

Absurd (anti)Heroes' Journey toward Happiness: A Psychoanalytic Comparison between Arthur Fleck and Meursault

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Abstract

In his philosophical writing, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1979), Albert Camus ponders the futility of the search for unity and absolute in this seemingly indifferent universe, and surmises that true happiness comes from accepting the meaninglessness of human existence. This particular school of thought is known as absurdism, and the narratives that fall under this discipline are referred to as absurdist texts. Camus not only expounds on the scopes of absurdism but also puts them into practice through his fiction. One such seminal absurdist novel by Camus is *The Outsider* (1987). In the novel, the writer delineates how the protagonist, Meursault, finds contentment by accepting his fate. A similar state of happiness is attained by Arthur Fleck, the protagonist of the film *Joker* (2019), when he accepts and assumes his proper place in society. From the onset, Fleck and Meursault may appear quite different from each other. However, upon closer inspection, the subtle similarities in their characteristics are perceptible, which bind them to a common threat of absurdity. It is undeniable that both Fleck and Meursault have committed homicide. Nonetheless, there is a greater force behind their acts than free will, and that is their unconscious drive. This paper explores the workings of the unconscious and its manifestation in Fleck and Meursault's actions while explicitly commenting on the relationships with their respective mothers. This comparative study also highlights how both of them discover true happiness once they finally learn to accept their fate and reality.

Keywords: happiness, antihero, psychoanalysis, absurdism, matricide, acceptance

How does one define happiness? Is it the absence of suffering? Or is it the glee of achievement? Or is it simply another neurophysiological change in one's mental state? Perhaps the true notion of happiness is subjective, and there is no absolute definition. As for Camus (1979), happiness is accepting the absurd condition of human existence, for "[h]appiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth" (p. 110). Man's search for "the nostalgia for unity" and "the appetite for the absolute" (Camus, 1979, p. 23) brings him face to face with the silent universe that is reluctant to provide man with any of those. "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, 1979, pp. 31–32), and by accepting this absurd condition, one can indeed be happy. However, Camus (1979) adds, one should not be mistaken that happiness necessarily originates from this absurd discovery since the feeling of the absurd may also spring from happiness. Based on Camus' account of happiness, this paper follows two absurd antiheroes — Arthur Fleck from the film *Joker*

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(2019) and Meursault from the novel *The Outsider* (1987) — and traces their pursuit of happiness. In this process, the comparative study heavily relies on psychoanalytic criticisms of the two characters and underscores how their personality developments have molded them to procure happiness through acceptance.

Analogizing Arthur Fleck to Meursault

It is pertinent to mention this paper does not try to prove that Fleck and Meursault are essentially identical as individuals, nor does it claim that. Superficially, they could not be more diametrical. For instance, Fleck works as a party clown who aspires to be a professional comedian in the future, or more precisely, he seeks recognition and validation from others. Shindler (2019) compares this desire to be recognized by others with the typical Lacanian form of recognition. Initially failing to do so with his professions as a party clown and comedian, Fleck gets his first public recognition after killing three men on the subway. The news gets coverage from the city's newspaper and television, and also catches the attention of the patricians of the society. Thomas Wayne, a billionaire and mayoral aspirant in the film, while commenting on the masked shooter, labels every person who has failed to earn a decent living as “envious” and “clowns” (Phillips, 2019, 39:40). These remarks about the less privileged stir an uproar where the protestors dress as clowns and identify themselves with the unknown masked murderer. Toward the end of the film, Fleck stands atop a wrecked police vehicle surrounded by a mob dressed as clowns symbolizing the collapse of the system. He finally gets the platform he has unremittingly yearned for and achieves the recognition he has always dreamed of.

Conversely, Meursault, by all indications, works in a freight company where he is a nondescript worker. Not only does he not look for any validation from others, he consciously avoids the crowd as he spends an entire Sunday sitting on his balcony looking at the people on the street from a distance. Focusing on his choice of living life, Champigny (1969) finds Meursault's temperament and morality “Epicurean” (p. 30), and a man who does not devoid himself of the passion for living. Camus (1987) personally believes Meursault has been condemned to death by society because he does not cry at his mother's funeral and declines to lie. Society expects him to behave in a certain way, but he refuses to play the game, which is why he has been incriminated. Wagner (1979), however, disagrees with most of the critics, and claims Meursault does not obey the societal rules not because of his honesty, but because of his incapability. Instead of finding a man who has an ardent desire for living, she notices a man who is always either exhausted, anxious, or generally uncomfortable. One thing is clear though, Meursault has both supporters and accusers.

