

**‘That rug really tied the room together’**  
Knitting Dudeism and Camusian Philosophy into a  
Larger Tapestry

A dissertation submitted to the University of Mumbai for the M. A.  
Honours (Research) Degree in English

Submitted by

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## STATEMENT BY THE CANDIDATE

As required by University Ordinance 770, I wish to state that the dissertation titled **‘That rug really tied the room together’: Knitting Dudeism and Camusian Philosophy into a Larger Tapestry**, submitted by me in partial fulfilment for a Master’s Degree in English, is my own work. This work has not been submitted for any other degree, or to any other University. Any reference made to previous works of others has been clearly indicated and included in the Works Cited.

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Elloit Cardozo

(Candidate)

Certified by

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Dr. Sachin Labade

(Research Guide)

## **CERTIFICATE OF THE GUIDE**

I certify that the M.A. Honours with Research dissertation titled **‘That rug really tied the room together’**: **Knitting Dudeism and Camusian Philosophy into a Larger Tapestry** by Elloit Cardozo represents his original work which was carried out by him at the University of Mumbai, under my guidance and supervision in the academic year 2016 –17.

I further certify that the foregoing statements made by him in regard to his dissertation are correct.

Signature of the Guide

(Dr. Sachin Labade)

Place: Mumbai

Date: 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2017

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Elloit Cardozo

## **Dedication**

To Dudeists all around the globe. To Shubham and Vignesh, who make life better in ways they hardly realize. To my parents and my brothers. To baby Neil.

## A Note to the Readers

Given the nature of the subject to be discussed, apart from quoting extensively from *The Big Lebowski* and other Dudeist sources, this dissertation has also made extensive use of the Lebowski Lexicon: a collection of lexical items borrowed from *The Big Lebowski*, which is now an integral part of The Dudeist discourse. This has been done in keeping with the spirit of the topic being discussed and not to make the study obscure, cryptic or inaccessible to the readers in any way. A comprehensive list of all such lexical items that have been employed in the dissertation, in order of appearance, is provided at the end, in the Endnotes. However, to best understand the Lebowski Lexicon in all of its possible implications, it is advised that the readers first watch *The Big Lebowski* before venturing to read this dissertation.

# 1.

## Inner-duction<sup>i</sup>

“What is a religion, after all, but a cult that caught on?” (Benjamin and Eutsey 12)<sup>1</sup>

A very interesting “train of thought”<sup>ii</sup> (The Stranger, *The Big Lebowski*)<sup>2</sup> is set into motion through this simple yet debatable statement made in *The Abide Guide: Living Like Lebowski* (2011). Taking a look at a couple of the definitions of a “cult” according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* will serve well for the discussion that follows. A “cult” has been defined as “a way of life, an attitude, an idea etc. that has become very popular” and “a small group of people who have extreme religious beliefs and who are not a part of any established religion” (Hornby 373). This seems to be exactly the case with several religions: their roots lie in instances of what could be classified as recalcitrant behaviour and “what-have-you”<sup>iii</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*). For instance, Jesus Christ was arrested and crucified by the Jews for preaching a way of life that did not go down too well with the authorities and even Siddhartha Gautama’s choice to renounce his father’s kingdom, though not exactly rebellious, might not have been looked at as the best of choices when he made it. The fact that the ideas they preached later went on to become religions with legions of followers is testimony to the fact that the claim made by *The Abide Guide: Living Like Lebowski* is not “dead in the water”<sup>iv</sup> (Donny, *TBL*).

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<sup>1</sup>All further references to *The Abide Guide: Living Like Lebowski* will appear within the text in parenthesis as (TAG).

<sup>2</sup>All further references to *The Big Lebowski* will appear within the text in parenthesis as (TBL).

Ethan and Joel Coen's film *The Big Lebowski* (1998), despite being a "goddamn plane crashed into the mountain"<sup>v</sup> (*The Big Lebowski*, *TBL*) on its initial release, has gradually gone on to gain a cult following and even sees an annual travelling festival, dedicated to it, celebrated over various cities in the USA since 2002 and in the UK since 2007. The film even got added to the USA's National film registry in 2014 in acknowledgement of its being "culturally, historically or aesthetically" significant in order to "protect a crucial element of American creativity, culture and history" ("Cinematic Treasures Named to National Film Registry" n.p.). This just goes on to prove that the film is "not exactly a lightweight"<sup>vi</sup> (Walter, *TBL*). The "cult" of the film eventually "caught on" in 2005 when Dudeism, also known as the Church of the Latter-Day Dude, a religion inspired largely by the film was formally established. Despite initially being derided as a mock religion and even being seen as an over-hyped cult by some, as of 2014, Dudeism boasted at least 300,000 ordained priests worldwide (Dudeism.com) out of which, at least 3,000 were reported to be Irish. Interestingly, as of 2014, this was already higher than the number of Catholic priests in Ireland at the time: 2,800 (Bramhill 3).

Given the film and the religion's growing popularity, academicians eventually realized that "new shit has come to light"<sup>vii</sup> (*The Dude*, *TBL*) and a couple of compilations of papers which looked at the academic perspectives to the film were published. In 2009, Indiana University Bloomington's Edward P. Commentale and University of Louisville's Aaron Jaffe came out with *The Year's Work in Lebowski Studies* as a part of "The Year's Work: Studies in Fan Culture and Cultural Theory", a series of five academic journals. It consisted of papers by 21 "fans and scholars" and contained "neither arid analyses nor lectures for the late-night crowd, but new ways of thinking and writing about film culture" ("The Year's Work in Lebowski Studies" n.p.). This was followed in 2013 by The Church of the Latter-Day Dude's own *Lebowski 101: Limber-Minded Investigations Into The Greatest Story Ever Blathered*, a

compilation of “over 40 essays covering a wide range of subjects” with contributions from “limber-minded writers, scholars, and bums” (“Lebowski 101” n.p.). Most of the attention that Dudeism has been getting, up to this point, naturally emanates from the growing popularity of the film. However, Dudeists contend that Dudeism is not a religion based entirely on a film. To them, The Dude is just an example of how people should live their lives and “what-have-you”. They do not worship The Dude. To them, he is merely “a brother Shamus”<sup>viii</sup> (Da Fino, *TBL*). According to them, this way-of-life that The Dude embodies has been in existence right since the beginning of time, in one form or the other, through a bunch of people, real and fictional, whom they refer to as the “Great Dudes in History” (“Great Dudes in History” n.p.) such as Lao Tzu, Heraclitus and Jesus Christ among others.

“Dudeism isn’t exactly a culmination; so much as a modern incarnation of a way of being that has always existed, even if it hasn’t been actively promoted by the powers-that-be” (Tabrys and Benjamin n.p.).

Dudeism openly admits to weaving in strands from multiple sources such as “*The Big Lebowski*, Taoism, Zen, Humanism and much more” (Dudeism.com). Dudeism then, can be called “an open-source attempt to remake religion that fits with modern times” (Benjamin qtd. in Rush n.p.). Hence, it is not without an “*Achtung baby!*”<sup>ix</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) that both *The Big Lebowski* and Dudeism, in fan theories as well as in academic readings, have often been associated with several philosophies and schools of thought.

One such philosophy that is often associated with the *The Big Lebowski* is Albert Camus’ philosophy of the Absurd. Bryan N. Baird, in “Existentialism, Absurdity and *The Big Lebowski*” (2012), tries to draw connections between the philosophy of the Absurd and the film. While Baird acknowledges The Dude’s encounter with absurdity, he does not do much more with it:

When The Dude confronts characters such as The Big Lebowski and the sheriff of Malibu, he encounters something essentially different from himself, something alien and unfamiliar... There is a disconnect between worlds in these encounters that closely mirrors what the existentialist Albert Camus (1913-1960) meant by absurdity. (137)

What he instead does is that he looks at the film as a work of art and weaves into it Camus' and Sartre's notions of absurdity. Baird proposes that the notion of the Absurd that comes out through *The Big Lebowski* is more akin to Sartre's notion of it than Camus'. A similar discussion to this is also taken up in "Bowling, Despair and American Nihilism" (2012) by Evan Brown and Peter S Fosl. They argue, among a few other things, that The Dude does not adhere to the Camusian notion of the Absurd Man. This discussion will be taken up in some detail in the final chapter of this dissertation.

*The Big Lebowski* has been given the "handle"<sup>x</sup> (The Stranger, *TBL*) of "[t]he first cult movie of the internet age" (Jones 228). It is not very surprising then that "[f]or years, Dudeism existed only on the internet and in the minds of people" (Benjamin, "The Gospel According To The Dude: How The Big Lebowski Inspired A Religion" 234). A considerably large part of the various analyses of the film hence comes through online forums, blogs and fan theories. One of many such blog posts that came up with an intriguing interpretation of the film, at the time, is one by Joel Harker titled "The Philosophy of the Absurd in *The Big Lebowski*" (2008). Harker asserts that the film is a modern adaptation of Albert Camus' novel, *The Stranger* (1942), and even goes on to call The Dude an American version of Camus' Meursault. Harker also sees the film as having parallels with Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) and, as an extension, The Dude as displaying similarities with the mythical figure of Sisyphus. Another element that is often mentioned as a reference to the connections between *The Big Lebowski* and *The Stranger* is the cowboy narrator of the film, who is given

the “handle” of *The Stranger* in the film credits. Stances towards this claim, however, tend to differ. While some like James Kerr believe that the connection is “far out”<sup>xii</sup> (*The Dude, TBL*), as is seen in his article “Psychological Analysis of *The Dude*” (2013). There are some others like Bill Green, Ben Peskoe, Will Russell, and Scott Shuffitt who, like it is mentioned in their book *I'm a Lebowski, You're a Lebowski: Life, The Big Lebowski, and What Have You* (2013), believe that the claim is “dead in the water.” One could perhaps say that “yeah, well, you know, that’s just like your opinion, man”<sup>xiii</sup> (*The Dude, TBL*). While we can “allow”<sup>xiii</sup> (*The Stranger, TBL*) that the parallel between the name that the narrator of the film is credited with and the title of Camus’ novel, is one that is often invoked, it must also be pointed out as one that has seldom been analysed in detail. Hence, we see that, even though parallels between the philosophy of Albert Camus and *The Big Lebowski* have been drawn repeatedly, a sustained enquiry into several possible dimensions of the matter is yet to have been conducted.

This dissertation, hence, makes an attempt to conduct the aforementioned enquiry in some detail. In doing this, the study will try to analytically compare Camusian philosophy and Dudeism and bring out the similarities between them. This does not imply that there are no differences between the two; but the focus of this study is the similarities and not the differences. Dudeism, for the purpose of this study, will not be restricted to *The Dude* and the literature written on *The Dude* and Dudeism. It will also be expanded to accommodate certain other parts of the larger discourse of Ethan and Joel Coen’s filmography as well as a few other parts of *The Big Lebowski* itself. It is crucial, however, to “draw a line in the sand”<sup>xiv</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) at the very outset. In embarking on a comparative analysis between Camusian philosophy and Dudeism, this study does not intend to propose that one of them is influenced by the other and “what-have-you.” Instead, it simply attempts to point out some of the discursive elements that they share with each other as well as with several of the sub-

discourses they comprise of. The analysis in the dissertation that follows is split into three major chapters:

1. ‘Well, I’ll tell you what I’m blathering about’: An analytical frame of reference.
2. ‘You can’t be worried about that shit, life goes on, man’: Life, Death and Absurdity in Camus and Dudeism.
3. ‘Somebody this square community won’t give a shit about’: Camus’ Absurd Man and Dudeism

The first chapter, “‘Well, I’ll tell you what I’m blathering about’: An analytical frame of reference”, provides an analytical framework for the discussions that follow in the rest of the dissertation. It is further divided into three sections. The first section lays out a basic understanding of a few fundamental ideas of Dudeism for the readers. The second section discusses a few important aspects of the philosophy of Albert Camus. The third section briefly establishes the connections between Dudeism and the philosophy of Camus which are examined in greater detail later in the study.

