

# Anatomization of Optimistic Nihilism in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

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## Abstract

This paper deals with the misconception towards the philosophical idea of nihilism that it reflects a pessimistic attitude towards life which does not provide a worthy notion of ideas that could possibly benefit humanity as it deals with key aspect of the belief that life is meaningless. Philosophical theories are open to debate as the reader becomes the interpreter of the ideology which is subjective and tentative. The aim of this paper is to predominantly unveil the optimistic attributes of nihilism through the novel *The Stranger* by Albert Camus which deals with the protagonist Meursault whose actions are found disengaged from the world and he is evidently insensitive to the death of his mother. Meursault projects an indifferent character when he is found guilty of murder, which is observed while he takes up his death sentence without perturbation. The novel is probed under the aspects of liberation, capitulation and absurdism with relation to the attributes of nihilism to bring out positive shade of limelight and to attain a coherent perspective that provides a better understanding towards the idiosyncrasy of nihilism in the field of philosophy and literature.

**Keywords:** *nihilism, optimism, liberation, indifferent, absurdism.*

## Introduction

Nihilism has its origin from the Latin word *nihil* which translates to the meaning nothing. During the early nineteenth century Friedrich Jacobi a German philosopher was the first person who used this terminology in his writings to denote a negative trait of transcendental idealism. However, nihilism came to the limelight only through Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* (1865) while he used nihilism to refer the character Bazarov who spreads the belief of complete denial of religion and values.

“Nihilism is a philosophy or family of views within philosophy that rejects general or fundamental aspects of human existence, such as objective truth, knowledge, morality, values or meaning” (Nihilism). In other words it denotes the denial of standards that is being advocated as mandatory element for humans to survive in society. It is considered as one of the most controversial ideologies that many philosophers rejected due to its high pessimistic nature.

*The Stranger* is a French novel written by Albert Camus, translated by Matthew Ward. Camus was born in Algeria, belonged to the early twentieth century who was an author, philosopher, journalist, and Nobel Laureate. His works predominantly reflected the themes of existentialism, absurdism and nihilism. Camus is best known for his theory of absurdism and he advocates that “as humans one must embrace the absurd condition of human existence” (Absurdism).

In *The Stranger*, Albert Camus uses the characteristics of a nihilist to portray the protagonist Meursault who does not display his emotions to the standard set by society which has certain structure on which each person follows or expresses their feeling. The novel begins with Meursault asking permission for absence of two days to his boss for attending his mother’s funeral ceremony. While doing so he does not express any grief of having lost his mother and rather he takes the incident in an ordinary way. During the funeral ceremony he exhibits no sign of mourning and remains silent. Meursault’s life goes unaffected by his mother’s demise and he continues going back to his routine life.

On a sunny day at beach due to the confrontation between Meursault’s friend Raymond and an Arab man, Meursault out of exasperation on the account of extreme heat takes the pistol of Raymond and murders the Arab. He is apprehended and the case goes on with Meursault as the main criminal. The prosecutor highlights the fact about how the criminal has treated his mother by sending her to a care taker home and has not expressed any signs of loss after her death. Meursault’s state of mind is revealed by the prosecutor on emphasizing this incident which changes the course of the case from a murder trial to a character trial based on which juries of the court decide and ultimately the judgment goes against him and he is sentenced to death.

## Optimistic Nihilism

Optimistic nihilism is an approach of looking at life from a positive perspective adhering to the pre-existing philosophical ideology of nihilism. Laves-Webb conveys that “Optimistic nihilism views the belief that there is no underlying meaning to life from a perspective of hope” (Optimistic Nihilism). The concept of nihilism is debated to be the most pessimistic philosophies which are assumed as selfish and individualistic that goes against morality which advocates life is meaningless. But it has a positive side on which individuals can make their lives better and more meaningful. When a person considers everything to be meaningless in this world the journey towards discovering it begins. The society is structured in such a way that no individual can go against the common pattern it has set since everyone is believed to have an inter connection with one other. In such a world, optimistic nihilism provides the gate way to find and execute our own purposes and goals without taking into the consideration of the predefined duties or responsibilities which is sub-consciously laid by society upon the minds of people. It provides a sense of contentment and evokes the sense of introspection towards oneself which brings self-satisfaction and ultimately leads the individual with a clear picture towards their existence.

