

Prahlad in Paris or Alan Tuvache's Halo of Hope

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Article Received: 28/07/2026

Article Accepted: 30/08/2026

Published Online: 31/08/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.08.579

Abstract:

The paper titled “Prahlad in Paris or Alan Tuvache’s Halo of Hope” analyses how Jean Teulé’s famous 2006 novella titled “*The Suicide Shop*” contests absurdism by withholding optimism and faith and ultimately retains hope while grappling with the themes of morbid and black humour. And how, despite being a popular work of these genres and amid the morbidly bleak, dystopian, and satirical themes, the work is a critique of absurdism.

The paper analyses the novella by employing a close reading of the novella’s characters, setting, and the use of black humour, with qualitative analysis of other relevant works and critiques of the absurd genre, along with few theological parallels and archetypes, and how the novella represents despair and freedom, and ultimately concludes with a note of sustained optimism and hope amid the predominant bleakness.

The paper further shows how the use of black comedy, satire, morbidity, and existential anxiety is moulded and transformed into an affirmation of life and hope.

Keywords: Absurdism, black comedy, satire, archetypes, dystopia, theology.

Introduction:

Le Magasin des suicides, or *The Suicide Shop*, published in 2006, is a quirky black comedy written by the French writer Jean Teulé. The novella is set in a dystopian, near-apocalyptic future city named “City of Forgotten Religions” in France, where the world has suffered the devastations of severe climatic changes, the sun rarely shines, and nearly everyone living in this city is chronically unhappy and depressed. In the city, the Tuvache family runs a unique shop called “The Suicide Shop” that caters to people’s ultimate need by selling a spectacularly inventive paraphernalia of means of suicide, like wide ranges of poisonous vegetation, ropes, sharp knives, one-bullet shotguns, apples coated with cyanide, full hara-kiri kits, etc., to put a stop to their ‘general drama of pain’ easily and conveniently.

The pivotal Tuvache family is symbolically named after the figures associated with death and despair, such as the grim patriarch Mishima Tuvache, who evokes the Japanese novelist and playwright Yukio Mishima; the grimacing mother Lucrece Tuvache, who

evokes the Roman legend of Lucretia, whose story is traditionally associated with tragedy and suicide; and their children, the mokey and anorexic Vincent and grotesque Marilyn, who are named after the famous Dutch post-impressionist Vincent Van Gogh and American actress Marilyn Monroe, respectively. The Tuvache family has another child, Alan, who is named after the British mathematician and logician, Alan Turing, and with whom the apple falls far from the proverbial tree.

Alan Tuvache seems to be immune to the depression that plagues his family and the rest of their customers. Unlike his parents and siblings, Alan can't stop dancing and singing; he is cheerful, optimistic, and brimming with life, confounding them with this unorthodox attitude towards life and, to their horror, even going to such lengths as wishing their customers a long life instead of a successful death, complimenting their physical appearance, and offering hopeful and cheerful remarks instead of validating their desire to die.

“‘He only ever notices the bright side of things,’ sighs Lucrèce, raising a hand that trembles with indignation. ‘We force him to watch the TV news to try and demoralize him.’” (Teulé). Beyond his verbal greetings and cheerful songs about the liveliness of life, Alan carries out subtle acts of sabotage, like replacing poisons with harmless liquids, cutting the fibres of hanging ropes so they snap, wearing out the razor blades on a breeze-block, making them blunt and useless, and replacing the apples from Alan Turing suicide kits, rendering them harmless.

Alan also helps his elder siblings overcome their insecurities, encouraging Marilyn to dance and Vincent to express his creativity through food. Alan's cheerfulness, optimism, and positive outlook of seeing life gradually become contagious, turning bit by bit the very purpose of the shop upside down; eventually Mishima and Lucrèce are worn down by Alan's relentless positivity, realising the joys of life and deciding to transform their suicide shop into a place of hope and life-affirming change.

As the novella nears its conclusion, the bleak element has been flipped into newfound positivity and happiness. The Tuvache family, having a change of mind and business, now wish to help people with their problems through food, music, and conversation, and as they are telling Alan this, he accidentally falls out of a window. The family manages to send rope to him, and as he climbs, he observes his revitalised family, “their collective happiness, their sudden faith in the future, and those radiant smiles on their faces are his life's work” (Teulé); Alan feels his life's mission complete, and he lets go of the rope.

Literary Review:

The birth of Absurdism was a critical and philosophical artistic movement in the twentieth century. Born out of the sheer dissatisfaction and the shattered promises of enlightenment, rationalism and accelerated by the horrors of the two World Wars, the

movement emerges as a direct response to a world that has lost its moral, philosophical, and religious compass. It utterly redefined the human conditions through the sharp confrontation of humanity's desperate search for meaning in a cold, indifferent, unyielding, and silent universe.