The second chapter, “‘You can’t be worried about that shit, life goes on, man’: Life, Death and Absurdity in Camus and Dudeism” looks at Camus’ takes on Life, Death and Absurdity while also pointing out the parallels they seem to strike with Dudeism. The chapter is further divided into four sections. The first section examines strands of Camusian thought, especially the Absurd in the other films of Ethan and Joel Coen before establishing a connection to *The Big Lebowski*. The second section explores the attitudes towards Death in Camusian philosophy and Dudeism. The third section compares the ideologies of Life in the works of Camus and Dudeism. The fourth and final section explores parallels between Camus’ novel *The Stranger* and The Stranger: the cowboy narrator of *The Big Lebowski*.

The third chapter picks up on the Camusian trope of the Absurd Man and its relation to Happiness in both: the works of Camus as well as the discourses of Dudeism. It comprises of three sections. The first section explores the notion of Alienation in Camusian philosophy and Dudeism and looks at how it eventually leads to the trope of the Absurd Man in Camus. The second section explores Camus' creation of the Absurd Man through the Cycle of the Absurd and looks at how it fits into Dudeism. The third and final section delves into a comparison of the Absurd Man's quest for Happiness in Camus and Dudeism.

## 2.

### **‘Well, I’ll tell you what I’m blathering about’: An analytical frame of reference**

Given the contemporary nature of Dudeism as an organized religion, it is quite normal for people to “have no frame of reference”<sup>xv</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) when talking about it. It makes little sense then, to delve into an analytical comparison of the matter at hand “like a child who wanders into the middle of a movie”<sup>xvi</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) wanting to know what is happening. The aim of this chapter, hence, is to provide an analytical “frame of reference” for the discussions that follow in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation. The first section of this chapter tries to lay out a basic understanding of Dudeism and its views and philosophy for the readers. The second section discusses a few important, recurrent themes in Camusian philosophy. The third and final section attempts to “really tie the room together”<sup>xvii</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*) by pointing out a few similarities between Camusian philosophy and Dudeism.

#### **2.1 ‘The Dude Abides’: What is Dudeism?**

Dudeism or The Church of the Latter-Day Dude, a religion that was only officially established only in 2005 has been described as “...the slowest-growing religion in the world. An ancient philosophy that preaches non-preachiness, practices as little as possible...” (“Dudeists Of The World Unite!” n.p.). The religion was founded by Oliver Benjamin, an American journalist and author based in Thailand and Los Angeles. The religion is largely inspired by the protagonist of Ethan and Joel Coen’s 1998 film *The Big Lebowski*, The Dude: a man whose “rumped look and relaxed manner suggest a man in whom casualness runs

deep” (Coen and Coen qtd. in Belth 8). It is hence natural that Dudeists (the followers of Dudeism) are often misunderstood as a group of people that worship The Dude. To this, The Dudeists contend that:

Dudeism, as a religion, it’s not based on a movie, but on thousands years old principles aimed at living a simpler, better life flowing around obstacles while enjoying the trip. A real-life trip Dudes, not the acid flashback type... Though we dig The Dude’s style, and we’ve even written books referencing him, he’s just an example to show some features of what Dudeism is or might become. The Dude is not Dudeism. (Favro n.p.)

Hence, despite only being formally established in 2005, Dudeism is believed to have been in existence since a long time before that. It is believed that “Dudeism is not some new shit that has come to light; it has existed since the dawn of civilization and that *The Big Lebowski* is only its New Testament” (Benjamin, *The Tao of The Dude* 7)<sup>3</sup>. Hence, in acknowledgement of The Dudeist ideas that have existed since before Dudeism was formally organized, Dudeism has a section called “Great Dudes in History” dedicated to “[p]illars of Dudeism” who are “Dudeist prophets and peacemakers” and “have existed throughout history” (“Great Dudes in History” n.p.). It can be contended whether or not Dudeism is a religion at all since many people see it merely as “a modern version of ancient Chinese Taoism which uses the film *The Big Lebowski* as its primary liturgical vehicle” (*TOD* 3). This statement can be better understood keeping in mind the claim that “though the *Tao Te Ching* is the principal holy book of Taoism, it might be said that the true text of Taoism is actually nature itself” (Benjamin, “Introduction” 10). Dudeism’s teachings, just like Taoism, recommend that one should be in harmony with the world around them. Even The Dudeists for that matter, do not

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<sup>3</sup>All further references to *The Tao of the Dude* will appear within the text in parenthesis as (*TOD*).

see Dudeism as a religion in the strictest of senses. They refuse to call Dudeism a religion in the sense of worshipping, arguing that ““faith” is not the preferred nomenclature—“worldview,” please” (Eutsey, “The Take It Easy Manifesto” n.p.). However, in contesting how and why it is a religion, the followers of Dudeism provide an important framework to understand Dudeism:

The beauty of Dudeism is its simplicity. Once a religion gets too complex, everything can go wrong.

That’s why the “To What/From What/By What Means” method of identifying a religion is a great way to summarize The Dudeist ethos for your un-Dude friends...

...From what is Dudeism trying to liberate us? *Thinking that’s too uptight.*

To what state of being is Dudeism trying to bring us: *Just taking it easy, man.*

By what means does Dudeism attempt do this? *Abiding* [emphasis in original]

(Eutsey, “The Take It Easy Manifesto” n.p.)

The Dudeists, hence, in contending that Dudeism is a religion, do not use the word in the most traditionally understood sense. Dudeism, therefore is not a religion if one’s perception of a religion is, as the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* lays it out, “the belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected to the worship of them” or “one of the systems of faith that are based on the belief in the existence of a particular god or gods” (Hornby 1279). However, if one’s notion of religion is that it is “a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects” or “something one believes in and follows devotedly” (Dictionary.com), then Dudeism most certainly qualifies as a religion. It is chiefly through the aforementioned framework laid out by Dwayne Eutsey that this study will try to establish a basic understanding of Dudeism.

Without spending any further time trying to “split hairs”<sup>xviii</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) over whether or not Dudeism is a religion, it must be pointed out that one can clearly see Dudeism’s worldview as being based on a belief that it is futile to be a part of the rat-race that civilization and its “real reactionaries”<sup>xix</sup> expects us to and end up making our thinking too “uptight”<sup>xx</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*). Dudeism, in this sense can be called “a humanistic rejection of civilization itself, or at least, of its worst excesses” (Benjamin, “The Gospel According To The Dude” 234). What Dudeism essentially suggests is that instead of getting caught up in the never-ending conundrum to accumulate “bones or clams or whatever you call them”<sup>xxi</sup> (Maude, *TBL*), we just kick back and enjoy life. Dudeism, unlike many other religions, does not concern itself with the theories of how the world came into being or prophecies of how it will come to an end. Instead it is “all about remembering how to live the right way in These Here Times” (*TAG* 91). Dudeism believes that “You can’t be worried about that shit. Life goes on, man.” (The Dude, *TBL*). This essentially underlines the idea that not everything that happens around us is in our control and hence, it is futile to be worried about what we cannot control and letting our thinking get too “uptight”. This idea is perfectly reflected in The Dudeist Affirmation that reads:

Dude, I shall Abide  
 With the things I cannot change,  
 Give a shit about what I can change,  
 And not be a fucking moron  
 Who doesn’t know the difference. (GMS n.p.)

Dudeism, hence, clearly vouches for not letting our thinking get too “uptight” by worrying over things we cannot control. Another crucial aspect to not letting one’s thinking get “uptight” is to be accommodative and not dismiss others’ views and ideas as diminutive.

According to Oliver Benjamin “Dudeism is compatible with any worldview that promotes peace, peace-of-mind, and doing no harm to others” (*TOD* 3). That is to say that, Dudeism as a religion, does not seek to proselytize and is rather accommodative. In this sense, Dudeism embraces some of the teachings of traditional religions, albeit, with a Dudeist twist. For instance, Dudeism believes that:

We should treat strangers with kindness and accommodation, but not because they are gods who will punish us if we don’t. We should be dude to them because they are reflections of ourselves—just like The Dude’s face in the “Are You a Lebowski Achiever?” mirror is an oblique reflection of the millionaire. (*TAG* 42)

This brings in an extremely important idea for Dudeists which otherwise seems irrelevant when The Dude says, “Yeah? Well, you know, that’s just like your opinion, man” (*The Dude, TBL*). Dudeism advises taking this stance over differences in opinions or disagreements to the extent that even the very teachings of Dudeism are open to opinions and interpretations, there are no strict lines drawn. An extremely interesting phenomenon is how the word “Dude” transforms from a personal noun to both, a non-personal noun and an adjective in Dudeism. It becomes much more than a reference to the protagonist of Ethan and Joel Coen’s film:

A central teaching in Dudeism is to “[i]ntend to do no harm” (Eutsey, “The Brotherhood Shamus” n.p.). By extension, Dudeism seems to align itself with Pacifism and promote peaceful co-existence, in not just being accommodative of differences, but also in helping

others when they are in need and saying “I’ll be there, man” (The Dude, *TBL*). This is what Dudeism calls “The Dude Way”:

Despite their wandering dodder,

The Dude Way is to treat everyone as a compeer.

Because this whole fucking thing—

It’s only, just, like, our opinion, man... (Benjamin, *The Dude De Ching* 300)

This can be seen as a way to avoid “uptight” thinking towards others, by treating them as compeers. In advocating these ideas, what Dudeism essentially tries to do is to make us realize that we can all be “a brother Shamus” to someone or the other, if not everyone.

Moving on to the second important idea in the framework, The Dudeists take much respite in the retort “[j]ust take it easy, man”<sup>xxii</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*). This essentially translates to having a laidback attitude towards life. Due to this, it has often been contended that The Dude and by extension, Dudeism advocates laziness. The most fitting response to this would be that:

The Dude is lazy, but not apathetic, as he shows by readily embracing work that he wants to do. The Dude’s maintenance of this lifestyle is philosophical, though, not outright political. The Dude proves that he cares more about the ideals of leisure more than any political movement by placing a picture of Richard Nixon bowling on his wall. (Cohen 195-196)

Reuben J. Cohen points out that The Dude only does the work that he finds interesting and stimulating, as is advocated by the “the original Port Huron Statement, not the compromised second draft” (The Dude, *TBL*) of which The Dude claims to have been a co-author. By extension, one can say that Dudeism advocates only doing what one finds stimulating and interesting. This can be seen as a scathing critique of the contemporary times where people

chase careers with “bones and clams”, and varied notions of ‘success’ as their primary targets. One could say that Dudeism sidesteps this trend and suggests that a career should be made out of what one enjoys doing, making work seem like play. According to Dudeism, as long as one has enough “bones and clams” to “feed the monkey”<sup>xxiii</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*), life can be very fulfilling as long as one learns to enjoy the smaller joys of life. The dilemma related to modern work culture is perfectly summed up in saying:

“We don’t allow ourselves to ask the question, “What do I love?” and instead focus on “What must I do?” because “What I love” leads down the dangerous unproductive path of leisure, where time is frittered away and career opportunities are lost” (Barclay n.p.).

For Dudeists, hence, “takin’ ‘er easy” is a virtue as opposed to letting one’s thinking get “uptight”. Laziness, in this sense, can be seen as a virtue in Dudeism: if one does what one loves and “just takes it easy”, one will have all the time one wants to laze around. This whole idea of “just take it easy” in Dudeism is closely related to the ancient Taoist concept of *Wu Wei*<sup>4</sup>. However, Dudeism acknowledges that this is not the way of the world:

“To go with the flow, you have to go against the grain. As we’ve said, it’s no easy thing to take it easy” (*TAG* 153).

