

A Familiar Stranger: An analysis of the character Mersault in the novel *The Stranger*

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ABSTRACT

Albert Camus's *The Stranger* raised the eyebrow of many critics and the readers with the strangest character Mersault. It was not that he was bad but he was "the bad" that society never wanted to openly admitted. There is nothing like individuality and freedom of expression that can make the so-called society to raise its barrier and put a price tag on the person's head. Just by being himself and not following the so-called society's cowardice values costed Mersault, his own life. It is easier to judge him as a murderer and a cold-blooded human based on his action and his lack of empathy for social norms. By using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory, the author proves here that Mersault is not a bad human or a stranger but the familiar "id" that is repressed in every human.

Key Words: Albert Camus, The Stranger, Divinity, Optimism, Id, Absurdist Philosophy

Introduction

To enter into the literary world of Albert Camus, one must realize that one is dealing with an author who does not believe in God. Major characters in Camus' fiction, therefore, can probably be expected either to disbelieve or to wrestle with the problem of belief. One's first response then might profitably be a brief consideration of what might happen to a character that comes to realize that there is no Divinity, no God. What happens when he realizes that his death is final, that his joys, his disappointments, and his sufferings are brief flickers precluding an afterlife of nothingness? What changes in his daily pattern of work-eat-love-sleep?

This concern with death and its abyss of nonexistence is the basis for most of Camus' literary works. Condemned to an everlasting zero of eternity, Camus' characters often suffer their author's own involvement and anguish. The recognition of the fact of one's death is the starting point for confronting and experiencing Camus' concept of the Absurd. When a person understands nothing is stable and life itself is meaningless, none would ever fear death.

As a salvation, however, from despair and nihilism, Camus' Absurd theory embraces a positive optimism. This optimism is in the sense that places much emphasis on human responsibility for civilizing the world. The fictional characters, therefore, who shoulder their new mortal responsibility, are often characterized as rebels. In revolt from both a cowardly suicide and an equally cowardly embrace of faith, the new optimism suggests man's returning to the center of a philosophical tightrope above an intensely physical death and, in his revolt, performing precariously. Above the threat of death, in confrontation with death, the metaphysical rope walker acts as if his actions mattered. Obviously they do not in any long-range sense. And, rather than scamper to either the poles of Hope or Suicide, he knows that he will eventually fall, but stays mid-center. Obviously, his life, the lives of all humanity, does not finally matter. Death is definitive. But, clown-like, he creates new acts, new entertainment reaching, gesturing. Exploiting his precarious posture in a new burst of freedom, he restructures his actions, and in vivid contrast to death, he diffuses joy and a sense of ridiculous responsibility.

Knowing that man has only man to depend upon, however, he can take fresh courage. He is now rid of fearful superstitions and questioning theories; he can now discard the religious faiths that assume that man is subservient to a something divine and eternal. Man now has no excuse for failure, except himself. God's will as an excuse for failure is no longer valid. Man succeeds or fails because of the strength, or the lack of it, in him. Camus challenges us to do the work that he has, too often, assigned to God. One should remember that Meursault is a man who does not lie about himself, a man who cannot accept the formulas by which his society convinces itself it is happy. He does not look forward to a life after death, he does not use religion as a vehicle to avoid facing the fact that he must die, and he refuses to mask his calm acceptance of his mother's death. He defies all

judgments except what he himself made of. He does not play the hypocritical penitent for his interrogators and prosecutors.

Perhaps one of the most valuable ways to understand Meursault is to quote what Camus has said about him. Camus opines about Mersault as,

Meursault for me is a poor and naked man, in love with the sun which leaves no shadows. He is far from being totally deprived of sensitivity for he is animated by a passion, profound because it is tacit, the passion for the absolute and for truth. It is still a negative truth, the truth of being and feeling, but a truth without which no conquest of the self or of the world is possible.

This might be the reason why until the very end Meursault answers to the questions but never asks a question. And all his answers are an alarm to the society's so called code of conduct.

Mersault and his psyche

The Id part of a humans mind is the real character of a human being. It can also be compared to a raw material which has not gone through any purification process. According to the social circumstances that a human grows, it will also have influence on that human's behavior also. This is what called as ego. When a person behaves according to the society's expectation he listens to his ego. Super ego is the phase every normal human strives to achieve. That is the perfect nature of a human according to every human.