It is evident that Fleck and Meursault are practically opposite persons. However, their visible differences are outnumbered by their concealed commonalities. One of their most subtle similarities is their perception of happiness, which comes from accepting reality, though their routes for reaching there are entirely separate. Their relationships with their respective parents, defiance of the conventions, and exhibition of apparent absurdism in their nature are among the other resemblances Fleck and Meursault share. But before delving into details, it is apropos to rationalize the choice of the term *antihero*.

Hero, antihero, or villain?

A hero in any literary genre is the protagonist of a story who is marked by feats of courage, strength, bravery, and ingenuity. An antihero, on the other hand, is not a villain but, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2022), a protagonist of a drama or narrative who notably lacks heroic qualities. *Dr. Wheeler's Website* defines an antihero as “a romanticized but wicked character who defies authority, and becomes paradoxically ennobled by his peculiar rejection of virtue” (Wheeler, 2018). Laham (2009) believes antiheroes are the protagonists of stories who are “psychopathic, lack a conscience, and are willing to engage in crime if it serves their self-interests” (p. 51). They are “flawed, and have a dark side to their personalities” (Laham, 2009, p. 51), which often prevails over their good side. The idea of an antihero is not particularly new. This type of character has appeared in literature since the time of the Greek dramatists and can be found in the literary works of all nations. However, the concept has been reinvigorated in different art forms from the twentieth century onward.

One of the earliest antiheroes in literature is Thersites from Homer's *Iliad*. Thersites is a soldier of the Greek army during the Trojan War. Yet, he revolts against Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae and commander of the Greeks, during the Trojan War. Thersites argues that the war is futile, Agamemnon is a corrupt leader and he has made Achilles, largely believed to be the greatest of all the Greek warriors, an ally in his misconduct. Thersites is instantly thwarted by Odysseus, first through verbal, then physical attack. Odysseus implies that only someone who does not have honor would show distaste against fighting, obliquely comparing the lack of honor with Thersites' physical deformity. Benardete (1991) notes, “There must be a figuration of wickedness as self-evident as Thersites—the ugliest man who came to Troy—who says what everyone else is thinking” (p. 101). The deficiency of heroic stature and the courage to rebel against the system make Thersites one of the first antiheroes found in literature.

Later the Byronic heroes created by the English poet Lord Byron, and the unnamed protagonist, generally referred to as the Underground Man, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) are considered some of the pioneering antiheroes in modern literature. Byronic heroes are unconventional romantic heroes, e.g., Harold from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–1818) and Don Juan from *Don Juan* (1819–1824), named after the English Romantic poet Lord Byron. Byronic heroes precisely reflect the persona and the characteristics of the poet. Lord Macaulay describes the Byronic hero Harold as “a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection” (as cited in Christiansen, 1988, p. 201), which may also be applied to characterize Byron himself. The extreme of some of these qualities can be witnessed in the nature of the Underground Man in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. The Underground Man has a dualistic personality whose ideas are admired but actions are abhorred. Steiner (1959) holds,

Like Thersites, the underground man incessantly talks to himself. His sense of alienation is such that he sees ‘otherness’ even in his mirror. He is the contrary to Narcissus and reviles creation precisely because he cannot believe that so abject a thing as himself should have been formed in the image of God. He envies the wealth and power of the

rich; irony will not keep out the cold of winter. But in his cellar, in the ‘labyrinth of fury,’ he schemes vengeance. (Steiner, 1959, p. 217)

The Underground Man’s criticism of ideas like societal utopia, determinism, and utilitarianism in the first part of the novella marks him as a progressive man. However, in the second part, his failure to function as an ordinary human being in society puts him with the other outsiders such as Fleck and Meursault.

Eventually, the concept of the antihero becomes prominent among twentieth-century existentialist writings such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938), *Saint Genet* (1952), and Albert Camus’ *The Outsider* (1987). During the 1950s, antiheroes enter American literature. From the beginning of this century, antiheroes have emerged in the visual art forms of television and films, of which *Joker* (2019) is one of the newest additions.