It can be said that is exactly why Dudeism considers it extremely important to “just take it easy”, because society conditions one into not doing so even though it would be more enriching if one did. The Dudeist slogan of “just take it easy, man” (The Dude, *TBL*) can also

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<sup>4</sup>Loosely translated as “actionless action” or “non-coercive action”... The practitioner of wu wei goes about his or her daily life just as anyone else. The difference is that he or she does not struggle nor contend with obstacles or adversaries. Rather, like water, the wu wei approach will patiently find a way around an impediment or patiently wear it down rather than confront it head on. (Benjamin, “Introduction” 12)

be extended to speak of situations and events beyond one's control. Dudeism advocates trying not to "be a hard-on"<sup>xxiv</sup> (Smokey, *TBL*) about things. This builds closely into not letting one's thinking get too "uptight".

A moment in *The Big Lebowski* that the whole of Dudeism reverts and is largely based on, is when the cowboy narrator tells The Dude to take it easy and gets this legendary line as a response:

"Yeah. Well, The Dude abides" (The Dude, *TBL*).

This is an idea that "draws a lot of water"<sup>xxv</sup> (The Chief of Police of Malibu, *TBL*) as far as Dudeism is concerned. This line by The Dude serves as an epiphany to a great extent for the audience. "Abides", here, can be understood in the sense of enduring without yielding. After the complicated sequence of events that unfold in the course of the film, The Dude's ability to keep his equanimity is something that Dudeism reverts. It is apt to say that "The Dude picks up on the word "abide" from *The Big Lebowski* himself and deems it befitting the core philosophy of all things Dude" (Bertocci 17). The act of abiding essentially characterizes The Dude: his identity stamp, so to say, is his ability to keep his equanimity in any given situation. This is one of the central ideas of Dudeism, that one must abide and maintain a state of equanimity through "strikes and gutters, ups and downs"<sup>xxvi</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*). What The Dude essentially does in abiding, is that he "operate[s] in harmony with the Tao—the natural "way" of our world's living systems" (*TOD* 11-12). This can be seen as an idea from ancient Taoism that advocates going with the flow of things and being in harmony with the world around us. It can also be seen as a guideline to deal with the things that one is surrounded by including "real reactionaries". This is perfectly exemplified when one juxtaposes the act of "abiding" with the endless conundrum of the achievement-oriented society we live in:

Abiding is no easy feat, especially in a culture that is success driven, instant-gratification oriented, and pathologically impatient like ours. True abiding is a spiritual gift, mastered only, it would seem, by the more fully evolved among us.

(Falsani 61)

One can hence say that for Dudeism life is a constant struggle between maintaining one's equanimity against forces that constantly try to disrupt it. That is to say, life is a constant struggle between our efforts to abide and the forces that try to stop us from doing so. To sum up, one could say:

If Dudeism has one central message about life, it is this: No problem, man. That is, life is only a drag if we make it so. It's our roll, Dude, and up to us not only to score, but to have a good time while doing so and deal with the consequences when gutterballs are thrown. We can choose to enter a "world of pain" or we can "take it easy." As The Dude puts it, it's all "just, like, our opinion, man." (Benjamin, "The Gospel According To The Dude" 235)

## **2.2 'Not exactly a lightweight': Albert Camus and his philosophy**

Born on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1913, Albert Camus was a French journalist, novelist and playwright. Despite his staunch opposition to systematic philosophy, it is commonly believed that Camus was a philosophical writer as well. Given that Camus asked several existential questions in the process of formulating his ideas of the Absurd, it is understandable that there has always been an ongoing debate as to whether Camus should be classified as an Existentialist or an Absurdist. On being asked whether or not he is an Existentialist, Camus said flat-out, "No, I am not an existentialist" (Camus qtd. in Lea n.p.). He went on to point out that "The Myth of Sisyphus", the only book of ideas that he has published, is directed against the so-called

Existentialist philosophers. On being called an Absurdist, Camus said that in analysing the feeling of the Absurd in “The Myth of Sisyphus”, he was “looking for a method and not a doctrine” and “simply practicing methodical doubt” (Camus qtd. in Lea n.p.) It must be pointed out that Camus insisted that he did “not believe sufficiently in reason to believe in a system” (Aronson n.p.). Hence, in acknowledgement of the wide applicability of his philosophy and in order to not “split hairs”, this study will not try to classify Camus as either as an Existentialist or an Absurdist philosopher and refer to his philosophy as just that: Camusian philosophy. When it comes to the central idea of his philosophy, one could say:

“Camus’ philosophy can be read as a sustained effort to demonstrate and not just assert what is entailed by the absurdity of human existence” (Aronson n.p.).

A large part of Camus’ philosophy revolves around his notion of the Absurd and the response to it. Camus’ notion of absurdity is best understood in an image: that of Sisyphus trying to roll a rock to the top of a mountain only for it to roll back down and him to roll it back up in an endless cycle. Camus believes that human life, just like Sisyphus’ struggle is essentially absurd and ultimately amounts to very little. Hence, in all the long, drawn-out attempts to decode the essence of life, man is essentially “out of his element”<sup>xxvii</sup> (Walter, *TBL*). The Absurd for Camus, as is quite often misunderstood, is not the perpetual conflict between the meaninglessness of life and the human struggle to constantly create meaning. On the contrary Camus believes that the Absurd “is an experience to be lived through, a point of departure, the equivalent, in existence, of Descartes’s methodical doubt” (Camus, “The Rebel” 8). Another common misconception is that, in using the term “absurd” to describe the world, Camus tries to state that the world’s existence makes no sense. Camus’ actual ideas on the matter, however, were a little more nuanced:

Strictly speaking, the world is not absurd in itself: it simply is. The absurd arises from this confrontation between man's appeal and the irrational silence of the world... The feeling of the absurd can arise in a variety of ways, through, for example, the perception of Nature's indifference to man's values and ideals, through recognition of the finality of death, or through the shock caused by the sudden perception of the pointlessness of life's routine. (Copleston 392-393)

Camus, in "The Myth of Sisyphus", goes on to discuss what the appropriate human response to the Absurd is: "*L'homme absurde* [The Absurd Man] has, we are told, three options open to him: "philosophical suicide", "physical annihilation" and "revolt"" (McBride 43).

"Philosophical suicide" is essentially resorting to a transcendent source or entity as a means of escaping the absurdity of the human world. Camus points out how philosophers like Husserl and Kierkegaard, both realize the absurdity of the human condition, but in resorting to faith, commit what he calls "philosophical suicide" (Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus" 20)<sup>5</sup>. In doing this, he argues that they indulge in a "thought [that] negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation" (MS 28). Hence, he sees this as an inept response to absurdity as it serves "not to resolve the problem posed by the Absurd but to dissolve it" (McBride 44). The problem with this sort of response, one might also argue, is that "If I am what I have and what I have is lost, who then am I?" (Fromm qtd. in Naylor n.p.) Hence, "Camus rejects this transcendence and tries to entice us to shape our lives without seeking such external meaning" (Golomb 120). The only way to successfully escape the human condition of absurdity for Camus, is by committing suicide. Camus spends some time discussing suicide as a possible response to life's Absurdity because he believes that:

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<sup>5</sup>All further references to "The Myth of Sisyphus" will appear within the text in parenthesis as (MS).

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest... comes afterwards” (MS 4).

Camus believes that suicide is a complete opting out, an act of surrendering to the absurdity of life. The problem with suicide, according to Camus, is that in committing it one takes the absurdity of life to be a conclusion, whereas he argues that it must be taken as a starting point from which everything else must ultimately be determined. He argues that the Absurd demands an answer and calls for a revolt. In committing suicide however, he believes one destroys the very questioning subject and escapes the absurdity instead of revolting against it. In denying the absurdity of the human condition, one might try to live a life that centres on acquisitions, accomplishments and possessions. The third and the final possible response to absurdity for Camus, is to “revolt.” This is a concept that is frequently misunderstood, one must hence, define it both in the negative as well as the positive: “[i]t is defined, negatively, by the rejection of suicide as well as of faith and, positively, by the Absurd man’s decision to live his life in conscious awareness of its meaninglessness” (McBride 45). Camus hence describes it as “a common confrontation between man and his obscurity” and facing “the certainty of a crushing fate without the resignation that ought to accompany it” (MS 36). Essentially, to revolt is to internalize the fact that life is full of “strikes and gutters, ups and downs.”

The purpose of human life, Camus believes is not to live happy, but to die happy. And in order to die happy, he argued, one must rebel. In order to die happy, one must have a will to live with a complete acceptance of life in all of its absurdity:

“Camus recommends acceptance and affirmation of life even if it lacks transcendent meaning. The solution to absurdity is not to escape to philosophy or suicide, but, rather, to accept it as a given” (Golomb 123).

Living hence means coming to terms with rather than avoiding and this coming to terms with, Camus believes, could be done by means of rebellion. In order to die happy, one must avoid being sucked into a mechanical, prescribed lifestyle while still fully accepting the fact that one’s life will essentially amount to nothing. Camus asserted that:

“[T]he only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that [one’s] very existence is an act of rebellion” (qtd. in Kechichian n.p.).

Camus was hence, of the opinion that while one must embrace the absurdity of life, one must not surrender to it and carry on living in a state of absolute freedom. However, he also seems to be acutely aware of how it is easy both: for these ideas to be misinterpreted as well as overcompensated:

[H]e became convinced that the feeling of the absurd, taken by itself, can be used to justify anything, murder included. ‘If one believes in nothing, if nothing makes sense, if we can assert no value whatsoever, everything is permissible and nothing is important. . . . One is free to stoke the crematory fires or to give one’s life to the care of lepers.’ (Copleston 394)

He realized that in taking these ideas to the extreme and believing that “the goddamn plane has crashed into the mountain”, one might very well descend into a nihilistic despair and go on a rampage, completely disregarding every form of value. This however, would be a horrendous misinterpretation of Camus’ ideas:

“He was convinced however that man cannot live without values. If he chooses to live, by that very fact he asserts a value, that life is good or worth living or should be made worth living” (Copleston 397).

These ideas are best understood through Camus’ novel *The Stranger* and his play “Caligula” (written 1938, performed 1945), together with “The Myth of Sisyphus” known as the Cycle of the Absurd. Camus advocates a more peaceful rebellion like the one Meursault embodies in *The Stranger* than the brutal tyranny that Caligula descends into in the play. While Meursault attaches value only to the things that he loves and enjoys doing, Caligula completely rejects any form of value and goes into a rage of fury, disregarding and trying to destroy everything within sight.

### **2.3 ‘Tying the whole room together’: Drawing connections between Camusian philosophy and Dudeism**

From the previous discussions, it must already have become clear that Dudeism shares quite a few similarities with the philosophy of Albert Camus. However, just in order to consolidate the analytical references laid out thus far and to set the groundwork for the rest of this dissertation, we shall venture to eke out a few more similarities between the two.

The most interesting parallel between Camusian philosophy and Dudeism is the approach to traditional religion, in general. Camus, in his discussion on the absurdity of life, clearly does not hold religion in very high regard, because he sees it as an inadequate response to the absurdity of the human condition. On the contrary, it has been previously said that he was of the belief that “religion doesn’t deny the Absurdity of life. Quite the contrary, most religions affirm it and use that to sell their particular version of hope and rationalization” (Solomon 34). As Camus’ philosophy developed with his career, he laid an increasing emphasis on the

revolt against the incorrect actions of powerful groups of humans as opposed to a revolt against the Absurdity of the condition of human life:

“Camus did not indeed renounce his belief ‘that this world has no ultimate meaning’; but he came to lay more and more stress on revolt against injustice, oppression and cruelty rather than on revolt against the human condition as such” (Copleston 394).

