



## ‘Absurdity in Albert Camus’: The Outsider

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### Abstract:

*The Outsider or the Stranger is beautiful novel written by French writer Albert Camus. It is the forerunner of a great deal of contemporary writings. The Outsider presents readers with a new kind of protagonist, a man unable to transcend the tedium and inherent absurdity of everyday existence in a world indifferent to the struggles and striving of its human denizens. The Outsider has focused his own vision and approaches about the life. While reading the novel we feel like passing from one island to another. Camus believes that arts should teach us to save ourselves. The Myth of Sisyphus is one of the profound philosophical statements written this century. It is a discussion of the central idea of Absurdity that Camus was to develop in his novel The Outsider while in wartime Paris; Camus developed his philosophy of the absurd. A Major Component of this philosophy was Camus' assertion that life has no rational and redeeming meaning. The experience of World War Two led many other intellectual to similar conclusions. Faced with the horrors of Hitler's Nazi regime and unprecedented slaughter of the war, many could no longer accept that human existence had any purpose of discernible meaning. Existence seemed simply, to use Camus' term absurd. Through discussion of narrative structure, the opening lines, the role of pity, resentment toward Meursault's judges, and the relationship between murder and innocence, I will prove that Camus' purpose is to bring the reader to introspect on their own relationship with society. Meursault recognizes the truth that life is meaningless. That means life is just what one makes of it while being conscious of two certainties- life and death. The Outsider gives the technique of psychological depth a new twist.*

**Keywords:** Absurdity, Death, Everyday life, Life, Truth

The Outsider, Camus' first novel is both brilliant crafted story and an illustration of Camus' absurdist world view. Camus does not want us to think of Meursault as 'the stranger who lives 'outside' of his society' but of a man who is 'the stranger within his society'. Had Meursault been some kind of outsider, a foreigner, then quite probably his acts would have been accepted as irrational evil. But Meursault was not an outsider; he was a member of his society – a society that wants meaning behind action and behaviour. In the second half of *The Stranger*, Camus depicts society's attempt to manufacture meaning behind Meursault's actions and behaviour. The trial is absurd in that the judge, prosecutors, lawyers and jury try to find meaning where none is to be found. Everyone, except Meursault, has their own 'reason' why Meursault shot the Arab but none of them are, or can be, correct. In life there are never shortages of opinion as to why this or that thing occurred. How close to any of them get to the meaning behind action? An interesting motif in *The Stranger* is that of watching or observation. Camus is writing a book about our endless search for meaning. We are all looking for a purpose in our lives. The characters of *The Stranger* all watch each other and the world around them. Meursault watches the world go by from his balcony. He later passively watches his own trial. The world around him is a fascination to Meursault. He keenly observes the sun, the heat, the physical geography of his surroundings. The eyes of the other are also depicted by Camus. Antagonism behind the

eyes of the Arabs, as they watch Meursault and his friends. The eyes of the jury and witnesses at his trial. Finally, the idea of the watching crowd, representing the eyes of society. Meursault, a young Algerian pied-noir, hears news of his mother's death. He receives this information with mild annoyance. He must now ask his boss for two days leave in order to attend the funeral. It is the custom, in his culture, for the bereaved to sit all night in vigil by the coffin of the departed loved one. At the vigil and during the funeral the following day he shows no grief, sadness or even regret. He only feels the physical inconvenience of sitting through the vigil and the heat of the sun during the funeral procession to the cemetery. At the funeral he makes mental notes of the physical objects that strike his eye; shining screws in the walnut coffin, the colors on the dresses of the nurses and the large bellies of the elderly mourners. The following day, back in Algiers, Meursault goes swimming in the sea and meets a girl, Marie, whom he knows vaguely. That evening they go to the cinema together to see a comedy; afterwards they go back to Meursault's apartment to have sex. A relationship, of sorts, develops during which Meursault shows no more feeling or affection towards Marie than he displayed at his mother's funeral. One day she asks Meursault to marry her and he accepts (advising her that it's all the same to him whether they marry or not).

He works in an office in Algiers, taking little interest in his career and receiving with disinterest the news of a prospective promotion and the transfer to Paris that accompanies the rise in position. He is more interested in the physical sensations to be found at work such as enjoying the cool freshness of the hand-towels at mid-day and comparing this feeling to the warm clamminess of the same towels by the end of the day. At home, as well as his relationship with Marie, he develops a relationship with his unsavory neighbor, Raymond Sintes, a gangster who beats women. Meursault is as disinterested in the friendship with Sintes and he is with his romance with Marie. One day, this friendship leads him to a beach where he kills an Arab with five shots of Sintes' revolver. The two men had come across the Arab and his friends earlier in the day and a fight had broken out, one of the Arabs had a knife. Later on Meursault is walking alone on the beach and comes across one of the Arabs. Through chance Meursault has Sintes' gun. The sun on his head and the flash on that sun on the blade of the Arab's knife somehow results in Meursault killing the man with a single shot and then firing four more bullets into the inert body. So ends the first part of the book.

