the remainder of his life through the eyes of Lotte and Maxine's daughter Emily (Kelly Teacher) is his own personal Hell. After watching the love of his life live happily with someone else, suddenly seeing through someone else's eyes is a nightmare come true.

Swiss Army Man (2016), directed by the same mind who would later direct one of the greatest absurdist films of all time, *Everywhere All At Once* (Daniel Kwan 2022), entails the story of Hank Thompson (Paul Dano) and his unlikely friendship with a revitalized corpse who he names "Manny" (Daniel Radcliffe). Towards the beginning, the film takes a large leap from reality to fantasy as soon as a dead body responds to Hank's presence. Although it takes time,

"the once-suicidal Hank explains living to his lifeless buddy," resulting in Manny slowly learning to speak, walk, and eventually fall in love and rejoin civilization (Mondello 2). Despite having remembered very little of his former life, Manny picks up the pieces with Hank and chases a mystic lover in hopes of finding answers and purpose. Along the way, the pair discover many absurd features in Manny's corpse (apropos to the titular Swiss army knife), including a fountain of drinking water, a compass, an engine, and a friend. A man who once wanted to be dead discovering the value of his life through a corpse who yearns to be alive is paradoxical and parabolic in and of itself. Despite not quite understanding the human experience, Manny pulls Hank out of his depressed stupor and self-depreciative emotions. When Hank declares himself "a scared, ugly, useless person," Manny responds with a crass and a brilliantly thoughtful counterpoint:

> But maybe everyone's a little bit ugly. And maybe we're all just ugly, dying sacks of shit, and maybe all it'll take is one person to just be okay with that, and then the whole world will be dancing and singing and farting, and everyone will feel a little bit less alone (Kwan and Scheinert 1:18:11).

The parabolic reversal appears at the end, as it should, when Manny becomes inanimate again, and Hank finds himself in trouble with the law. Manny makes his escape into the ocean– away from the society he had been chasing and the pressures that came with standards of living. Life will become whatever he makes of it, forgoing all expectations and obligations. Of course, he does so in a true absurdist fashion, using his own flatulence as a makeshift motor and driving off into the horizon.

Another keystone absurdist film of the contemporary age is Daniel Kwan's *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022)– a seven-time Oscar-winning movie that the popular film journal

Film Quarterly describes as: "a coherent Buddhist parable of a family suffering failure in every world before learning compassion for each other in this one" (Coe 1). The plot follows the discontented Evelyn Wang (Michelle Yeoh), who struggles in her unhappy marriage and estrangement from her queer daughter, Joy (Stephanie Hsu). However, an inter-dimensionally traveling version of her daughter, going by the fatuous name of Jobu Tupak, causes chaos in the multiverse as a way of lashing out against her other-world mothers. In almost every universe, Evelyn's relationship with her daughter is strained with high expectations and generational trauma, and Jobu seeks to save every version of herself burdened by her mother. Having eventually learned to travel into different versions herself like Jobu, Evelyn experiences glimpses into other realities where her marriage is no longer strained, she is happier and most successful, or she is simply a rock atop a mountain alongside her daughter (who is also a rock). *Everything Everywhere All At Once* discusses very human, grounded themes through fantastical props– emphasizing the importance of kindness and the present moment in light of infinite possibilities and life's untoward disappointments. When we focus on pedestals, legacy, fulfillment, and genres of living, we box ourselves into conventions that leave us wanting more. We wish for our lives to follow a specific blueprint– whether that be romance, success, or another fiction of our desires– which causes our current life to feel meaningless. Jobu's explanation of the all-consuming everything bagel she made brings solace to this dreary conclusion: "Feels nice, doesn't it? If nothing matters, then all the pain and guilt you feel for making nothing of your life goes away, sucked into a bagel" (Kwan 1:01:19). Jobu beckons her mother to join her self-destructive quest to bring every universe to an end. Her goal is purely existential and nihilist, attempted through absurdist means. Furthermore, the film finds its humor within its absurdist action and bizarre laws of power and space travel. The crazier the antics, the further Evelyn becomes from reality.

Here, we find the parable of *Everything Everywhere All At Once*: a positive feedback loop. Evelyn's life loses its meaning as she moves farther from home, traversing endless galaxies, despite the glitz and glamor of these alternate worlds and the essence of interdimensional travel itself.

Conclusion

The fact that absurdist literature can be a parable is a parable. Though it is convoluted, that is the metaphoric game of the genre. As the distinguished absurdist writer Kurt Vonnegut articulates, *so it goes*. Whether it be Camus using abstractions to gain a new understanding of his tribulating lifetime or Daniel Kwan simply ruminating on what gives our lives meaning, the absurdist parable attempts to gain a new insight into the human condition and our never-ending quest for purpose. We can find absurdism in everything irrational: the paradox, non-linear plots, the morally gray, incongruity, existentialism, human and irony, apathy, and other challenges to conventional norms. As characters struggle against the absurd, we, as an audience, often struggle against this mode of storytelling. The reversal we experience ourselves comes when we try to arrive at a certain definitive meaning to the absurd– to the inherently unreasonable. However, that very logic brings us back to why we listen and consider parables in the first place: we seek that disruption. Creating order is a natural human compulsion, just as we might solve a puzzle or unravel the Gordian knot.

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