On an explicit level, though probably not consciously, this is what The Dude does as well. He tells Walter to stop “waving the fucking gun around” at Smokey and even hits out at The Big Lebowski when he believes he is not getting what he rightfully deserves, saying “this aggression will not stand, man” (The Dude, *TBL*). Another striking similarity is both: Camus’ as well as The Dude’s connection to, as well as detachment from Nihilism. While just like Nihilism, Camus assumes an inherently absurd universe, he however, does advocate picking or maybe even creating a set of values to adhere by, unlike Nihilism. It can be said that in proclaiming oneself a Nihilist, one believes that he/ she believes in nothing; hence negating the whole idea. On the other hand, “[a]lthough The Dude is not foolish enough to proclaim himself a nihilist, his life borders on nihilism” (Hibbs 34).

Throughout *The Big Lebowski*, we constantly see The Dude “abiding.” In “abiding”, The Dude effectually does his best to stick to the way of life or the state of mind (in this case) that he has chosen for himself. In this sense, one can say that The Dude and by extension, Dudeism “abides” by the Camusian belief that:

“[M]an cannot live without values. If he chooses to live, by that very fact he asserts a value, that life is good or worth living or should be made worth living” (Copleston 397).

In Camusian philosophy, it is a given that the cosmos as a whole is indifferent to human life. One of the sources of the feeling of absurdity for Camus, then, can be seen as being the

unfulfilled “expectations of fairness” (Solomon 38). Dudeism can be seen treading along the same path when Walter angrily lambasts the German Nihilists in the film, asking them “Fair? Who’s the fucking nihilists around here, you bunch of fucking cry-babies?” (Walter, *TBL*). Superficially, this seems merely like a criticism of the film’s German Nihilists’ double standards or maybe even Nihilism as whole. However, further probing into it reveals something more interesting. Dudeism’s attitude towards whether or not life is fair can be perfectly summed up in the following words:

“The ability to forgive and forget provides a far greater peace of mind than does obsessing over petty imbalances. *Life is never fair*. But with the right attitude, it can be fabulous” [emphasis added] (*TOD* 294).

Pretty much like Camusian philosophy then, Dudeism seems to point to the fact that one cannot do too much about the fact that life is not fair, so one should stop trying to do anything about it at all.

In previously having conducted a detailed psychoanalysis of The Dude in his article “A Psychological Analysis of Personality: “The Dude” in *The Big Lebowski*”, James Kerr points out that:

Friedman and Schustak (2009) remark that though Camus was “concerned with the fundamental absurdity of existence, [he] nevertheless saw value in the individual’s having the courage to attempt to correct injustice” (p. 318). Again these phenomenological beliefs are exemplified through The Dude’s actions and results in personality test results. The Dude’s P-type and Meyer-Briggs code type support such psychological/ philosophical diagnoses. (309)

It is hence clear that The Dude and by extension, Dudeism definitely lend themselves as parallels to the philosophy of Albert Camus to a fair extent. However, this does not mean that there are no differences between the two. It is just for the sake of this study that we will focus on the similarities.

### 3.

## **‘You can’t be worried about that shit, life goes on, man’: Life, Death and Absurdity in Camus and Dudeism**

In the philosophy of Albert Camus, the fine thread that runs through Life, Death and Absurdity, helping weave them into a larger tapestry, is what “really tie[s] the room together.” This chapter therefore, through its four sections tries to bring out traces of this trinity from Camus’ philosophy in Dudeism. The first section establishes connections between the Existentialist notions of absurdity in Camus and the Coen brothers’ filmography before narrowing down to *The Big Lebowski* and Dudeism, using it as a launch-pad into the discussions to follow. The second section attempts a comparative analysis of the treatment of Death and its connection with Absurdity in Camusian philosophy and Dudeism. The third section tries to trace the trajectory that the aforementioned “trains of thought” take in Camus’ as well as Dudeism’s perceptions of Life. The final section tries to look at whether the cowboy narrator of *The Big Lebowski*, The Stranger can actually be considered as a link between the film and Camus’ novel *The Stranger*, or even Camusian philosophy as a whole, or whether the claim “stinks to high heaven”<sup>xxviii</sup> (Maude, *TBL*).

### **3.1 Camus’ notion of Absurdity, the Coeniverse and Dudeism**

In treating Dudeism as a separate discursive body, it is essential to firstly acknowledge the fact that the creators of its New Testament, *The Big Lebowski*, Ethan and Joel Coen have played a crucial role in shaping it. Also, one needs to pay heed to the fact that *The Big Lebowski* serves as an interdiscursive entity between the Coens’ filmography or the

“Coeniverse” (Falsani 90) and Dudeism, it “really ties the room together.” To begin with, one must hence look at the interdiscursivity between the Coeniverse, Camusian philosophy and Dudeism.

“Their [the Coens’] imaginations were further stoked by the reading of high and low literature, of philosophy (in Ethan's case) with its questions about existence, alienation, and truth...” (Levine 161).

It is hence safe to say that the philosophical underpinnings to the Coens’ films are, to a large extent, deliberate. When attempting to study the traces of Camusian philosophy in *The Big Lebowski*, it makes sense to firstly look at how Camus’ footprints can be found in the rest of the films in Ethan and Joel Coen’s filmography. In this light, it has aptly been pointed out that:

“Filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen presuppose an absurd world. This statement implies more than casual viewers might imagine. True, many images in their films appear at first merely strange, incongruous, or even repulsive” (Gaughran 227).

Gaughran talks at length about how the Coeniverse is rife with a predetermined condition of absurdity. This idea can be seen as a resonation of Camus’ notion of the Absurd when he says in the preface to “The Myth of Sisyphus” that “the absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a starting point” (MS 4).

Daniel Berthold (2013) adeptly points out that both Camus’ and Kierkegaard’s philosophies “start from a shared perception of the forlornness of the human situation” (137). It has also, previously, been said that “[both] Bergson and Camus... find in modern industrial society an emblem of the comic” (Wood 45). In light of these statements, Douglas McFarland’s (2009) claim that the Coens’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and its “serious comic

underpinnings can best be understood through the overlapping concepts of the mechanical, the contradictory and the Absurd articulated by Henri Bergson and Kierkegaard” (41), can be seen in a whole new light. In being influenced by a couple of philosophers who also seem to have left a few traces in the philosophy of Camus, the Coens, in this film too, align their philosophical underpinnings with Camusian thought to a great extent. Anton Chigurh, famously believed to be one of the most chilling characters ever created by the Coens, famously asks the profound question:

“If the rule you follow brought you to this, of what use was the rule?” (*No Country for Old Men*)

Richard Gilmore argues that this is exactly the same idea that “lurks under Camus’ claim that the only real philosophical question is the question of suicide” (64).

Richard Gaugharn discusses at length how various characters in the Coeniverse indulge in what he calls an “Existentialist Role Playing” (227) as a reaction to the absurdity of the human condition. Among other parallels between the work and philosophy of Camus and the Coeniverse, one of the most striking ones is the resemblance between Meursault, the protagonist of Camus’ *The Stranger* and Ed Crane, the protagonist of the Coens’ *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001). Both the men, just moments before their respective death sentences are executed, seem to come to a full realization and acceptance of the whole absurdity of the human condition. Death, in this sense to them is not frightening, but liberating. One can say this because, as they both speculate one realizes that their lives were lived authentically, without ever striving to be the way society wanted or expected them to. It is seen that both of them “are honest about the human condition as they find it, and to some measure they take responsibility for their actions” (Gaughran 238). This turns into the perfect point of resonance for *The Big Lebowski* with Camusian philosophy, the Coeniverse and

Dudeism. Most of The Dude's guilt in the film arises out of a sense of responsibility for his actions. This is clearly seen in how he behaves flustered when the kidnappers send The Big Lebowski a severed toe which they claim is Bunny Lebowski's. It is out of a sense of guilt at his failed ransom drop-off which leads to Bunny's toe being cut off, that The Dude shows an uncharacteristic amount of worry and behaves very "un-Dude"<sup>xxix</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) in going out of his way to make an effort to try and solve the case.

In looking at the intertextuality<sup>6</sup> between Camus' *The Stranger* and by extension Camusian philosophy and *The Big Lebowski* and the whole discourse of Dudeism, it can be said that:

...there are as many ways to approach the existentialist dimensions of The Big Lebowski as there are spent joints on The Dude's ashtray, but the most promising for our purposes is by way of a key term in any existentialist vocabulary: absurdity.  
(Baird 136)

Baird talks about how The Dude disengages himself when he comes in contact with the absurdity of life: the schist between his perception of the world around him and, the reality. The same can be said of Meursault, the protagonist of *The Stranger*. The Dude's disengagement comes more from a matter of conscious choice: retorting with "Well, fuck it" when Jeffery Lebowski starts sermonizing to him or with "I'm sorry. I wasn't listening" (*TBL*) when the Chief of Police of Malibu starts listing reasons for hating The Dude. The Dude's "stonewalling"<sup>xxx</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) of these figures of apparent capitalist authority, in this sense, can be seen as a conscious act of resistance. Meursault, on the other hand falls into trouble because of his inherent disengagement with worldly ways in general and "finds himself standing trial, more for not... acting in accordance to society's norms and laws-

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<sup>6</sup>“how a given text is connected with other texts (broadly understood) and how those texts affect the interpretation of the given text” (Oropeza and Moyise xiii).

rather than for the murder itself” (McKee 61). It is essential however, to point out that in accepting the Absurdity of the universe, The Dude does not let it destroy all sense of semblance for him:

The Dude accepts the basic absurdity of the cosmos, of life in the most advanced civilization ever to grace the face of the earth. His way of life affirms the equal significance or insignificance of all human endeavours, but none of this stops him from judging certain things to be unseemly. (Hibbs 35)

In “The Myth of Sisyphus”, Camus talks about the limits of reason and how it is because the universe is too enormous for the human mind to comprehend that Absurdity actually comes into existence. One could hence say that the universe appears Absurd simply because we as humans are “out of our element.” Similar “trains of thought” are seen in *The Big Lebowski* through the characters of The Dude and The Stranger. Interestingly, the Coens do not just present the limits of human reason in all its nakedness but seem to provide a characteristically implicit commentary on it too. One can say that The Dude seems to have pretty much accepted the limits of human reason as can be seen in his astute refusal to get into lengthy discussions and arguments in trying to ‘reason’ things out. This is best exemplified in the how he repeatedly retorts to saying “fuck it” (The Dude, *TBL*) whenever he realizes the futility of trying to reason things out with someone. Very interestingly, the one time The Dude actually tries to reason things out in the film, he is only reminded of the limits that he seems to have forgotten. The Dude seems to be putting in an uncharacteristically large amount of energy into solving the puzzle of Bunny Lebowski’s kidnapping:

“This is a very complicated case, Maude. You know, a lot of ins, a lot of outs, a lot of what-have-you’s and a lot of strands to keep in my head, man. You know, a lot of strands in the old Duder’s head” (The Dude, *TBL*).

Hence, when he retorts at the end that “The Dude abides” (The Dude, *TBL*), it indicates that the limits of human reason are not something he has not known about. On the contrary, the events that unfolded along the way only seem to have convinced him to go back to his characteristic ways.