In the 1940s, the character of Joker is introduced as a psychopath with a sadistic sense of humor. Archenemy of another famous character Batman, Joker’s origin and real name remain vague and debatable until now. The latest reincarnation of the character in the film gives Joker a real name, a traumatic backstory, and a root to his becoming one of the most notorious fictional characters of all time. For the first time, the world beholds the cries behind the fake laughter of Joker, and few also empathize with the murderer, as some do with Meursault. Christina Newland for *The Guardian* interprets the film as a cautionary tale and inscribes that “the man it depicts is a product of our current era” (Newland, 2019). Kent (2019) identifies the film as a reminder that men like Fleck surround our society. This recent rendition of the character exhibits Joker as an unlikely hero who thrives in the darkness and, like any other heroic figure, could inspire others to follow him blindly, Kent presumes.

Though Meursault neither seeks nor gets followers like Fleck, it is undeniable that both Fleck and Meursault are murderers and crestfallen from the status of hero. However, readily dismissing them as villains would also be hasty and imprudent since they are not inherently evildoers, but their situations force them to pull the trigger, at least the first time. They are not misfits, just misunderstood. Hence, antihero is the befitting term to describe them.

Fleck’s mendacious happiness

Despite being far removed in time, space, and genre, two different kinds of artistic forms, the novel and the film, share some stark similarities. For instance — both Meursault and Fleck have committed manslaughter. However, neither of them acknowledges this as a crime against humanity. The concept of law is unknown to Meursault, the courtroom drama puzzles him, and according to his better judgment, the killing of the Arab is not a crime but merely a mistake. In the same way, Fleck claims he kills three men on the subway because they are “awful” (Phillips, 2019, 1:42:57). That is his only justification for triple homicide without any guilt or remorse. However, one of the most dominant parallelisms between Fleck and Meursault can be drawn based on their relationships with their mothers.

The relationship between Fleck and his mother is exceptionally intricate and almost unhealthy. Unlike Meursault, he does not send his mother off to an old home. Instead, he takes care of her as if she were a child. He takes care of the finances, prepares their meals, and even bathes his mother. Fleck can be considered a dutiful son; however, the dynamics of their relationship is far from perfect. Fleck's mother is a patient of "delusional psychosis" and "narcissistic personality disorder (NPD)" (Phillips, 2019, 1:12:13), and she has weaved a misapprehended, distorted reality both for her son and herself. Her sobriquet for Fleck is Happy. By calling him Happy, she has been tampering with his psychology and has built a mirage of happiness around them. However, in reality, she is mentally so unstable that when one of her boyfriends used to abuse Fleck at the age of three, she still could not grasp the gravity of the situation. Her medical testimony reads, "I never heard him cry. He's always been such a happy little boy" (Phillips, 2019, 1:15:14). This testimony is given by Fleck's mother after he is found tied to a radiator in her shabby apartment, malnourished, and with an injury to his head. Fleck does not have any recollection of these traumas until he gets access to his mother's medical history, which also mentions that he is adopted.

Childhood trauma is a significant factor in shaping a person's adulthood. Joseph (2003) examines the effects of childhood trauma and amnesia, and notes that traumatic experiences can disrupt or damage central parts of the memory system. Adults who are abused in their childhood can form their earliest memories about two to three years after than adults who have not gone through such traumatic episodes. So, it is not unusual that Fleck has no memories of the events. Moreover, his mother has always maintained a fabricated aura of happiness around them. Nevertheless, all these falsities could not keep reality and its impact at bay for long. One of the earliest effects of childhood trauma that becomes apparent in Fleck's behavior is his pathological laughter.

Fleck's murderous instincts and matricide

At first, Fleck's mother appears to be just an old, sickly woman who completely depends on her son. But as the plot unfolds, we can see how malicious and manipulative she can be. Along with delusional psychosis, she also has NPD. It is a personality disorder where the person experiences amplified feelings of self-importance and an unrealistic sense of identity, often to survive through a lowly reality. Pluznick and Kis-Sines (2018) suggest that children of narcissistic parents develop significantly lower self-esteem and higher rates of depression during adulthood. Lancer (2020) talks about the effects of a narcissistic mother on her son, which includes Oedipal complex, codependency, and intimacy issues. These complexities are acutely palpable in Fleck's nature. He is as much a failure in his professional life as in his personal life, and he is mocked or feared by other party clowns for his odd behaviors. What Sartre infers about Meursault is also true about Fleck, "He lives among outsiders, but to them, too, he is a stranger" (Sartre, 2001, p. 6).