Prior to the World Wars, Western thought was dominated by theological and grand narratives. Religion promised cosmic salvation, while the Enlightenment promised that human reason and technological advancement would gradually sort this chaotic existence into order. However, the violence of World War I, followed by the systematic and industrial slaughter of the Holocaust on an unprecedented scale and the dread of nuclear age, perpetually shattered these ideals. Technology did not liberate humanity, rather it became its master and optimised annihilation. Reason had not created any utopia; instead, it birthed bureaucratic destruction. In this historic rupture, traditional framework of meaning collapsed, leaving a generation of thinkers to explore this newly disenchanted world. Within this vacuum Albert Camus formulated the decisive philosophy of the Absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942).

Camus clarified that the Absurd is neither the universe nor human consciousness, but the tension between the two. The Absurd is born the moment one asks "Why?" and receives silence in return. Unlike nihilism, which surrenders to the despair, or religious existentialism which leaps into faith, Camus's argument was for an active acceptance of this tension. His concept of the "Absurdist Hero," one who recognises the futile existence but continues to defy it by living, serves as a theoretical bridge to black humour.

This shift in philosophy found its artistic form in the Theatre of the Absurd, a term which was coined by Martin Esslin in his 1960 essay of the same name, to describe the post-war plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Harold Pinter. These playwrights rejected the prevalent and traditional dramatic structures, linear plots, and coherent dialogues, asserting that these rational mediums could no longer express an irrational reality. In the Theatre of the Absurd, action gets reduce to routine, and language breaks down into circular reasonings; the stage transforms into a microcosm of modern existence: a place where human beings perform rituals of purpose to mask the emptiness beneath.

French Surrealist theorist André Breton coined the term "humour noir" (black humour) in 1935 and popularised it in his 1940 book, *Anthology of Black Humor (Anthologie de l'humour noir)*. Breton defines black comedy as a literary subgenre that uses comedy to treat morbid, taboo, or painful subjects such as death, war, suicide, disease, violence, and absurdity, with lightness, cynicism, and detachment. Black comedy adopts carnivalesque and in a nuanced sense, is a form of revolt that frees the mind from social and existential restrictions by using grotesque irony and juxtaposition to provoke amusement and critical discomfort in the reader.

Existing studies on the novella. *The Suicide Shop*, explore this theme of hope amid the absurd and black comedy, analysing Camusian theory of the “Absurd Hero” and Breton’s “humour noir,” although, the research gap lies within the unresearched areas of the archetypal analysis. The paper tries to contribute to and build upon this ongoing academic conversation by tracing the theological archetypal patterns, taking examples from mainstream religions and paralleling them with the central character, Alan Tuvache.

Analysis:

In an almost similar fashion to Kurt Vonnegut’s short story, *2BR02B*, which presents ethical suicide as a population-control measure, *The Suicide Shop* also tackles suicide in an ironic way where it is not a mere value-laden concept or a matter of religion, ethics or morality but is a commercialised element of a society, a very banal and practicable thing, something that is even encouraged.

“Has your life been a failure? Let’s make your death a success!” – The Suicide Shop.

The motto of this novella takes the morbid motif of suicide and turns it into a darkly comic practice of commercialised part in people’s everyday life. Death is treated, not as a private tragedy but in a satirical way as a consumer choice in a society of despair.

The novella uses black comedy and satire to explore absurdism. Absurdism centres on the conflict between humanity’s search for inherent meaning and the silent, meaningless universe. This is highlighted in several distinct ways in the novella. The most absurd element to be seen is the commercialisation of mortality and the hyper-bureaucratic, consumerist approach to death. The Tuvache family sells suicide kits with the enthusiasm of a convenient store. Suicide is strictly regulated; people follow arbitrary civic rules, such as purchasing a licence to die in public to avoid a fine for littering. This highlights Camus’s idea that society invents trivial rules to distract itself from cosmic meaninglessness.

Teulé took a taboo subject of suicide and turned it into a vessel of satire and irony. Teulé masterfully employed the use of macabre setting and black humour, making it a striking feature of the novella. Humour is found in the bleakest of situations; this juxtaposition adds depth to the narrative. The shop’s official motto is "Has your life been a failure? Let's make your death a success." Teulé flips this discourse on its head through Alan, who offers warm greetings, motivations and points out the positive side of living, incurring frustration in his family, especially exasperating his father, Mishima. The bulk of the novella is centred around the Tuvache family’s appalled and shocked reaction to Alan’s optimism and cheerfulness.

Taking mythological parallels, Alan Tuvache can be taken as a parallel to the ancient figure of Prahlad from Hinduism. Alan and Prahlad function as a theological archetype: an incorruptible devotional child born in a family and world of spiritual darkness whose light of faith illuminates very bright and obliterates the cycle of death and decay. Prahlad and Alan’s circumstances are very similar; both were born in a world hostile to their idea of faith

and hope were tried to be corrected several times by their family, yet they both remain indifferent to such hostility, proving that environment, conditioning, and lineage cannot corrupt someone. Neither character fight backs with violence; their resistance is purely grounded in a belief that hope and life are superior to death.

On another interesting note, both characters display the pattern of a Bodhisattva-like figure, who, according to Buddhist tradition, is “an individual who has reached spiritual enlightenment but chooses to delay entering nirvana to assist others in achieving their own enlightenment” (Starter). While *The Suicide Shop* places Alan's story in a modern existential and dystopian satire, Alan acts as a secular version of Prahlad: a lone star shining in a sable sky, a proof that life force, hope, and faith are such a light from within that cannot be taught out, bullied and/or tortured or snuffed out by the darkness around it.