Dudeism seems to advocate something extremely similar to this in acknowledging that the universe comprises of a grander scheme of events and will eventually unfold the way it has to and wants to, totally indifferent to our existence:

Rather than feeling nihilistic despair, we take comfort in how, through all of life’s ups and downs and existential absurdities, The Dude abides. And if someone like him can, perhaps so will we, with or without lighting a jay. If we just relax and allow it to, well, the universe will tend to unfold as it should. In other words, it’s a trip. (*TAG* 122-123)

Hence, just like Camusian philosophy, Dudeism too, in a way, acknowledges that absurdity arises largely due to the limits of human reason. It is hence clear that there are several similarities between Dudeism and Camusian philosophy when it comes to the notion of absurdity. However, in having discussed similarities when it comes to attitudes towards absurdity in the two discourses while not addressing their takes on death, one would be leaving out an extremely important element.

### **3.2 The Attitude towards Death in Camusian Philosophy and Dudeism**

It has often been pointed out that Albert Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1942), *The Stranger* (1942) and “Caligula” (1944) together comprise what is often called the “cycle of the absurd” (McCarthy 12) and should be read and understood together. The “rug” that

“really ties the room together” for these works, in relation with each other, can be singled out as the following question Camus poses:

“Does its [life’s] absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide—this is what must be clarified, hunted down, and elucidated while brushing aside all the rest” (MS 7).

While “The Myth of Sisyphus” discusses death and suicide as a philosophical question, *The Stranger* and “Caligula” through Meursault and Caligula, the respective protagonists, look at the two possible responses to this Absurdity of life (and death) according to Camus. In *The Stranger*, Meursault realizes that he is happy just like he used to be on the night of his prosecution once he got himself “opened to the gentle indifference of the world” (Camus, *The Stranger* 61)<sup>7</sup>. Meursault does not “split hairs” over his death because he realizes that he has lived his life doing what makes him happy and in that sense, he has lived authentically. His feelings towards his impending death are best encapsulated in the following statement he makes: “Since we’re all going to die, it’s obvious that when and how don’t matter” (*TS* 57). Hence, he does not feel as if he is “rolling out naked”<sup>xxxii</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) for death.

Though The Dude does not brood too much over death in *The Big Lebowski*, one of the statements he makes while speaking to Walter and Donny proves really helpful in providing an insight to what his take on death is:

“My only hope is that The Big Lebowski kills me before the Germans can cut my dick off” (The Dude, *The Big Lebowski*).

Superficially, this statement only suggests that The Dude is terrified at the idea of having his “Johnson”<sup>xxxii</sup> (Uli, *TBL*) cut off and prefers death over castration. It would be easy to dismiss this as The Dude’s fear of losing his manhood and by effect, his manliness. However, throughout the film, The Dude constantly rejects traditional models of masculinity: he is not

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<sup>7</sup>All further references to *The Stranger* will appear within the text in parenthesis as (*TS*).

overly excited about working or making achievements unlike *The Big Lebowski*, neither does he advocate indulging in a violent display of his machoism unlike Walter. In fact, one can say that:

“The audience identifies with the terrified Dude until Donny asks “What do you need that for, Dude?” – in fact, *The Dude* does not seem to require his penis to prove anything” (Kazecki 65).

It can be contended that in preferring death over castration, *The Dude* is pointing towards the fact that he would rather die than get castrated and end up being “uptight” for the rest of his life. In being “uptight”, he would end up being “un-Dude” and hence leading an inauthentic existence. In such a case, *The Dude* sees death as preferable since it would let him avoid an “uptight”, inauthentic existence. This view that *The Dude* has can be seen as an extension to Meursault’s happiness at death. Meursault is happy even on the verge of death only because he realizes that his existence has been authentic. Though *The Dude* sees death as an escape in this case, he does not descend into despair and commit suicide. Here, it helps to look at what Dudeism has to say about death:

“Ultimately we all get out of this thing [life] cheap. Regardless of all that we might acquire or achieve in life, we are all pisspoor in death, and recognizing that might allow us to recognize the priceless value of life” (*TAG* 54).

In light of this, it can be said that *The Dude* prefers death over castration because he is fully aware of death’s inevitability and does not fear it. Essentially, when it comes to death, *The Dude* has “pin[ned his] diapers on”<sup>xxxiii</sup> (Wu, *TBL*).

In “*The Myth of Sisyphus*”, most of Camus’ discussion is centred on trying to address the question of whether or not life is worth living. In this attempt, he discusses the Absurdity of

human existence given the inevitability of death. Sisyphus's ceaseless labour of pushing the rock up the mountain only to see it roll back down, according to Camus is a metaphor for the absurd meaningfulness and repetition of everyday life, it is "a bummer"<sup>xxxiv</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*). Joel Harker (2008) equates The Dude's affinity with bowling to Sisyphus' ceaseless rolling up of the boulder. He believes that just like Sisyphus's boulder metaphor, The Dude's hobby, bowling, serves as a metaphor for the absurd repetition of daily life. Harker further goes on to compare the two as metaphors:

[T]he metaphor is more precisely portrayed in *The Big Lebowski*, for it also confides a sense of mortality- the bowling ball will not simply roll forever as the rock of Sisyphus would, it reaches the end of its lane eventually and invites the epistemic possibility of death. (Harker n.p.)

This argument can be given some credibility if one analyses Donny's death in the film. One of the most popular "trains of thought" in analysing *The Big Lebowski* amongst fans and scholars alike has been analysing the character of Donny and especially his death and the scene just before it.

The scene right before Donny's death, inside the bowling alley is a strange scene. Every time that we have seen Donny bowling, he has been "throwing rocks." It is implied that he is a very good bowler, perhaps the best on his team. But in this scene, he does not get a strike, he rolls a 9. When the pin fails to fall over, Donny gives a bewildered look down the lane... Considering that his death occurred in the very next scene, the remaining pin foreshadowed his imminent demise. (Thomas n.p.)

In light of this one could say that The Coens' metaphor seems to be a more fully developed one. What then is Camus' stance on mortality? The answer to this seems to lie in an observation of Mersault's attitude while talking to his boss about careers in *The Stranger*,

where he implies that “man lives for the future but ahead of him lies nothing but death” (McCarthy 75).

### 3.3 Life in Camus and Dudeism

“The literal meaning of life is whatever you’re doing that prevents you from killing yourself” (Camus qtd. in Butler n.p.).

This statement by Camus, at first glance appears very “un-Dude”, but a further probing proves otherwise. Given the inevitability of death, human life according to Camus, is essentially absurd. However, the absurdity is further “dinged up”<sup>xxxv</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) by our search for meaning in life, since it ultimately culminates in death. What this statement essentially means is that one needs to find a way of life and internalize it without attaching any sort of meaning to it while still being fully aware of an impending death. This is exactly why Camus gives the example of Sisyphus while speaking of the absurdity of life. Camus believes that just like Sisyphus naturalizes the whole process of rolling the rock to the top of the mountain, time and again, one must naturalize an existence that fully acknowledges its own absurdity. In the foreword to *I'm a Lebowski, You're a Lebowski: Life, The Big Lebowski, and What Have You*, Jeff Bridges, who plays The Dude in *The Big Lebowski*, says that:

For me, The Dude has a certain type of wisdom. I like to call it the “Wisdom of Fingernails”: the wisdom that gives you the ability to make your hair and fingernails grow, your heart beat, your bowels move. These are things that we know how to do, but we don’t necessarily know how we know how to do them, yet still we do them very well. And that to me is very Dude. It’s not like he’s a know-it-all, The Dude. He’s not a guy who has figured out the way to be or anything like that, but he is

comfortable with what he's got, and, as The Stranger says, things turn out pretty well for him. (12)

What Bridges very well manages to point out here is how The Dude has managed to naturalize his way of life. It can be argued that this comes through his acknowledgement and a full-frontal acceptance of the essential absurdity of his life. Hence, The Dude seems to adhere to Camus' notion of what life essentially means. It can also be said that "The Dude equates to an American version of The Stranger's Meursault in the sense that he lives without responsibility, contemplation, or regret... The Dude is merely acted upon and made to react" (Kerr 308).

While speaking to Maude Lebowski's limousine driver, Tony, The Dude says "You can't be worried about that shit, life goes on, man" (*TBL*). Life goes on. In encapsulating both the idea of moving on from the past as well as the indifference of the vast cosmos towards human life, this statement perfectly serves as a link between Dudeism's worldview of living in the present and Camus' proposition of absurdity as arising out of the universe's indifference. However, saying that Dudeism hopes for a better tomorrow would not be completely appropriate.

"Life is short and complicated and nobody knows what to do about it. So don't do anything about it. Just take it easy, man. Stop worrying so much whether you'll make it into the finals" ("What is Dudeism?" n.p.).

These words clearly indicate that Dudeism does not exactly "hold out much hope" (Police Officer, *TBL*) for a better tomorrow, in fact it is not too concerned about tomorrow at all. At the same time however, it acknowledges the fact that we are "out of our element" and know nothing about what is happening around us. Dudeism suggests that it would be "a Swiss fuckin' watch"<sup>xxxvi</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*) to not even try too hard to. This idea in Dudeism can be

seen as a parallel to Camus' idea that in an Absurd universe, life means nothing but "indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given" (MS 40). These stances seem to largely predetermine both Camus' as well as Dudeism's attitudes towards the now or the present. In taking up an attitude of indifference towards the future, Camus contends that man comes to a full realization that "[t]his hell of the present is his Kingdom at last" (MS 35). This gives man, in Camus' words an "absurd freedom" to determine how he wants to live in the now. The Dudeists, on the other hand, contend that "we're all about remembering how to live the right way in These Here Times" (TAG 91).

Meursault, in Camus' *The Stranger*, is extremely content with whatever life brings his way. He does not feel the need to radically change anything that is happening around him and believes that even through all the effort that people expend to change their lives they do not actually end up doing much. This is clearly seen when he broods in the middle of a conversation with his boss:

"...people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't dissatisfied with mine here at all" (TS 26).

Dudeism, akin to Taoism, suggests engaging in action through inaction or *Wu Wei*. Dudeism advocates the value of doing nothing and going with the flow, being content with whatever life has to give to one. It contends that when one cannot comprehend why something is happening, one must follow the simple rule: "no funny stuff"<sup>xxxvii</sup> (Uli, *TBL*), and just wait for things to sort themselves out. In essence, Dudeism suggests that one should "just take it easy, man." The Dude perfectly embodies these ideas of Dudeism as Benjamin points out:

"In contrast to the others, The Dude is perfectly content to lead a leisurely, uncomplicated and in many ways, empty lifestyle. It seems he enjoys his life precisely because it is relatively empty" (TOD 13-14).

This acceptance of a state of inaction can be read along the same lines as Meursault's claim that people never change their lives. The Dude's choice then, seems like an acceptance of this view as is best seen in the following exchange:

"The Dude: Will you just take it easy man?"

Walter: You know, that's your answer to everything" (*TBL*).

In "takin' it easy" as an answer for everything, The Dude seems to have "close[d] the file"<sup>xxxviii</sup> (Police Officer, *TBL*) on the uncontrollability of things around him and the frailty of his existence.