The second half of *The Stranger* is concerned with Meursault's trial and subsequent execution for the murder of the Arab. Throughout his trial and imprisonment, until the day before his execution, Meursault maintains the same detached indifference we saw in the first half of the book. He exhibits the same preoccupation with his own physical sensations and the same reluctance to pretend to have emotions he does not feel. Much to the chagrin of the lawyers, he will not plead self-defense in the face of his murder charge. In the Algeria of the time such a plea would probably see him escape punishment. Neither will he express emotion or remorse for his victim. He is warned by his lawyer that the prosecution will make use of his unusual behaviour at his mother's funeral but in the same way Meursault refuses to express histrionic remorse over the Arab he won't make a show of weeping over his mother during the trial. The only explanation for killing the Arab Meursault will, or can, offer is "because of the sun."

During the trial, Meursault shows the same disinterested attitude he has displayed throughout the book. His mind wanders; he drifts in and out of what the prosecution and his defense are saying. To him, although he is aware that he is the subject of conversation, it is like they are talking about someone else. He is more interested in the different colors of the fans used by the jury-members or the sunlight and noise coming through the court-room window. From his arrest to his execution, Meursault spends the time he is not in court in prison. Once he has come to terms

with his loss of freedom he learns to adapt to his environment. He develops his memory and spends his time mentally cataloguing the items of furniture in his former room. He realizes that even if a person were to live only for one day, he would amass enough memories to last in a hundred years in prison without getting bored. He thinks that even if he were made to live out his life in the base of a hollow tree-trunk with only the view of the sky above him for entertainment he could find enough to interest him in the flight-patterns of the birds and the shapes of the clouds above him. He would wait for these patterns in the same way that in his former life he waited for Saturday to take Marie into his arms.

After these reflections Meursault is ready to confront the prison Chaplain who attempts to take his confession and read him his rites. He throws the cleric out of his cell, stung by his promises of 'another life' after this one, and convinced that this life alone is certain and that the inevitability of death removes all significance. After the Chaplain is gone, Meursault, for the first time, is filled with the "tender indifference of the world." He now realizes that he has been happy in his life and would like to live it all over again. He hopes "in order that all may be fulfilled" that there will be many people attending his execution and that they all greet him with cries of hatred. Even at the time of his end of life, he faces death with sensitive and joyous awareness of his last moment. It is true that he doesn't believe in any kind of show, hypocrisy and pretension. In the words of a critic:

"Meursault will not pretend. After the death of his mother, everyone is shocked when he shows sadness. And when he commits a random act of violence in Algiers, society is baffled. Why would this seemingly law-abiding bachelor do such thing... Why does he show no remorse, even when it could save his life? His refusal to satisfy the feeling of others only increases his guilt in the eyes of the law. Soon Meursault discovers that he is being tired not simply for his crime, but for his lack of emotion that condemns him for being an outsider."

For Meursault, death, love, killing, imprisonment, law and order are parts of his life as on the occasion on the death on his mother, he says: "All healthy people had more or less wished for the death of those they loved." For him, life is meaningless, torturous, boring and dull. So for him, Death is heaven, a permanent freedom. As he speaks the last words: "My last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that they should greet me with cries of hatred."

To conclude, Meursault is condemned because he doesn't cry at his mother's funeral. He is condemned because he doesn't play the game. Keeping this thing in view, he is an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on the fringe, on the outskirts of life, solitary and sensual. If we want get more accurate picture of his character, we must ask ourselves in what way Meursault doesn't play the game. Meursault doesn't play the game in the sense that he refuses to lie. Lying is not only saying what is not true. It is also saying more than is true; saying more than one feels. To make life simple, we all do it every day. The hero of the novel, Meursault doesn't want to make life simpler. He is a unique creation, flat but very natural, beautiful but not sentimental or emotional or feelingful. He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feeling and society immediately feels threatened. For example, he is asked to say that he regrets his crime, in time-honored fashion. He replies that he feels more annoyance about it than true regret. And it is this nuance that condemns him. So it can be said that Meursault is a poor and naked man, in love with a sun which leaves no shadows. Far from lacking all sensibility, he is driven out by a tenacious and therefore profound passion, the passion for an absolute and for truth. This truth is

as yet a negative one, a truth born of living and feeling, but without which no triumph over the self or over the world will ever be possible. *The Outsider* is the story of a man who, without any heroic pretensions agrees to die for the truth. The writer Albert Camus has tried to make his character represent the only Christ that we observe. In the middle of the widespread intellectual and moral bewilderment that followed World War Two, Camus was a voice advocating the moral and social values of justice and human dignity. Though his career was cut short, he remains one of the most influential authors of the twentieth century, regarded both for the quality of his fiction and for the depth and insightfulness of his philosophy.

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