One could compare the behavior of Meursault with Freud's Id. Meursault purely act according to his instincts. That is he does not care to listen to his ego or super ego. He does whatever he likes and thinks to do. He is not bothered about society's reaction about him smoking while he keeps vigilance over his mother's corpse in the night. According to the society Meursault is indifferent to everything. The fact that he was not sure of when his mother passed away and about him does not cry or show any grief on his mother's funeral is a great crime in the eyes of society since it is not the expected behavior of a normal human being.

In a way Meursault is a victim of society's moral policing. Like how Jesus Christ is been crucified by those people Meursault also been sentenced to death only because he does not do what society expected him to do. When a person is indicted for murder, normally one look upon the motive and circumstances that lead to the murder in the court. Yet in the case of Mersault, more than the crime he committed, it was his personal life that is been discussed in the trial. It is evident that it was not the crime that he has committed but his indifference to society's values that ended his life in jail.

The indifferent attitude of Meursault has become the reason for many critics to have a negative opinion about Meursault's behavior. Nathan A Scott remarks that, "the lifeless monotone of the speaker [Meursault] intimates that the issue is of no consequence to him" (34). Another critic Colin Wilson opines that, "the hero of *L'Etranger* is basically a brainless idiot" (56).

When one check the time period of this novel one can understand that it is highly impossible for a white person to get a death sentence for the crime of killing an Arab. Even though Camus has not discussed about any racial discrimination in his novel *The Stranger*, it is evident from the very epoch itself that it is impossible to get a punishment for doing something against an Arab.

When such situations prevail, it is the society's ego that forces them to take an action against Meursault. He isa person who swims against currents than a person who goes with current. If one alone goes against the whole world then that person will become a mad person to everyone else. Everyone called Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer, as a mad man when he has discovered Earth is round in shape. Later in history everyone accepted that as truth. Nevertheless in the case of Meursault it does not happen.

It is true that he has committed a crime by killing an Arab person. But it is also noticeable that Meursault shot the Arab when he sees the Arab drawing a knife to stab him. It can also be considered that Meursault killed this Arab just to save his own life. It is not justifiable to give death sentence to a man who committed a crime without any forethought. The judge might have given him a life sentence or any equal punishments. It must be the society's prejudice that has given Meursault a death sentence. Meursault is a person who relies purely on his instincts. The so called refined society hates such kind of man with guts. This attitude of Meursault may be a puzzle for the society. To understand the action of Mersault, it is better to be defined by the philosophy of existentialism.

Existentialism concerns itself very much with the idea of free will, and a person's feelings towards their existence and how they go through life. It is a cultural movement that looks at how the idea of society is

somewhat unnatural, because it moulds our views. It also suggests that our human morality which the society has developed shouldn't exist. This is because in a sense, no one's life holds distinct value; it is merely the tiniest of dots in the universe. Existentialism seems to focus on the idea that an individual can independently structure one's lives and values, and do the search for one's 'true self'.

The way Mersault views his mother's death explains the idea of existentialism. Her death doesn't seem to have a big effect on him. This distant emotion was the first example of someone not placing too much value onto one's life, and showed signs of not feeling real emotion or pain. However, a part of Meursault's thought process is that his feelings or reactions about his mother's death shouldn't affect anybody, including his mother, because she is dead.

The way Meursault handles his mother's death also emphasizes that he accepts everything and view in a point that existentialists seem to have. If someone dies, it has to be accepted and move on. Meursault does the same when he is in prison, as he explains that he is able to adjust to the prison life without too many problems. Conflicts such as not being able to smoke, he states that within a short period, he is able to become accustomed to the change, and did the same for living in the cell with not much to do.

Similarly, the killing of the Arab seemed meaningless to him. He states that he does not feel any true pang of conscience about the murder. From an existential point of view, this is a fairly reasonable response. What is interesting is that before he shoots the Arab, he never really has any intention to kill him. Even when the Arab withdraws a knife, it is the intense heat of the sun which makes him feel uncomfortable and lead him to shoot the Arab. Meursault seems to have two sides to his personality; the physical side seems to be his bigger focus. It was the annoyance of the sun that leads him to shoot, not his emotional feelings towards the Arab.

Throughout the book one could see Meursault goes against what would be considered normal human reactions. His focus is often more on the physical reactions of life, rather than the mental reactions. Meursault shows no real passion towards other people, such as not crying at his mother's funeral, and not showing real love towards Marie (his girlfriend).

When Meursault does form a relationship with Marie, it has no meaning to him. Meursault tells her that he can never love her, for love is too vague of an emotion; he will, however, marry her if she insists. His relationship with Raymond is equally absurd. Even though he knows his neighbor is a violent pimp, yet he allows himself to become involved in his problems, for he feels it makes no difference.