In "The Myth of Sisyphus", Camus says that it is possible to live with "the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it" (54). This essentially is a reference to his idea that a realization of the absurdity need not necessarily lead to despair. Hence, very much like Dudeism, Camus does not exactly buy into the idea of living in nihilistic despair on coming to terms with the absurdity of life. Instead, one could very well say that "[f]ull consciousness, avoiding false solutions such as religion, refusing to submit, and carrying on with vitality and intensity: these are Camus' answers" (Aronson n.p.) to the question of why one should not kill himself or herself on realizing the absurdity of their condition. This can be further explicated by a passage from *The Stranger*, where Meursault broods being trapped inside a tree trunk:

I often thought that if I had had to live in the trunk of a dead tree, with nothing to do but look up at the sky flowering overhead, little by little I would have gotten used to it... it was one of Maman's ideas, and she often repeated it, that after a while you could get used to anything. (42)

What makes this even more interesting is how closely it is related to the crucial Dudeist notion of “Abiding”. As has been discussed before, for The Dudesits to “Abide” means to endure without yielding. In choosing to “Abide”, as a reaction to all the run-of-the-mill changes that constantly take place around us, this brooding by Meursault immediately brings to mind the following Dudeist verse:

The wind passeth over the flower of our days,  
Blowing ashes from a Folger’s can back onto our faces  
And it’s gone.  
The whole concept abates.  
But life goes on, man.  
The Dude abides... (Eutsey, “Inner-duction” 8)

Given their staunch belief that life is a roller-coaster ride where no one knows what will happen next and their insistence on “takin’ ‘er easy”, it is quite natural that in Dudeism, laziness can be seen as a virtue: “if hard work makes one happy, then work is a virtue for that person, just as laziness is a virtue for a dude” (Douglas and Walls 158). As is quite well known, The Dude is placed “high in the running for laziest worldwide” (The Stranger, *TBL*). Though not prominently a part of Camusian philosophy, this idea, especially as a parallel to The Dude seems to be precluded, quite interestingly, by Meursault:

“I felt the urge to reassure him that I was like everybody else, just like everybody else. But really there wasn’t much point, and I gave up the idea out of laziness” (*TS* 37).

Hence, it is clear that there are quite a few parallels between the ideas of Camus and Dudeism when it comes to how one should go about living his or her life.

### **3.4 Camus’ *The Stranger* and The Stranger in *The Big Lebowski***

Another important “train of thought”, when looking at the notions of Life, Death and Absurdity in Dudeism, is The Stranger: the cowboy narrator of *The Big Lebowski*. Opinions over the years have varied as to what exactly The Stranger, represents in the film.

“The question, ‘What does Sam Elliott’s The Stranger represent in *The Big Lebowski*?’ is answered with. ‘He’s God. Pay attention to how he enters the scene. He’s also omniscient and he doesn’t like profanity.’” (Clark 22).

While Randall Clark’s observations are based on internet fanfare, Trevor Miller, in his Christian interpretation of the film looks at The Stranger as representative of the archetype of God:

It seems clear that if The Dude is a flawed Christ-figure, The Stranger serves as the film’s stand-in for God. In line with the other off-center archetypes, The Stranger is a rambling, absent-minded God-figure who steps into the world for a sarsaparilla at a bowling alley bar and to chat with his wayward Son, chiding him for the number of cuss words he uses. The two speak warmly, but there is no recognition, no relationship, and a fair deal of mis-communication. (Miller 235)

Apart from these interpretations, there are also some which cast a doubt over whether The Stranger is an actual character in the film at all, calling him a figment of The Dude’s imagination, an “acid flashback”<sup>xxxix</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*) or even The Dude’s conscience at times.

Coming to the discussion over whether or not The Stranger in the film is a reference to Existentialism, opinions tend to vary again. While some believe that he “may be an allusion to Albert Camus’ existentialist novel of the same name” (Kerr 308), others are of the opinion that “[t]o say that The Stranger’s name is a nod to existentialism might seem like a bit of a

stretch” (Green, Peskoe, Russell, & Shuffitt 27). Whether the character shows any indications of aligning with Camus’ novel other than his name is worth brooding over. To begin with, it must be pointed out that quite a few of the aphorisms that The Stranger dishes out in *The Big Lebowski* are integral ideas in Dudeism. One such instance is when he tells The Dude “Sometimes you eat the bear and sometimes... sometimes the bear, well, he eats you” (The Stranger, *TBL*). This piece of advice that The Stranger gives The Dude may well be seen as aligning with Meursault’s assertion that “[e]verybody knows what bad luck is. It leaves you defenseless” (*TS* 48). These instances can be read as an application of Camus’ idea that if there is a fate or a higher destiny, there is nothing man can do to change it, that is, it is essentially inevitable (*MS* 78). This argument can be further extended through Dudeism’s claim that ““...The Dude shows us a way to be “at home” in the world even without a destination in mind”” (*TAG* 53). In light of these ideas, one can very well say that The Stranger in *The Big Lebowski*, whether or not he is actually a separate character, is similar to The Dude in his worldview. Another fitting example of this is The Stranger’s acceptance of the limits of human reason, as has been mentioned before. The Stranger’s acceptance of these limits is best seen when he says “there was a lot about The Dude that didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me” (*TBL*) but still openly admits his admiration for The Dude. He accepts that not everything can be understood and is content with what he does know and understands, which is enough for him to form a liking for The Dude.

It is also worthwhile to take a look at how The Stranger’s views on death in *The Big Lebowski* align with the views in Camus’ *The Stranger*. In his monologue at the very end of the film, he remarks:

I didn’t like seeing Donny go. But then I happen to know that there’s a little Lebowski on the way. I guess that’s the way the whole darned human comedy keeps

perpetuat[ing] itself. Down through the generations, westward the wagons, across the sands of time... (The Stranger, *The Big Lebowski*)

The Stranger's remarks, it can be said, interestingly bring out a fresh perspective on what *The Big Lebowski*'s central plot is all about:

[I]t's really been all about the outrageous circumstances that lead to the conception and birth of Maude and The Dude's child, a convoluted tale to out-do Tristram Shandy. Even the title is an intentional misnomer. This story isn't about The Big Lebowski. It's about the Little Lebowski, who, someday, is going to grow up to be trapped in his or her own generation, too. (Bastian 33)

In this sense, the Absurd chain of events which lead to the child's conception can be seen as a resonance of Camus' idea that "eternal nothingness is made up precisely of the sum of lives to come which will not be ours" (Camus qtd. in Naylor n.p.). It is this "eternal nothingness" which gives rise to absurdity. While this aptly brings out how life is all about "intergenerational give-and-take" (Bastian 33), it can also be seen as an allusion to how the rest of the world continues with its ways and "do[es]n't say peep"<sup>x1</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*) even if someone ceases to exist. While through *The Stranger*, Dudeism looks at it in a relatively optimistic light, Camus, in his existential ruminations has a rather more pragmatic take on the whole notion. Camus' views on death and its after-effects are summed up perfectly in a passage where Meursault is ruminating over his impending death:

Deep down I knew perfectly well that it doesn't much matter whether you die at thirty or at seventy, since in either case other men and women will naturally go on living—and for thousands of years. In fact, nothing could be clearer. Whether it was now or twenty years from now, I would still be the one dying. (*TS* 57)

While Camus, in his philosophy, and by extension Meursault looks at the universe as being essentially devoid of meaning and hence unsurmountable by the human mind, The Stranger in *The Big Lebowski* takes what one could call not just a more humble but also a more non-anthropocentric view in that “[h]e appreciates that as the world is bountiful in its variety, it exceeds him. Ultimately, The Stranger also abides” (Porter 164). This aligns with Camus’ belief that given the enormity of the cosmos compared to one’s human existence, there is actually very little one can change in the larger picture. Another extremely interesting parallel between *The Stranger* and *The Big Lebowski* is how, in both, it is only once a sense of the enormity of the scheme of things start setting in that both Meursault and The Dude eventually find the solutions to their problems. While Meursault realizes the vastness and incomprehensibility of the universe once he gradually “opened himself to the gentle indifference of the world” (*TS* 60), the parallel onset of the realization in The Dude’s case is much more subtle. On having his drink spiked by Jackie Treehorn, one could say that just before he passes out, The Dude realizes that there are actually a lot of interested parties, a lot of “human paraquat[s]”<sup>xli</sup> (The Dude, *TBL*) in the whole case, most of them completely indifferent to what The Dude wants and just in it for their own benefit. This is where The Stranger comes in. Very interestingly, once The Dude faints after having consumed the spiked drink, we hear The Stranger say:

“Darkness warshed over The Dude – darker than a black steer’s tookus on a moonless prairie night. There was no bottom” (The Stranger, *TBL*).

It can be argued here, that what The Stranger is essentially referring to as “darkness” is The Dude’s striking subconscious realization, without an “*Achtung baby!*” of his insignificance given the vast, complicated nature of the whole case and the other parties’ indifference towards his interests.

In light of these discussions, it can be said that the cowboy narrator in *The Big Lebowski* is one of the interdiscursive elements that the film and Dudeism share with Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger* and his philosophy. The character's name, hence, might very well be an allusion to the novel as well.

## 4.

**‘Somebody this square community won’t give a shit about’:**

**Camus’ Absurd Man and Dudeism**

“...[S]ometimes there’s a man. I won’t say a hee-ro. ‘Cause what’s a hee-ro? But sometimes there’s a man... Sometimes there’s a man... Well, he’s the man for his time and place. He fits right in there” (The Stranger, *TBL*).

These lines close to the opening of *The Big Lebowski* paint a picture of The Dude as an exemplary man. A similar discourse is seen constructed, in Camusian philosophy, around Sisyphus. Camus sees Sisyphus as a “worthy fuckin’ adversary”<sup>xlii</sup> (Walter, *TBL*) because he believes Sisyphus is what he calls the Absurd Man. However, he seldom uses the term “hero” to speak of Sisyphus or of his notion of the Absurd Man, which strikes an immediate chord when the narrator of the film says: “I won’t say a hee-ro. ‘Cause what is a hee-ro?” (*TBL*).

This chapter then, in comparing Camusian philosophy with Dudeism, attempts to establish a comparative analysis of Albert Camus’ notion of the Absurd Man as represented in his works and its parallel realization in the discourses of Dudeism. The first section within this chapter tries to contextualize the notion of Alienation and how it eventually gives rise to the Absurd Man. The second section takes a look at Camus’ introduction and eventual construction of the notion of the Absurd Man as well as its potential antithesis through his ‘Cycle of the Absurd’ before trying to locate the its traces in Dudeism. The third and final section lays out the relation between the Absurd Man and happiness in how it is brought out in Camus, before going on to compare it with its Dudeist “brother Shamus.”

## 4.1 Alienation in Camusian Philosophy and Dudeism

According to Camus, Alienation is one of the several reasons that give rise to Absurdity. In *The Stranger*, Meursault's alienation comes to the fore when he says that he "had no place in a society whose most fundamental rules I ignored" (52). Even though Meursault comes to a realization of this state towards the end, one can argue that this state of alienation has a very strong presence throughout the novel. In his unconventional ways of living and conducting himself, Meursault is alienated in the world that he lives in. This sense of alienation is felt extremely powerfully in the way Meursault is treated by a few "real reactionaries" when he is keeping a vigil for his mother. A sense of such alienated disconnect in the philosophy of Dudeism is seen in the following passage:

The achievers have never been more certain of anything in their life,  
Whereas I'm rambling again.  
The square community is strongly commended,  
Whereas I throw out ringers for ringers,  
Aimless as a wave drifting over the bosom of the Pacific Ocean.  
Thaaat's right, dude—  
One hundred percent uncertain. (Benjamin, *The Dude De Ching* 74)

Here, we see how Dudeism speaks of a sense of disconnect from the people in the world who seem to be "one hundred percent certain" (Walter, *TBL*) of everything happening around them. Dudeism suggests that we are, instead totally "out of our element" despite the belief that we are not. The previously quoted passage also speaks of how the realization of the fact that one does not necessarily have to do what the "square community"<sup>xliii</sup> suggests and the fact that the "square community" is built around the notion of a herd mentality leads one to

feeling “uncertain.” Though not exactly a parallel to the Camusian notion of Alienation, this disconnect that Dudeism speaks of is something that is pretty similar.