After discovering his mother's mental illness, years of lies and deceptions, Fleck suffocates her to death. The viewers are perplexed by this sudden act of violence. But upon close perusal of Fleck's act, a certain hint of sadism can be perceived. On the manifest level, his matricide appears as an act of vengeance because he blames her for all

his miseries. However, that is not the only reason behind Fleck's matricide. Bunker (1944) argues that matricide and mother-son sexual liaison are unconsciously identical. To prove his point, Bunker alludes to the Greek mythologies of Oedipus, Alcmaeon, and Orestes. He claims that the matricide of Alcmaeon and the marital relationship between Oedipus and his mother are identical in the sense that both of their conducts brought barrenness upon their lands. Likewise, the mother-murder of Orestes and Oedipus' sins are punished in a similar manner of self-castration. It is rather difficult to avoid the resemblance and the consequences, concludes Bunker.

Over time, the portrayal of matricide becomes more covert in literature. Kanzer notes that the matricidal instincts found in Dostoevsky's writings are as fierce as the patricidal impulses described by Freud, "in brief that there is a recurrent theme of intense but frustrated love of a man for a woman which drives him to the point of madness, suicide or murder" (as cited in McKnight et al., 1966, p. 100). Wertham (1941) accentuates how the son's contribution to his mother's suicide obliquely exhibits the matricidal manifestation in Eugene O'Neill's play *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). In most of the matricidal incidents, Wertham continues, the sons are excessively attached to their mothers, the murder takes place in the mother's bedroom with a weapon of violence but never with poison, and the reactions after the murder vary from relief or absence of guilt to frantic anguish with suicidal thoughts. Fleck strangulates and kills his mother in a hospital bed with a pillow. When the news of his mother's death spreads to his friends and former coworkers, two of them come to console him and ask about how he is doing. In reply, Fleck says he is "celebrating" (Phillips, 2019, 1:26:44) and feels a lot better now, justifying Wertham's claims. A similar tone resonates in Meursault's comment, "I probably loved mother quite a lot, but that didn't mean anything. To a certain extent all normal people sometimes wished their loved ones were dead" (Camus, 1987, p. 65). Meursault derives a sense of relief from his mother's death, whereas Fleck gains a schadenfreudian¹ joy, and both of their responses toward their respective mother's death possess a certain kind of sadistic pleasure.

Matricide is usually committed by overprotected boys who are desperate "to free himself from his state of dependency on [the mother], a dependency that he believes has not allowed him to grow up" (Solomon, 2014). Byock (2014) records in an article that all young men need to find a way to kill their parents. Clearly stated in a symbolic fashion, the young men need to kill their parents in order to cut the psychological ties with them, otherwise these ties may keep the young men infantilized. "This is a critical aspect of development that, if not actualized internally, can literally drive men insane" (Byock, 2014). On a similar note, Jung proposes some archetypal events, among them "separation from parents" and "initiation" (as cited in Papadopoulos, 2006, p. 84) are crucial. In primitive times, children used to undergo painful, radical, and barbaric rituals to be transformed into a man. In modern times, however, these rituals have been reformed into more personalized and non-violent activities, such as hitchhiking across the country or traveling abroad. These archetypal events can occur to any person and steer them unconsciously if not achieved consciously. Needless to say, Fleck is in no position to experience this transition healthily into adulthood, neither physically nor mentally. Fleck's mother has always maintained an uncut, invisible umbilical cord with him which

has denied him a sound adult life. What is supposed to be a symbolic killing of the mother to step into the phase of adulthood has become literal in Fleck's case. Moreover, the remarkable change in Fleck's behavior is readily noticeable after his mother's death. He becomes calm and confident with an unyielding posture. But most importantly, he gets control over his laughter. It is hard to overlook the connection between his mother's death and his ushering into a new chapter in his life.

Meursault's suicidal instincts

As Camus (1979) begins by saying, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide" (p. 11), he implies that suicide is the measuring unit that allows a person to decide whether life is worth living or not. If a person chooses to end their life, they implicitly acknowledge that life is not worth living, releasing themselves from the circle of absurdity. Once freed from the absurd condition, a person can truly be happy. However, that is also impossible since the person would be dead, and happiness is meaningless in that scenario. Therefore, if one can find a way to commit suicide metaphorically by eliminating all the elements that give life meaning, one can find happiness without dying. This is precisely what Fleck does by killing his mother since she is one of the primary figures who gives meaning to his life. However, the same cannot be said about Meursault, and his way of responding to the call for suicide differs from Fleck's.