In the end, Meursault winds up killing the brother of Raymond's Arab girlfriend, even though he did not really intend to murder him. Since he shows no remorse or emotion over the murder of the Arab, the death of his mother, or anything else in life, the jury decides that Mersault is unfit to live and convicts him to death by the guillotine. His absurd existence comes to an absurd end. There are no particular explanations for Meursault's behavior throughout the novel. It again emphasizes the existentialistic notions of Camus; that is there is no meaning in human's life.

Mersault seems to have find no place to fit in the world and he never tries too. Although he states that he is fond of his mother, Mersault clearly did not love her, and it is proven by his lack of grief over her loss. Although he goes to work every day, he is not ambitious and does not care if he gets ahead. When his boss offers him a promotion to Paris, he refuses because the sun does not shine enough there. He just lives his life as it goes; nothing more, nothing less. Meursault understands there is no meaning for his life and does not possess anything as his own in this world. But he is not a nihilist to end his life thinking that his life is meaningless. Meursault just does not hope for anything bigger but does whatever feasible to him.

A major component of Camus' absurdist philosophy is the idea that human life has no redeeming meaning or purpose. Camus argues that the only certain thing in life is the inevitability of death, and, because all humans will eventually meet death, all lives are equally meaningless. Meursault gradually moves toward this realization throughout the novel, but he does not fully grasp it until his argument with the chaplain in the final chapter. Meursault realizes that, just as he is indifferent to much of the universe, so is the universe indifferent to him. Like all people, Meursault has been born, will die, and will have no further importance.

Paradoxically, only after Meursault reaches this seemingly dismal realization is that he is able to attain happiness. When he fully comes to terms with the inevitability of death, he understands that it does not matter whether he dies by execution or lives to die a natural death at an old age. This understanding enables Meursault to put aside his fantasies of escaping execution by filing a successful legal appeal. He realizes that these illusory hopes, which had previously preoccupied his mind, would do little more than create in him a false sense that

death is avoidable. Meursault sees that his hope for sustained life has been a burden. His liberation from this false hope means he is free to live life for what it is, and to make the most of his remaining days.

An essential part of Meursault's character development in the novel is his coming to terms with his own attitudes about death. At the end of the novel, he has finally embraced the idea that death is the one inevitable fact of human life, and is able to accept the reality of his impending execution without despair. Meursault is content to believe that physical death represents the complete and final end of life, but the chaplain holds fast to the idea of an afterlife.

Meursault is distant from set plans, ambitions, desires, love, and emotions in general. He has a difficult time with emotions such as regret and compassion. His mother's death serves to interrupt the flow of Meursault's life, a life dedicated to appreciating tangible things. He wished she had not died, but her death made no real impact on his life other than temporarily disturbing his daily lifestyle. The discomfort on the bus and the unbearably hot burial were caused by her death. He recalls this discomfort as he shoots the Arab. But Meursault does not force himself to fake emotions, which is probably why he harbors so little resentment.

His apparent lack of emotion is what lands him in trouble in the courtroom, for people think his nature to be that of a cold-blooded murderer. He does have some relatively good characteristics, such as his honesty. Meursault also possesses the ability to logically evaluate a situation without becoming panic-stricken. Everything he does and says is in such a nonchalant manner that one wonders what it takes to make him tense.

For the first time in his life, Meursault thinks about his relationship with society. The final encounter with the chaplain forces him to articulate his ideas on life and death. He is faithful to his beliefs, though they are limited. The confrontation with death causes Meursault to open up his heart to the indifference of the universe. The only thing that could make his death happy is to maintain his beliefs and set a standard for those to come.

Meursault is a very interesting character. His character is interesting for several reasons. One of the most important reasons is his being contrast to members of conventional society. At the beginning of the book he is more or less fully indifferent character. This is definitely different from the image of a well-rounded person that society puts forth. Meursault cares only for the physical world. He does not dwell on other things, such as knowledge or intelligence. He is also indifferent to many things that conventional society is emotional about. He cannot find anything in his life worth making an effort for.

Meursault has a passion for the truth. He is an outcast for this reason, and is detached from others because they cannot face the truths of the world as he perceives them. It is most likely that his indifference allows him to care less about whether life has a meaning. It was odd that Meursault becomes so preoccupied or maybe fascinated by his own death. He at least thinks about it, which shows that he cares about his own life at last. Perhaps it is a way for him to redeem himself. He is an existentialist hero through his understanding of the meaning of life. It is a complex theory in a short, simple novel.

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