Alan Tuvache's character can be interpreted also as a messianic figure; traditionally someone who is seen as the promised saviour, who brings redemption, liberation, and salvation to a people or the world, and once their task has been achieved, they may reign, return back to the divinity, disappear, or leave a lasting legacy depending on the tradition or story. Taking this biblical parallel, Alan functions as an explicit Christ figure, serving as an agent of light, hope, and redemption in a nihilistically bleak and post-apocalyptic world. Messianic archetypes often culminate in an act of self-sacrifice to complete their redemptive purpose. Alan undergoes a dramatic, fatal and literal leap to force his family, and by extension, the town, to conform to his precious value for life and positivity. He acts as an instigator for his family and the town from their transformation of their world-weariness and pessimism to a positive hope and a love for life. Through his presence, Alan redeems a lost community not through *Deus ex Machina* or any divine intervention but through small, persisting, simple acts of kindness, humour, songs, and motivations in the face of utter doom. Born into a family whose legacy relies on the selling of lethal instruments to the dejected, Alan is an accidental anomaly. He is represented as the catalyst for life force. His refusal to conform to the bleak and macabre ways people carry on in the City of Forgotten Religions forces his family to confront and invert their choices. Alan's character illuminates the fact that meaning is not pre-packaged or can be bought in stores, rather, it is created by the small and simple everyday acts and appreciating small pleasures. The novella has resilience and the power for personal transformation at its crux. It challenges the idea that people are helplessly trapped in their circumstances, suggesting that even in darkest circumstances people can find hope and purpose. In Peter Jackson's film *The Return of the King*, there is a scene where a very withered and almost dry and dead white tree is shown blooming again after the battle for the Middle Earth is over and a new king is being coronated in the city. That image of the tree blooming back into life is relevant in many ways; it emphasises the purpose of the king's return not just as a personal victory but as showing that he has a role greater than himself. The blooming signifies he is restoring what was broken, linking his kingship to healing and a better future for the people. In simple terms, it conveys the message

that what was dead can live again, and the rightful brings that change. Alan Tuvache, in a similar Tolkienic, fashion can be hailed as such rightful. He can be perceived as light split and refracted by a prism into a rainbow of colours on a black screen.

In a world where moroseness and depression are mandatory, Alan is biologically wired with a relentless cheer, optimism, and joie de vivre (zest for life). His character is treated as a horrific disability, an insult, and an impediment to the family business. This inverse of logic creates a classic absurdist irony. His family do everything in their power to bring him back to the fold, dismantling the positivity within Alan, and guide him back to the 'natural' moroseness and morbidity that prevails in the family and in the city; they do everything to bring Alan back to the scaffold of that dignified misery.

Alan, through his optimistic joie de vivre, embodies the archetypal absurd hero. In Camus's essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, an absurd hero is someone who recognises that life has no inherent meaning and higher purpose, yet instead of surrendering to despair or physical suicide, they choose to rebel against this meaninglessness by living life with intense passion, joy, and defiance. For eternity, Sisyphus is condemned to push a giant boulder up a hill only for him to watch it roll back down. Camus notes that Sisyphus becomes superior the moment he decides to walk back down the hill to push the boulder again, because he consciously chooses his own condition and finds satisfaction in his ordeal. Alan's boulder is his family business of selling death. He rejects being crushed by it and turns it into a game, actively working every day to spread cheer, warmth, and positivity, creating his own purpose. Sisyphus smiles in defiance of the gods, and Alan smiles in defiance of his bleak surroundings.

Conclusion:

Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* contains an appendix titled "Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka," where he says that Kafka's characters aptly probe the absurd reality of human existence, but they retain a glimmer of hope, and so Kafka fails as an absurdist writer. If the paper analyses the discussion through this lens, Teulé's novella, *The Suicide Shop* is also not an absurdist work, as it heavily retains hope. The novella's controversial ending underscores the heavy burden of choice. Alan Tuvache serves the narrative's central catalyst and ideological focal point. In an almost fatalistic compulsion, his existence revolves only around one *raison d'être* (reason for being): to eradicate the existential misery of his family and transform the death-shop into a business of life.

The paper shows how the novella *The Suicide Shop* is not just a mere black comedy but rather a nuanced critique of absurdism and hope. It also elicits a wide range of emotions. While being darkly humorous, it has moments of profound introspection and sadness. Jean Teulé's writing style is engaging, funny, and vivid. The novella has allegorical aspects as well, being of explicit and implied nature, which can be seen in the several characters of the

story and as an allegory for human struggles with despair and the absurd and the pursuit of happiness, respectively.

The novella concludes on one of the most debatable, famous, and shocking climaxes in modern French black comedy literature: a sudden 180-degree shift in tone, leaving the readers unprepared and completely surprised by moving from a general good story with a redemptive arc to one last twist of existential satire and dark irony. Despite the shocking end, the novella succeeds in retaining hope and dissipating the fogs of morbid, bleak, and morose elements that prevailed through the better half of the novella.

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