According to de Pichon-Rivière and Baranger, the death of Meursault's mother evokes feelings of guilt accompanied by schizophrenic symptoms in Meursault. In order to get redemption from this guilt and reunite with his mother in death, Meursault's unconscious mind provokes him to commit suicide. "In order to escape this sadistic guilt and to rejoin his mother in death, Meursault commits suicide. This, they say, is the meaning of the shooting of the Arab and his failure to defend himself in court" (as cited in Stoltzfus, 1989, p. 516). Meursault's guilt for sending his mother to the old home is clearly detectable throughout the text as he tries to justify his ways to people like the director of the old home and Salamano. Moreover, his guilt is cemented after his mother's death which puts him into a state of complete denial where he goes so far as to say that "I'd managed to get through another Sunday, that mother was now buried, that I was going to go back to work and that, after all, nothing had changed" (Camus, 1987, p. 28). It is clear that Meursault fails to register the finality of death.

S. Freud (1981) argues that the human mind cannot comprehend its death. Our mind believes in its immortality. We deny the presence of our own death and accept the idea that only our enemies and strangers die while our loved ones and we are spared from this fatal fate. Through the death of a loved one, we first become aware of the severity and finality of death. "Innocent in every sense of the word" (Sartre, 2001, p. 6), through his mother's death, Meursault becomes aware of the extremity of death. Later, Anna Freud introduces two original defense mechanisms, one of which is altruistic surrender. A. Freud argues,

In conclusion, we may for a moment study the notion of altruistic surrender from another angle, namely in its relation to the fear of death. Anyone who has very largely projected his instinctual impulses onto other people knows nothing of this fear. In the moment of

danger his ego is not really concerned for his own life. He experiences instead excessive concern and anxiety for the lives of his love objects. (as cited in Appignanesi & Forrester, 1992, p. 294)

By projecting the fear of death onto a loved one, the ego remains free from its vulnerability. In Meursault's case, this projected vessel is his mother. After her death, however, Meursault feels exposed since his ego loses its defense mechanism.

This newly discovered consciousness about death and the overwhelming guilt over failing to save his mother from death's dreaded clasp have fused inside Meursault and placed him in a self-punishing state. After the first shot, Meursault pauses and lets the silence sink in before lodging four more bullets into the inert body of the Arab and describes it as "like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness" (Camus, 1987, p. 60). The narrator fills this perfect silence with the rays of the sun and the magistrate with religion, but truly the silence leads to Meursault's first manifestation of self-destruction.

The description of the shooting part is oddly similar to Meursault's mother's funeral scene. The repetition of homogeneous phrases like "blinding light," "beads of sweat," "shimmering heat," "scorching blade," (Camus, 1987, pp. 9, 16, 17, 59), and Meursault's sudden remembrance that "[i]t was the same sun as on the day of mother's funeral" (p. 59) constitutes a striking similarity between the funeral and the shooting episode at the beach. Stoltzfus (1989) compares the relationship here among Meursault, the sun, and the sea with "the classical Oedipal triangle" (p. 522) where the sun appears as the sturdy father, the sea or the cool spring as the bountiful mother, and Meursault as their inconsolable child whose egoistic pleasures need to be met instantly. Here, Meursault's egoistic pleasure is to approach the spring or, symbolically, be reconciled with his mother. But the Arab, lying beside the spring, poses a threat from achieving that. Shooting the Arab, from this vantage point, can be interpreted in two different senses. First, in the literal sense, is removing the present threat to fulfill his immediate need, which is achieved by the first shot. The second, in the figurative sense, is enacting Meursault's own funeral on the beach and reuniting with his mother in death, which is achieved by the last four shots. The first shot may be accidental, but the last four shots are intentional, and during the silence between the shots, an unconscious decision is made.

