

## Meursault: an Outsider or an Insider?

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**Abstract:** *The Outsider* (1942) is an explication of Camus's idea of the absurdity of human existence. Here we find a protagonist who has no specific goal or aim in life not because he is undirected or unsure of himself but because he knows that life is meaningless. This knowledge results in an acute stoicism in Meursault and seems to make him an outsider not only to his surrounding world but also to his own life. But if we judge him through the incidents he narrates, we don't get the real Meursault. We can rather understand him perfectly if we analyse his confrontation with the sun. The way he constantly faces the hot sun instead of taking refuge under any shade shows his stubbornness, his challenge to the benign indifference of this world towards human existence. The way he faces all his misfortunes shows him as a man who has resolved not to be hurt or distressed in any way. But if we examine his character closely, we don't fail to trace his emotion and attachment which he mentions very briefly and casually. Thus it should not be overlooked that in his utter loneliness during his prison life he thinks of his mother over and over again, and it is Marie, his girlfriend, who makes him painfully aware of how stagnant his life has become. In fact, we can say that these sudden paroxysms overshadow his apathy for life. Therefore, we can reach a conclusion that this detachment and indifference are his deliberate impositions which tend to hide his real self, but only unsuccessfully.

The first response of every reader of *The Outsider* is probably the same. It is that of a shock, shock at the utter indifference of the hero towards everyone and everything of his surrounding world. This feeling of shock surmounts all other feelings because of Camus's use of the first person narrative. The way he uses 'I' renders a tone of maximum detachment though the narrator expresses his most intimate experiences. Again, as Rachel Bepaloff puts it, "Camus wanted to show an alienated subjectivity by letting the character depict himself through acts which do not express him" (Bree 92). Camus has portrayed the essential absurdity of human existence through Meursault. He denies conforming to any norms of society and religion, and lives a life fulfilling his sensual needs only. All the irregularities of his character combined together make him an outsider not only to society but also to his own life. The lack of emotion and attachment with which he narrates his own life shows how meaningless life could be. This confrontation with a meaningless existence is at the root of all his passivity and lack of enthusiasm. Being deprived of any future, because he has no aim, and

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past, because he has no attachment to life and hence no fond memory, he is condemned to live for the present. And this present, according to Rachel Bepaloff, "is crumbling away and does not become memory. Time, until the final revolt, is nothing for him but a succession of distinct moments, which no remembrance transfigures. Camus has rendered admirably this fall of present into insignificance through a paradoxical use of the first person narrative" (Bree 93). His taciturnity and indifference alienate him from society and he becomes an embodiment of the sheer aimlessness and purposelessness, who even denies an emotional attachment towards his mother and his girlfriend. In short, he doesn't have a single relationship which can bind him to someone with expectation, responsibility, love and care. But a close look into his character will enable us to discover that this stoicism is only a mask which he wears to save himself from any pain and disappointment. This paper aims at delving deep into Meursault's heart through the corridor of some sudden paroxysms of emotion to find him not as an outsider at all but as an ardent insider.

In *The Outsider* we find Camus demonstrating his idea of the 'absurd man' through Meursault. To Camus "in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 13). So absurdity is a human condition faced by a man which leaves him totally dismayed at the realization of the inevitable destiny of life, namely death. An absurd man "prefers his courage and reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits" (*Sisyphus* 64). So Meursault, as Jean-Paul Sartre conceives of an absurd man, "does not hesitate to draw the inevitable conclusions from a fundamental absurdity" (Bree 109). He is not grief-stricken at his mother's death, because he is aware that his mother must die someday or the other. His relationship with his mother could be summed up from some of the statements he gives in course of the whole novel. He always judges situations in terms of their feasibility. So when the presiding judge asks him why he sent his mother to a home, his blunt answer is:

It was because I didn't have enough money to have her looked after by a nurse. He asked me whether it had been a personal sacrifice for me and I replied that neither mother nor I expected anything more of each other. (85)<sup>1</sup>

He also feels that he did the right thing in sending his mother to the home as during the last phase of her stay with him she could hardly communicate with him anymore. She only used to observe him silently. He also says that he hardly visited his mother during the last year of her life, because in that case he would

have to give up his holidays and also because they both got accustomed to their new lives.

*The Outsider* is a demonstration of the basic principle of existentialism propounded by Jean Paul Sartre, namely "existence precedes essence" which means there is no fixed way a man will behave and respond to his surroundings. So we do not see Meursault behaving like most of the people of our society. Since Meursault doesn't believe in God, he doesn't feel that this life on earth will transcend him to the afterlife which religion ensures for man. So, seeing that life ends with death and death is the only destination that life leads to, he receives life as it is and shows no enthusiasm or disillusionment towards what happens to him.