Meursault is a character that does not ascribe to societal norms. In that, he lives his life the way he wants to and creates his own meaning as well as reality. Meursault’s realization of the importance of this authenticity of his life is seen when he says:

“I was assailed by memories of a life that wasn’t mine anymore, but one in which I’d found the simplest and most lasting joys: the smells of summer, the part of town I loved, a certain evening sky, Marie’s dresses and the way she laughed”” (*TS* 53).

Even though it is when he is on the verge of death, Meursault realizes the value of having lived his life authentically and without any regrets and this realization makes him happy. Authenticity is an extremely important component of what The Dudeists call “The Dude way”:

“In contrast to the uptight and superficial life that society often demands we live, The Dude Way is really about living an authentic life that grows naturally from a laid-back sensibility” (*TAG* 93).

This authenticity is perfectly exemplified in The Dude’s rejection of societal norms and what *The Big Lebowski* and “the square community” would call “a life of achievement” (*TBL*). The Dude, however, consciously chooses not to chase material achievements or “bones and clams.” For him, being able to “feed the monkey” is enough and maintaining his mental peace and equanimity is more important. Hence, in rejecting to sway to the ways prescribed by the “square community” and choosing to go about living life the way he wants to, authentically “The Dude Abides” (*The Dude, TBL*). The whole idea of Authenticity hence

can be seen as an extremely crucial interdiscursive element between Camusian philosophy and Dadaism.

## 4.2 The Absurd Man

Albert Camus came up with a philosophy called the 'Cycle of the Absurd', which lays out three central propositions:

- 1- Life is absurd, and it is useless to find any pattern or irregularity within it.
- 2- Man must accept life as the absurd and enjoy the absurdity with happiness.
- 3- Man cannot fight the absurd, but simply accept that his life will never have meaning. ("Theatre of the Absurd" n.p.)

The same term is often used to refer to three of Camus' works, *The Stranger* (1942), "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) and "Caligula" (written 1938, performed 1945). It is hence, commonly agreed upon that these three works serve to embody Camus' philosophy of the Cycle of the Absurd and must be understood in relation with one another.

What, in fact, is the absurd man? He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. (MS 43)

For Camus, the Absurd Man is someone who lives in full acceptance of the fact that he is "out of his element." In "The Myth of Sisyphus", Camus remarks at the very outset that the absurdity of human life, arising from its helplessness against death, needs to be taken as a starting point for philosophical discussions and not as a conclusion. Due to the imminent nature of death, Camus believes that human life is essentially absurd since all our endeavours

are ultimately futile and devoid of meaning. However, Camus proposes that surrendering to the absurdity of life by committing suicide is an equally absurd step to take. He suggests that instead one must try and find something which is of value to one and make life worthwhile through that, like the mythical figure of Sisyphus. The Absurd Man, then, for Camus is a man who realizes this and attempts to find something to make his life worth living amidst all of its absurdity. It must however, be pointed out that the Absurd Man can arise in various ways or take various forms:

The man of the absurd (l'homme absurde) can take various forms. The Don Juan who enjoys to the full, as long as he is able, experiences of a certain type, while conscious that none of them possesses any ultimate significance, is one form. So is the man who recognizes the meaninglessness of history and the ultimate futility of human action but who none the less commits himself to a social or political cause in his historical situation. So is the creative artist who sees clearly enough that both he and his works are doomed to extinction but who none the less devotes his life to artistic production. (Copleston 393)

The mythical figure of Sisyphus is characterized by his acceptance of his fate which sees him roll a boulder to the top of a mountain endlessly even after it rolls down to the bottom repeatedly, which helps him overcome, what Camus calls his “despair”. One can say of Meursault, the protagonist of *The Stranger*, that:

Like Sisyphus, whose fate is grim as long as he hopes for something better, Meursault too cannot be happy if he hopes for an alternative. He must learn to accept his current situation in order to overcome his deep despair. Meursault, who symbolizes an absurd man, is able to find happiness, even in his cell, and to be stronger than his fate.

(Shobeiri 840)

It can hence be said that, “the absurd hero's refusal to hope becomes his singular ability to live in the present with passion (“Absurdism” n.p.). Despite being sentenced to death, Meursault does not show any signs of resentment; on the contrary he is well aware of the inevitability of death and is even happy for having lived his life the way he did, authentically.

“I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, made me realize that I had been happy, and that I was happy still” (*TS* 119-120).

In his realization of the universe's indifference, Meursault does not loathe the fact that he is insignificant or that he has “roll[ed] out naked.” On the contrary, he realizes how he had been happy despite the universe's indifference to him and “close[s] the file on that one.” On the other hand, after the death of Drusilla, Caligula comes face-to-face with the irrationality of the universe. However, despite fully realizing and even accepting this irrationality, he sets out on a quest to eventually overpower it and descends into tyranny:

“Caligula does understand the irrationality of the universe and man's relation to it, he embraces and accepts this irrationality. He does not revolt against it, as the Absurd Man should, and thus he is not the Absurd Man” (Jones 124).

Caligula, then, serves as a polar opposite to Meursault. Caligula's assertion that “(m)en die; and they are not happy” (Camus, “Caligula” 15) hence points towards a pessimistic attitude on his part, to the realization of the inevitability of death. Instead of an acceptance and internalizations of the absurdity surrounding him, he exploits his uninhibited power, like a “real reactionary”, to pursue something even more absurd, a conquest of the Moon. This turns out to be anything but “a Swiss fuckin' watch.” In this sense, despite realizing the absurdity of the universe, Caligula ends up becoming an embodiment of the irrationalism that characterizes it. What leads to Meursault's eventual death sentence is largely the threat that

he poses to the social systems by his rejection of their values and norms. This again aligns him with Camus' Absurd Man who rejects others' moral codes because he "sees nothing in them but justifications" (MS 44). Camus points out how Sisyphus' life becomes a suffering only if he hopes, in an attempt to detach himself from the universe's indifference to him and the reality of his situation. The Absurd Man on being confronted by the irrationality of life accepts and uses it as a starting point to permeate his life with something of value. Caligula, contrarily, despite having encountered this irrationality, is in a state of constant denial as is clearly seen in his constant attempt (and the entailing hope) to overpower the Absurd. This is brought out in the stance he takes towards the inevitability of death:

"And I swear to you her death is not the point; it's no more than the symbol of a truth that makes the moon essential to me. A childishly simple, obvious, almost silly truth, but one that's hard to come by and heavy to endure" (Camus, "Caligula" 15).

Caligula's downfall then, does not come through his failure to decipher the absurdity and irrationality of life, but through his constant attempt to deny and eventually overpower this irrationality, that is to say in "making with the funny stuff." In his denial, Caligula harbours hope that he can eventually overpower the irrationality of life and ends up surrendering himself to his fate. "Caligula", hence, becomes a play about the failure of a potential Absurd Man:

One might conclude that "Caligula" is a paradoxical play. The major paradox is that a man has reached the point of encountering the absurd, the understanding and acceptance of which would make him the Absurd Man par excellence. However, instead of becoming the Absurd Man he becomes a personification of the irrational world. (Jones 125)

Hence, one could argue that through the character of Caligula, Camus depicts the how the same realization of life's irrationality that has the potential to make one into the Absurd Man, can also lead to a descent into tyranny. Caligula the emperor, in many ways is a potential antithesis to Camus' Absurd Man. Quite contrary to Caligula, Meursault seems to be completely aware of the universe's innate irrationality and knows that his death will eventually be forgotten like any commonplace event:

And, on a wide view, I could see that it makes little difference whether one dies at the age of thirty or three-score-and-ten since, in either case, other men and women will continue living, the world will go on as before. Also, whether I died now or forty years hence, this business of dying had to be got through, inevitably. (TS 112)

In his refusal to pursue any abstract notions of what is acceptable and his pursuit of what he finds fulfilling and pleasurable, Meursault further aligns himself with the Absurd Man that Camus speaks of:

“Meursault represents an absurd man who emphasizes existence, and disregards abstract ideas. An absurd man must live in a way based solely on what is known and must discard anything that is not certain” (Shobeiri 842).

In thus having written *The Stranger* before “The Myth of Sisyphus”, Camus, one could argue, attempts to give “a frame of reference” to his readers to better understand his notion of the Absurd Man. Camus does this through his construction of the fictional character of Meursault in close tandem with that of Sisyphus, as an Absurd Man. In this way Albert Camus' Cycle of the Absurd, when understood in all its intricacies, comprehensively brings out the notion of the Absurd Man that Camus develops in “The Myth of Sisyphus”, *The Stranger* and “Caligula” in providing examples at the opposite poles of a potential Absurd Man. *The*

*Stranger* and “Caligula”, in this sense serve as supplements to understand the philosophy that Camus attempts to develop in “The Myth of Sisyphus”.

Let us now try and see how this notion of the Absurd Man plays out in *The Big Lebowski* and Dudeism. It is quite natural that in thinking of The Dude as the Absurd Man, the comparisons with the mythical figure of Sisyphus tend to recur:

We can... for Camus, make our rolling an act of rebellion. We can rebuke the gods and transform our existential situation by turning our punishment into a life rich with meaning and even joy... Now The Dude doesn't roll a rock up a hill, but he does roll bowling balls, and he would find meaning in doing so endlessly. (Brown and Fosl 155)

Hence, on being confronted with the hopeless absurdity of life, The Dude, pretty much like the Absurd Man, responds by finding happiness in and enjoying the act of repetition thus turning it into an act of rebellion. In their discussion on the implications of Nihilism and specifically nihilistic despair in *The Big Lebowski* in “Bowling, Despair and American Nihilism”, Evan Brown and Peter S Fosl (2012) discuss and elucidate at length how The Dude, on encountering this despair, does not behave as if “the goddamn plane has crashed into the mountain.” However, one can argue that they end up misinterpreting The Dude to a certain extent as not being a Camusian Absurd Man:

That's how we find The Dude to be different from the Camusian absurd man or woman. For Camus, the plague of nihilism must be confronted, and every attempt possible made to eradicate it- all the while knowing that, like the killer in *No Country [for Old Men]*, it cannot be ultimately defeated. (Brown and Fosl 156)

Brown and Fosl contend that, in not rebelling against the nihilistic despair, The Dude does not qualify as an Absurd Man. One must however point out, as has already been in the first chapter of this study, that engagement is one form of responding to absurdity as well. Also, engaging with this absurdity is exactly what Sisyphus, around whom Camus builds the whole notion of the Absurd Man, does. Unlike Caligula who, as discussed earlier, tries to rebel against the absurdity of the human condition and descends into tyranny, The Dude accepts the meaninglessness of life but does not surrender to it. Quite contrary to Brown and Fosl's proposition, one may hence say that:

The world is a place devoid of meaning save the meanings which would be imposed upon it by humanity, and in this sense The Dude's paranoid, raving, and indifferent friends who attribute any random series of larger meanings and possibilities upon a single event contrast to The Absurd Man in The Dude. (Harker)

Hence, The Dude's attitude towards Absurdity and despair is certainly one that aligns with the Camusian notion of the Absurd Man.

Another important factor to consider when evaluating whether or not The Dude is an Absurd Man is his attitude towards death. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, The Stranger in *The Big Lebowski* often serves as a mouthpiece for both, The Dude and Dudeism as a whole. This is exactly the case with his views about death:

I didn't like seein' Donny go. But then, I happen to know that there's a little Lebowski on the way. I guess that's the way the whole darned human comedy keeps perpetuat'in' itself, down through the generations, westward the wagons, across the sands of time. (The Stranger, *TBL*)

This can essentially be seen as The Dude's attitude towards the absurdity of death. And just like The Dude, Dudeism acknowledges this absurdity while also realizing that it is merely one of the several parts of an unalterable cycle of nature. Despite the loss of his dear friend to death, The Dude does not dwell on his loss and moves on in life. In this sense, he "abides". This also serves as another parallel between him and the Camusian Absurd Man.