Meursault's identification with his mother

Identification is a "psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides" (Laplanche et al., 1988, p. 205). As a male child's superego starts to develop, first he identifies with the mother; however, for him "to attain a healthy sense of maleness, must replace the primary object of his identification, the mother, and must identify instead with the father" (Greenson, 2004, p. 260). Since Meursault does not have much time with his father or much recollections of his father, he is unable to entirely "dis-identify" (Greenson, 2004, p. 260) from his mother. Meursault's earliest identification with his mother in the novel happens based on religion in front of the magistrate. During his mother's funeral rites, the director of the old home declares to

Meursault that his mother has asked for a religious burial before her death. He does not respond to that, but only reflects, "Though she wasn't an atheist, mother had never given a thought to religion in her life" (Camus, 1987, p. 12). The same negligence toward religion is also visible in Meursault's nature. During the interrogation with the magistrate, who tries to make him confess his sins by pointing a crucifix at his face, Meursault shows a similar kind of indifference toward the profundity of religion as his mother. When asked if he believed in God, Meursault plainly answers in the negative and detects that "[i]t was getting hotter and hotter" (p. 68) in the room. His last observation resonates with the most common image of hell, making Meursault a symbol of human evil, if not the devil himself. Frustrated by his faithlessness, the magistrate announces that "I have never seen a soul as hardened as yours" (p. 69) and goes so far as to label Meursault, rather aptly, as "Mr Antichrist" (p. 70).

During his last days in prison, Meursault's final identification with his mother occurs. Towards the end of the novel, he starts to recall his mother frequently. As he spends more and more time in his cell, he starts to comprehend how his mother must have felt in the old home. Otten (1975) notices that Meursault's mother was freed to take a fiancé once she got used to the old home, "and, in a sense, when Meursault is finally condemned to his cell, he acquires a measure of freedom too" (p. 110). On one occasion, Meursault recollects how his "[m]other often used to say that you're never altogether unhappy" (Camus, 1987, p. 109) as he prepares himself for his sentence to be carried out. With this air of freedom and happiness, Meursault looks outward through his cell's small window and perceives "stars shining on [his] face. Sounds of the countryside were wafting in. The night air was cooling [his] temples with the smell of earth and salt. The wondrous peace of this sleeping summer flooded into [him]" (p. 116). This last description hauntingly echoes with the surroundings of the countryside where Meursault's mother spent her last days, marking his final days as well. Finally, Meursault realizes "[f]or the first time in a very long time [he] thought of mother" (p. 116) as if to reinforce that their reunification is at hand.

Identifying with the aggressor

When it comes to the Oedipal triangle, the father plays the primary role of an aggressor. However, as the child's superego develops, he adapts by incorporating his father's personality traits into his superego. "[I]dentification with the aggressor,' which, A. Freud points out, is a common 'stage in the normal development of the superego.' The child internalizes the criticism of his elders, making their characteristics and opinions his own" (as cited in Appignanesi & Forrester, 1992, p. 294). Through this identification with the aggressor, the father becomes a role model rather than a rival.

Interestingly enough, both Meursault and Fleck lack an ideal father figure. In *The Outsider*, Meursault's father is mentioned only once in the entire book. The only thing Meursault remembers about his father is that one time his father went to witness a public execution of a murderer. He recalls how his father, despite not having sufficient nerve, could not stop himself from beholding that inhuman act. Though as a child he could not grasp his father's voyeuristic curiosity, but now he understands that it was perfectly natural, "nothing was more important than executions and that, in actual fact, they were

the only thing a man could really be interested in!” (Camus, 1987, p. 106). He also contemplates, though vainly, that if he ever gets out of prison, he will watch every execution from that point onward.

This identification of Meursault with his father is crucial because if we consider that Meursault is a child, as per Stoltzfus (1989), this is the moment his superego inures his father’s personality characteristics. He comprehends the finality of death, as his father did once, and realizes there is no escape from it as he indicates, “what was wrong with the guillotine was that you had no chance at all, absolutely none” (Camus, 1987, p. 107). Nonetheless, he makes the Sisyphean peace with his fate, and as his last wish, he denotes, “there should be a crowd of spectators at [his] execution and that they should greet [him] with cries of hatred” (Camus, 1987, p. 117). This theatricality marks the fall of an absurd antihero whose flaw is that he does not believe in the pretensions of society.

Fleck, on the other hand, never knew his biological father since he was adopted, or rather anonymously found by his mentally unstable mother. Here the argument can be made whether Fleck is indeed adopted or not since his mother claims that Thomas Wayne has forged the medical documents about Fleck’s adoption to conceal the fact that Wayne is Fleck’s biological father. Nonetheless, between the verbal assertion of a mental patient and the tangible medical documents, the latter one will always be considered as indisputable truth. In any case, the idea of a father is fragmented to Fleck and shared by three individual father figures. These three are — his mother’s abusive boyfriend, Thomas Wayne the billionaire, and Murray Franklin who is a talk show host and comedian. The primary role of the father is assumed by his mother’s abusive boyfriend. While Fleck was being molested, his superego embodied that violence and he identified himself with the abuser-aggressor for the first time. His violent and sadistic nature was well-repressed until provoked. The first reactionary act on Fleck’s part is when he defends himself and kills the three harassers on the subway. Like Meursault’s killing of the Arab, this is the first enactment where Fleck solely reacts on his will.

