

Conflict Between the 'Self' and the Society in Albert Camus's *The Outsider*.

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Abstract

The Outsider explores the unpredictable journey of Meursault, the male protagonist, in chaotic twentieth century France. The protagonist rebels yet remain silent, mulling over the absurdity of life and the untouched society he lives in. This essay explores Meursault's conflict with the 'self' and the 'outer' society. The essay discusses the hollowness of emotions with reference to absurdist elements incorporated in the novella.

Introduction:

Probably *The Outsider* (1942) is one of those novellas which explores large themes and narratives directly related to the author's life in much decent use of words. The language is crisp and direct yet tangling for readers who are reading this novella for the first time. Camus's strength lies in exploring the psychological absurdity of his characters through the use of direct and open-ended language, possibly which is also a challenge for Camus's translators. The protagonist is hollow from the inside, and this is established by society in the novella as it progresses through a legal scenario of Meursault's trial. But contrary, the protagonist has a lot to say, and this can be

inferred by reading this novella, especially the second part of it. The male protagonist revolts yet remains silent and maps a journey of self-rebellion in mid-twentieth century France. It was a time when the Nazis made multiple attempts to invade France, and in the personal life of Camus, he just suffered the loss of his father. Suffering, trauma, and hidden emotions dominate *The Outsider*. The protagonist's taciturnity arises from his continuous conflict with society in terms of social expectations attached to him as a young working man. However, the uniqueness of the protagonist, Meursault, is that he never allows himself to change for society; rather, he rebels silently. This essay explores such a conflict portrayed in the novella.

Symbols of Absurd

While Camus himself rejected the label of “existentialist,” his novella nonetheless explores many of the key existential themes that gained prominence in Europe after the devastation of World War II—namely, the absurdity of life, the rejection of traditional morality, and the search for personal authenticity in a meaningless world. Through the detached protagonist Meursault, Camus offers a stark and unsettling portrayal of a man who refuses to conform to societal expectations, thereby illuminating the philosophical crisis of the modern individual in the wake of war, nihilism, and moral collapse.

Remarkably, Camus has very distinctly integrated many symbols in such a short narrative to reflect the protagonist’s psychological state. The opening line of the novella set the tune, “My mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know.” (Camus, 3) This timelessness of death and emotion is the driving force throughout the novella. Meursault is unaware of his emotions and the complex society he lives in. He attends his mother’s funeral in plain emotions, with no “sign of remorse”. This becomes a prime argument by the prosecutor in part two of the novella, where Meursault is on court trial for murdering an Arab man. At the same time, readers may feel a lack of connection between Meursault and his mother the protagonist never feels the same. Meursault’s response to his mother’s death is not traditionally emotional; he does not cry, mourn, or express grief. His focus on the heat, the sun, and physical sensations during the funeral contrasts sharply with social expectations of sorrow and highlights a

fundamental disconnect between human feeling and the natural world. He justifies his reason for separating his mother and admitting her to an old age home:

“When we lived together, Mama spent all her time silently watching me come and go. The first few days she was at the old people’s home, she often cried. But that was because her routine had changed. After a few months, she would have cried if she’d been taken out of the home.” (5)

The prosecution in the court exploits the silent blunt relationship Meursault share with his mother:

“He believed that a man who had, morally speaking, murdered his mother cut himself off from human society in the same way as someone who had actually laid a murderous hand upon the person who gave him life.” (92).

Of course, Meursault is indifferent to this narrative as well and remains silent throughout the court trial. The fact is Meursault is able to feel the loneliness of his old mother, and the sudden change in her behaviour after living in the old people’s home, she transforms from a bitter lonely woman to an active friendly lady. Similarly, Meursault shares a beautiful relationship with Marie.

Another symbol of much significance in the novella is the sun. Meursault is continuously affected by the sun. This sun drives him to murder an Arab man, “an entire beach pulsating with sun pressed me to go on.” (53) Throughout the novella, the protagonist is in

conflict with the sun. Whenever the sun appears, Meursault feels anxious and helpless. Sun becomes an absurdist element. The sun represents the outer world of Meursault but also signifies the society. Just like the rays of the sun cannot escape nature, society intrudes on the personal space of an individual. Meursault is affected by the neighbourhood he lives in—the violent Raymond, who is a sex worker, the old Salamano, who deeply loves his diseased dog, and Marie, his girlfriend, who is obsessed with marriage. These people, although secondary characters in the novella, drive the life of Meursault.

Further, the sun becomes a prime reason for Meursault to commit the murder of an Arab man. It is the repression he holds against society that is poured out in the form of murder. Absurdly, Meursault cannot defend himself on why he committed the murder. His unawareness about the murder makes him a culprit in the eyes of society, and thus, he will be executed openly in the presence of the 'sun'.