In *The Stranger* though the protagonist at the end faces death penalty, his view towards life during imprisonment and his thoughts about execution delivers a positive attitude towards life. Even under such miserable condition he accepts death and wishes that all must witness his execution that was to be held in the street and he utters, “I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate” (Camus 123).

Camus unveils the protagonist as a nihilist who does not react to the changes or happenings around him and accepts all incidents in the same way. Being it happiness or a sad event Meursault expresses his emotions in the same ordinary way. This trait exposes the neutral way of looking life, unaffected by the external influences which can be seen as one of the positive aspects of nihilism.

The action of Meursault murdering a man cannot be justified at any situation for which he faces irreversible consequences that finally leads him to death sentence. But the judgment awarded to him was

solely for his character that went against the norms of the society rather for the murder which is conveyed through the lines, “They had before them the basest of crimes, a crime made worse than sordid by the fact that they were dealing with a monster, a man without morals” (Camus 95-96). He accepts for having committed the crime, expect for the fact that it was not planned murder rather a slip of moment due to the extreme heat on the beach which is conveyed as “Fumbling a little with my words and realizing how ridiculous I sounded, I blurted out that it was because of the sun” (Camus 103). Though it might sound silly his intolerance towards scorching sun and the reflection from Arab man’s pocket knife was the reason which triggered him to shoot.

On having analyzed the novel under the scope of optimistic nihilism, following are some of the positive outcomes of nihilism that can be identified.

### **Liberation**

“The fact that life has no meaning is a reason to live - moreover, the only one” (Cioran, Ch. 3). Life as such does not have any defined meaning as our very existence is a mere accident which even perplexes the modern day scientists. In such a situation the society sets various parameters and defines how to lead a life and instructs how to react to every incident that happens around us. This creates an expectation and tension around the individuals when they fail to satisfy the standards. Meursault is one such person who liberates himself from the standards for which he is considered as an insensitive person. During the trial Meursault hears various acquisitions against him to which he responds “for the first time in years I had this stupid urge to cry, because I could feel how much all these people hated me” (Camus 89-90) and realizes how he has been perceived by the people and finds himself as a stranger living in the world. This enables him to be liberated from picturing himself away from the thoughts of others and truly becomes self-aware of his existence in the world.

### **Capitulation**

Laves-Webb comments that “The more you believe you have control over something, the more you identify with it” (Optimistic Nihilism). Throughout the novel Meursault surrenders himself into the situation which makes him to adapt and accept the situation. After committing the crime he accepts the

consequences and during imprisonment Meursault ponders upon his trial and says “‘Well, so I’m going to die.’ Sooner than other people will, obviously” (Camus 114) which reflects that he is ready to accept the worst outcome of facing his death sentence and at the same time utters “I would somehow have to cool the hot blood that would suddenly surge through my body and sting my eyes with a delirious joy” (Camus 114) which shows he also hopes for his release. In both scenarios he is ready to accept the situation irrespective of the outcome. This displays his rationalistic view towards the reality in which he surrenders himself as nothing matters since in one way or another everyone will die.

### **Absurdism**

Absurdism in relation to philosophy is associated with Albert Camus who frequently uses the ideology in his writings that deals with the conflict of human tendency to seek value and inherent meaning in life and the human inability to find any certainty. The acceptance towards absurdism in life can provide the greatest power of freedom for an individual to exist in a serene state of mind neglecting the external factors imposed by the society that always focus on finding and cherishing pre-determined value system. Meursault’s life can be taken as an example of absurdism where he does not bound to the standards prescribed by the society which makes him a stranger in the society. This enables him the mental freedom at prison and even after hearing about the death sentence, he is able to hold his emotions which require a strong state of mind.

### **Conclusion**

The perspective towards any idea or theory solely lies upon how it is being perceived by the reader. Thus, nihilism a philosophical ideology which is considered to have a negative trait by the critics, can also be fathomed as an optimistic one provided with the appropriate approach towards it which can help in understanding the complex nature of human existence and the ways to embrace the absurdity that prevails in this world. Through the novel *The Stranger* it can be analyzed that optimistic nihilism break frees the chain set by society that tries to contain the individuals from thinking outside the limits.



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