Thomas Wayne is the rival father figure toward whom Fleck projects his hatred like a son. This hatred has a twofold reason, one is conscious, the other is unconscious. Fleck learns from a letter written by his mother addressed to Wayne that reads “your son and I need your help” (Phillips, 2019, 48:29). Previously unaware that Wayne is his father, this revelation ignites the unconscious hatred for Wayne in Fleck for abandoning him and his mother. However, the claim is untrue, and this is yet another one of his mother’s deceptions. Upon confrontation, Wayne clarifies that he cannot be Fleck’s father since Fleck is adopted and his mother is “crazy” (1:06:43), both of the facts are supported by medical documents, which Fleck was ignorant of until now. The conscious reason for Fleck’s contempt for Wayne is his utter disregard for people like Fleck. Wayne also shows his grief for the three young men killed on the subway by the masked murderer, which is Fleck himself, and calls the murderer a “clown” (Phillips, 2019, 39:40) for not being able to make anything out of his life. This remark about the clown remains subdued in his subconscious and gradually reinforces his alter-ego.

Lastly, Murray Franklin is Arthur’s role model and ideal father figure. Identifying with him, Fleck idolizes Franklin and wants to pursue the career of a comedian. Such is his obsession with the talk show host that once he daydreams about an

imaginary interaction between him and Franklin where the latter invites him on the stage and says, “all this, the lights, the show, the audience, all that stuff; I’d give it all up in a heartbeat to have a kid like you” (Phillips, 2019, 15:01). This vision explicitly reflects Fleck’s ache for an idealistic father, but that last hope also evaporates when Franklin mocks Fleck on his show one day. The talk show host plays a clip of Fleck on his show where Fleck repeatedly tries and fails to deliver a joke because of his laughing fits. While ridiculing Fleck for thinking that being a comedian is easy, Franklin calls him a “joker” (Phillips, 2019, 59:48). This unanticipated comment from a person he almost worships completely pushes Fleck over the threshold of sanity.

Utterly unhinged, Fleck realizes no one takes him seriously, which echoes in his statement, “I used to think my life was a tragedy. But now I realize, it’s a [expletive removed] comedy” (Phillips, 2019, 1:21:09). Toward the end, Fleck is, in fact, invited to appear on Franklin’s show where he kills Franklin on live television, fortifying the need for the symbolic killing of the father, except making it literal again. Upon finalizing the separation from both of his parent figures and confronting reality without any false hope, Fleck completes his metamorphosis as the Joker. The clown mask becomes the new mascot of mayhem and the Joker, its ambassador. Arthur is an emblem of the sad clown phenomenon, yet he laughs the last laugh. This spectacular collapse of the system marks the rise of an absurd antihero who is the byproduct of a broken society.

Conclusion

Meursault and Arthur Fleck are most alike in the way they reason with their realities, accept their fates, and extract happiness from their destinations. Both of them happily embrace their destinies; however, one through accepting the inescapability of the guillotine, while the other through retaining the notoriety of a murderer that society has forced him to become. Happiness has played a subjective and oxymoronic role in both of their lives. Standing so close to his death, Meursault realizes “[he]’d been happy, and that [he] was still happy” (Camus, 1987, p. 117); vice versa, minutes before murdering his mother, Arthur has the revelation that he has always hated the name Happy and declares “I haven’t been happy one minute of my entire [expletive removed] life” (Phillips, 2019, 1:20:49). Their conception of happiness is diametrically opposing — this awakening about always being happy and never being happy makes them entirely antithetical. Yet both Meursault and Fleck have measured happiness with the scale of death and reconciled with reality in the end. This reconciliation ultimately unites them on the same platform where everyone perceives their grandeur of acceptance.

Endnote

- ¹ Schadenfreudian is a compound of *Schaden* (damage/harm), *Freude* (joy), and *-ian* (relating to/like). *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2022) defines Schadenfreude, which is a borrowed word from German, as the emotional experience of pleasure derived from another person’s misfortune. Etymologically Schadenfreudian means relating to this feeling of Schadenfreude.

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