Lastly, the symbol of religion, although not mentioned directly, influences the life of Meursault. His famous declaration at the novel's end—welcoming the "gentle indifference of the world"—suggests not a passive resignation but a form of liberation. In facing death without appeal to God, justice, or ultimate meaning, Meursault achieves a kind of existential freedom that Camus presents as authentic and courageous. His first encounter with religion and its ethos is in the very first chapter when he is preparing for his mother's

funeral, "she wished to have a religious burial". (5) But Meursault is an atheist and never firmly believes in Christianity. In the last chapter of the novella, he meets the Chaplain after refusing him three times earlier. The Chaplain incident is crucial in understanding the justice systems of humans and God. For the Chaplain, "justice of man was nothing, and the justice of God, everything." (107) He encourages Meursault to unify himself with God so that all his sins are washed away. But Meursault opts for a contrary behaviour—he screams and yell at the Chaplain, "I started shouting at the top of my lungs and swore at him and told him not to pray for me." (109) This becomes a moment of great realisation for him as he introspects his life journey:

"From the depths of my future, throughout all this absurd life I had lived, a gathering wind swept towards me, stripping bare along its path everything that had been possible in the years gone by, years that seemed just unreal as the ones that lay ahead. Why should the death of other people or a mother's love matter so much? Why should I care about his god, the lives, the destinies we choose when one unique destiny had chosen me, and along with me millions and millions of privileged others who, like him, called themselves my brothers?" (109)

Meursault's idea of self is different from the hegemonic notion established by religion and that is the prime reason he resists against religion. Religion has no significance in his life, and thus, becomes an absurdist element.

Conflict

Meursault's idea of self is dynamic in terms of philosophically but narrow socially. The society he is surrounded with does not favour his 'joyful expeditions' after his mother's death. Rather than mourning emotionally, Meursault is having a 'good' time. For Meursault, life goes on without much 'change'. In the court trial, the prosecutor exploits this casual behaviour of Meursault and accuses him of murder. The society, represented by the court trials, portrays Meursault as emotionless and unsympathetic. Contrary, the readers are told by the unnamed narrator that Meursault does have emotions and lively ideas, which are restricted to his mind. Camus portrays the absurdity of the society and not of the individual, here being Meursault.

In a preface to an English edition of *L'Étranger*, Camus describes Meursault in a defensive manner:

"The hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game. In this sense he is a stranger to the society in which he lives; he drifts in the margin, in the suburb of private, solitary, sensual life. This is why some readers are tempted to consider him as a waif. You will have a more precise idea of this character, or one at all events in closer conformity with the intentions of the author, if you ask yourself in what way Meursault doesn't play the game. The answer is simple: He refuses to lie. Lying is not only saying what is not true. It is also and especially saying more than is true, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, saying more than one feels. This is what we all do every day to simplify life. Meursault, despite

appearances, does not wish to simplify life. He says what is true. He refuses to disguise his feelings, and immediately society feels threatened. He is asked, for example, to say that he regrets his crime according to the ritual formula. He replies that he feels about it more annoyance than real regret, and this shade of meaning condemns him. Meursault for me is, then, not a waif, but a man who is poor and naked, in love with the sun which leaves no shadows. Far from its being true that he lacks all sensibility, a deep, tenacious passion animates him, a passion for the absolute and for truth. It is a still negative truth, the truth of being and of feeling, but one without which no victory over oneself and over the world will ever be possible. You would not be far wrong, then, in reading *The Stranger* as a story of a man who, without any heroics, accepts death for the sake of truth. I have sometimes said, and always paradoxically, that I have tried to portray in this character the only Christ we deserved. You will understand after these explanations that I said this without any intention of blasphemy and only with the slightly ironic affection which an artist has the right to feel toward the characters whom he has created." (19)

Meursault never gave up his own identity for the sake of assimilating with the society. Probably that is the reason, the novella is aptly titled as 'outsider' - the protagonist remains an outsider in the eyes of the society because he never conforms.

Conclusion

The Outsider provides readers access to dual views- Meursault's mind and the point of view of society. Both are in conflict with each other. Adding to this is the absurdist symbol of the sun which provokes the protagonist to commit murder. Camus does not hesitate to show the hollowness of the twentieth century France legal system and the untouched society. The conflict drives the protagonist to re-think his life as an absurd journey. Camus, through Meursault, presents a vision of life that is at once bleak and liberating, challenging readers to confront the void without flinching. Though often categorized with existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus maintains a unique position—one that emphasizes the dignity of living without appeal, the strength in embracing absurdity, and the possibility of defiance without hope. In the context of postwar disillusionment, *The Outsider* continues to resonate as a profound meditation on what it means to live authentically in an indifferent world.

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