Camus' statement that Sisyphus is "the Absurd Hero" (MS 76), despite his seldom use of the word "hero" to speak of Sisyphus or of the Absurd Man, has led to the two terms becoming largely synonymous. In speaking of the essential spirit that underlies his stance towards the absurdity of life and death, and the despair that usually accompanies it, it must be said that "the absurd hero's refusal to hope becomes his singular ability to live in the present with passion" ("Absurdism" n.p.). Such a refusal to hope is initially seen in Meursault's way of living his daily life and how he "never gives a thought to the future or the past" while "[h]e merely passes his daily life with little interest" (Knopp 108). Once however, he comes to terms with his impending death and is more aware of time, Meursault "fabricates a future he knows he cannot probably have in order to be able to live in the present moment" (Knopp 108). This fabrication on Meursault's part can be seen as a proactive refusal to hope, his "pin[ning] on his diapers" for death. Given its light-hearted nature and manner, it is extremely easy to misunderstand Dudeism as an overtly optimistic and hopeful religion. However, in their sheer detachment towards matters that concern the future and through their insistence on learning how to live in the present because "[t]he now is here" (TAG 88), Dudeism does not seem to harbour any sort of hope for the future. That is however, not to say that The Dudeists believe that all hope is lost or that life is hopeless. This can be better understood by taking a look at the following Dudeist verse:

Don't live in the past,

Worry about what day it is,

Nor hope to make it to the finals,

In this way, The Dude abides,

As Dudeness has always abided. (Benjamin, *The Dude De Ching* 54)

Hence, pretty much like Camus does through Meursault, Dudeism advocates living the present to the fullest and “clos[ing] the file” on the past as well as the future. Owing to its disinterest towards the future then, Dudeism does not talk about having any hope. The same can be said to be true of The Dude as well. He is not someone who lives on hope. His nonchalant indifference towards concerning himself with the future can be seen as an extremely conscious refusal to hope. Hence, both Meursault’s and The Dude’s choice to consciously reject hope, aligns them even further with Camus’ Absurd Man. It has previously been pointed out that “The man of the absurd lives without God. But it by no means follows that he cannot devote himself in a self-sacrificing manner to the welfare of his fellow men” (Copleston 393). This seems to be in perfect harmony with The Dudeist dictum “Be there, man” (*TAG* 28). In advocating reaching out and helping our compeers whenever we can, Dudeism seems to advocate something that Camus lays out as one of the qualities of the Absurd Man.

### **4.3 Happiness in Camus and Dudeism**

“The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (*MS* 78).

These last words in Camus’ essay often leave readers dumbfounded. At times, it is beyond comprehension for them to imagine Sisyphus happy given the absurdity and pointlessness of the effort he is putting in. The argument that is often made against this is that a life of absurdity would give rise to despair. One must, however, keep in mind that despair does not come out of a realization of the absurdity of life. On the contrary, it is the hope that this

tension between the absurdity of life and the endless human efforts to deal with this meaninglessness can be resolved, which give rise to despair. To be happy, according to Camus then, does not require that one successfully resolve this tension but that one realizes that this tension cannot be resolved. It is hence, fair to say that “[r]ejecting any hope of resolving the strain is also to reject despair” (Aronson n.p.). Does an acceptance of the Absurd then lead one to happiness? As is perfectly exemplified by Caligula’s example, Camus believes it does not.

It is not that discovering the absurd leads necessarily to happiness, but rather that acknowledging the absurd means also accepting human frailty, an awareness of our limitations, and the fact that we cannot help wishing to go beyond what is possible. These are tokens of being fully alive. (Aronson n.p.)

Hence, it follows that even in living a repetitive, pointless life, happiness can be found. That is to say, happiness can be found even in the midst of absurdity. This justifies Camus’ statement that “Happiness and Absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable” (MS 122). As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Meursault seems to be perfectly happy with the way he has managed to live his life. His realization and complete acceptance of human frailty as well as of his inability to do anything about the situation he finds himself in, enables him to find happiness even in repetition. For Meursault, this repetition comes through reimagining the fond memories of his past.

In speaking of being happy, The Dudeists believe that “life is full of forks in the road and that we have to be happy with the choices we’ve made” (TAG 25). Given Dudeism’s advocating of “action through inaction”, it is not very surprising that they suggest that one should be happy with what one has in life. They take it a step further in saying that one must live indeed in a state of “unconditional cheer”, without being flustered if things go haywire:

“Why is The Dude happy? A better question would be: Why are we surprised at unconditional cheer? And why don’t we experience it more often ourselves? There is so much even in the most miserable life to appreciate” (TAG 44).

The word “miserable” here, must be taken with a pinch of salt. Given their insistence that life can be enjoyed happily with an extremely minimalistic approach, the word “miserable” seems to be a stand-in for the notions held by the “square community”: not rich, not ‘successful’ by traditional notions and “what-have-you”. However, in a manner quite resonant with Camusian philosophy, Dudeism also points out that one must not get too “uptight” about the way one’s life is and always be open to change, given the lack of control we have over our surroundings. In other words, Dudeism suggests that one should not hope for life to always be the same. Their go-to example for this, like for several other ideas is The Dude:

“He is happy with the little things in life, but is not too proud or ashamed to take what is offered to him, whether it’s a night of unrobed passion with an eccentric heiress, a Caucasian or two, or a chance to roll his way into the semis” (Madeiros 221).

As has been elucidated in the previous chapter, Meursault comes to a full realization of his happiness just before his death. Meursault feels happy because he realizes that he has lived his life doing what truly made him happy and effectually, he led an authentic existence. One could even go as far as saying that Meursault is happy even on the brink of death simply because of the fact that he has lived authentically and he realizes this fact. These traits that Meursault displays immediately make him The Dude’s “brother Shamus.” It has often been pointed out that The Dude is extremely happy with whatever little he has even though people look down on him for it.

“He lives for nothing more than ten pin bowling, his two bowling team mates, beer and smoking. But yet, he is happy, content, at one with the world around him” (Davies 174).

Hence, in indulging in an intentional repetition of the things he enjoys, The Dude manages to find himself at home in the world despite having “roll[ed] out naked.” And in managing to do this, he manages to find happiness in the little he has.

## 5.

**Wrappin’ ‘er all up<sup>xliv</sup>**

In having conducted a comparative analysis between Dudeism and the philosophy of Albert Camus, this dissertation has been an attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of the similarities between the two. While being extensive in nature however, this study does not claim to be exhaustive by any means and hopes to have inspired further inquiries into the subject. As has already been mentioned, this dissertation does not deny the existence of dissimilarities between Dudeism and Camusian philosophy; it just chooses to focus on the similarities between the two. By virtue of the resonance of his philosophy with Dudeism, this study also aims to have elucidated that Albert Camus is indeed a “Great Dude in History.”

Despite not having been the first piece of work to draw connections between Camus and Dudeism, but in still having attempted to tackle certain unaddressed dimensions of the parallels, this dissertation has hopefully been a testimony to Oliver Benjamin’s claim that “[i]t [Dudeism] assiduously invites focused critical thinking, argumentation, rhetoric , semantic, arm-wrestling, modern psychological theory (mostly evolutionary and cognitive) and various other what-have-you” (“The Editorial Preface” 12). This study has been built on a few previous studies on *The Big Lebowski* and Dudeism while proving and disproving some claims along the way. It is however, a given that not all the claims made in this dissertation will manage to convince all the readers and some might end up asking “what in God’s holy name are you blathering about?”<sup>xlv</sup> (*The Big Lebowski*, *TBL*). But then just like is the case with most of Dudeism, “yeah, well, you know, that’s just like your opinion, man.”

By having pulled on several strings in the process of having compared Dudeism with Camusian philosophy such as *The Dude*, *Meursault*, *Sisyphus*, *Caligula*, Dudeist literature, and the Coeniverse among others, this study has hopefully highlighted the fact that Dudeism is an “open-source attempt to remake religion that fits with modern times” with “a lot of ins, a lot of outs, a lot of what-have-you’s.” In having touched upon the light-hearted “take it easy” dynamic that Dudeism brings to Camusian thought, this dissertation has also attempted to quell previously held misinterpretations that the philosophy of Albert Camus is an inherently pessimistic one. Pretty much like Dudeism, despite its highly radical nature, early Camusian thought is one rife with a message that is ultimately positive.

In having demonstrated similarities between Dudeism and Camusian philosophy while also acknowledging the overlaps Dudeism has with other religions and schools of thoughts, this study has hopefully consolidated the well-known notion that Dudeism is not a rigid dishing-out of worldly doctrines. It is hence reinforced that Dudeism, as a religion, draws parallels with several religions and schools of thoughts. This owes largely to the creative genius of Ethan and Joel Coen for having created a film so nuanced and intricate that even after almost two decades of its release “[o]ne can’t help but wonder if *Lebowski* Studies might not in fact become a legitimate academic field someday. Given the number of philosophical books on *Lebowski* out there, it seems it is already well on its way” (“The Editorial Preface” 10).

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> inner-duction: introduction

<sup>ii</sup> train of thought: line of thought

<sup>iii</sup> what-have-you: etc.

<sup>iv</sup> dead in the water: completely unlikely to succeed

<sup>v</sup> the goddamn plane has crashed into the mountain: a catastrophe

<sup>vi</sup> not exactly a lightweight: someone/ something who has achieved something admirable

<sup>vii</sup> new shit has come to light: something new and interesting has been found

<sup>viii</sup> brother Shamus: one of us/ you

<sup>ix</sup> *Achtung* baby: (German) a warning or alert

<sup>x</sup> handle: title, name

<sup>xi</sup> far out: that's cool

<sup>xii</sup> yeah, well, you know, that's just like your opinion, man: you're welcome to your viewpoint

<sup>xiii</sup> allow: admit

<sup>xiv</sup> draw a line in the sand: clearly demarcate

<sup>xv</sup> have no frame of reference: have no idea about the context

<sup>xvi</sup> like a child who wanders into the middle of a movie: like a clueless person

<sup>xvii</sup> really ties the room together: is a vital part

<sup>xviii</sup> split hairs: agonize over the particulars

<sup>xix</sup> real reactionary/ reactionaries: extremely uptight person/ people

<sup>xx</sup> uptight: rigid

<sup>xxi</sup> bones, clams: money

- xxii take it/'er easy: kick back and relax, calm down
- xxiii feed the monkey: fulfil basic needs
- xxiv be a hard-on: be frigid
- xxv draws a lot of water: is extremely influential
- xxvi strikes and gutters, ups and downs: good and bad times
- xxvii being out of one's element: having no idea what's going on
- xxviii stinks to high heaven: is completely baseless or untrue
- xxix un-Dude: not calm
- xxx stonewall: delay or obstruct by refusing to answer or being evasive
- xxxi rolling out naked: unprepared
- xxxii Dick, Rod, Johnson: male genitals
- xxxiii pin one's diapers on: brace oneself
- xxxiv Bummer: a term of commiseration
- xxxv dinged up: damaged
- xxxvi a Swiss fuckin' watch: a well-crafted plan
- xxxvii no funny stuff: no acting over-smart
- xxxviii close the file: stop worrying
- xxxix an acid flashback: a drug-induced hallucination
- xl don't say peep: don't say anything, be quiet
- xli human paraquat: a mean and selfish person
- xlii worthy fuckin' adversary: someone/ something deserving one's respect
- xliii square community: the 'respectable' section of society
- xliv wraps 'er all up: sums it all up
- xlv what in God's holy name are you blathering about?: what the hell are you talking about?
- (TBL, "Lebowski Lexicon" n.p.)

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