One of the most striking examples of his indifferent response towards life is the way he accepts his mother's death without any shock. Rather he is mostly occupied with his physical comfort during the night of vigil. He doesn't refuse to drink coffee which the caretaker offers him and also smokes before his mother's coffin. In his words:

He then offered to bring me a cup of white coffee. I'm very fond of white coffee, so I accepted and he came back a few minutes later with a tray. I drank. I then wanted a cigarette. But I hesitated because I didn't know if I could smoke in front of mother. I thought it over, it really didn't matter. I offered the caretaker a cigarette and we smoked.(14)

And rather than thinking of his mother, which is quite usual or expected at such a moment, he observes everything around him very closely. Instead of being lost in mourning and losing track of what is going on around, his sensuous organs become more active. He can smell flowers in the night air, describes the nurse and the inmates of the home in sharp details. Again, in the morning just before the funeral he even feels like having a walk in the countryside and enjoy the natural beauty. During the funeral procession it is the steaming heat of the sun that bothers him only, and he also keeps observing what others, namely Mr. Perez and the warden, are doing around him. At last when it's all over, he is relieved after returning to Algiers, because he will now be able to sleep comfortably in his bed for a long time uninterrupted by anyone or any sense of duty or formality. The way Meursault enters into a liaison with Marie beginning from just the day after he returns from Marengo is another shock for us. And the shock is manifested in Marie's reaction. When she sees him wearing a black tie, she wants to know whether he is in mourning. Hearing from him that his mother died the day before, she shrinks a little but doesn't say anything. His approach to life and his recent loss is made clear from the way he concludes this chapter of his life:

I realized that I'd managed to get through another Sunday, that mother was now buried, that I was going to go back to work and that after all, nothing had changed. (28)

The way Meursault presents his girlfriend Marie Cordona to us is another manifestation of his temperament which denies warmth and love. He first meets her in the bathing station by chance though we are informed that he knew her before. He also mentions that he had a fascination for her when she used to work as a typist in his office, which he thinks was reciprocated by her. But as she left suddenly, he didn't feel any urge to pursue her and soon forgot her. After meeting her again he gradually enters into a relationship with her where there is no love or commitment. They simply hang on together and he likes spending time with her and desires her body. So when Marie asks whether he wants to marry her, he says he doesn't mind doing so if she wants to. In reply to another question he says without any hesitation that he probably doesn't love her and that it doesn't matter at all. Again, when Marie wants to know if he had accepted the same proposal from another woman with whom he had the same kind of relationship, his simple and plain answer is "Naturally" (30). He continues to deny any emotional connection with Marie in the same manner throughout the novel, and during his imprisonment we don't see him thinking about Marie. Rather he mentions categorically:

I had a tormenting desire for a woman. That was only natural, I was a young man. I never thought specifically of Marie. But I'd so often be thinking about a woman, about women in general, about all the ones I'd known and all the occasions when I'd loved them, that my cell would fill with faces, the embodiments of my desire. (76)

Finally he puts her out of his life, the way he puts an end to his relation with his mother. He recalls Marie once again for the last time towards the end of his life to wipe her out completely from his memory. He assumes that maybe Marie has become tired of having a relationship with him, because she hadn't written to him any more. He even thinks that she is dead. There's no way available for him to know, because they are now physically separated. So he confesses:

Anyway, from that point on, Marie's memory would have meant nothing to me. I wasn't interested in her any more if she was dead. I found that quite normal just as I could quite well understand that people would forget about me once I was dead. They had nothing more to do with me. I couldn't even say that this was hard to accept. (110-111)

But if we probe deep into Meursault's heart, we find several instances which forbid us to take him the way he presents or rather tries to present himself. We can see a man deeply in love with life who never wants to miss a chance to enjoy it amidst his sharp awareness about the absurdity of his existence. We even find



him mentioning, though casually, the source from which stems such an acute indifference. There are indeed some occasions when he mentions them very briefly. The first one is the moment when after showing no enthusiasm about his boss's proposal to go to Paris, he reflects how he should have actually dealt with this issue. There we find him mentioning that he once had ambitions and hope, but he had to give them up because of some harsh realities of his life:

When I was a student, I had plenty of that sort of ambition. But when I had to give up my studies, I very soon realized that none of it really mattered. (44)

Maybe because he had been exposed to poverty, the negative aspects of life, at too young an age, have left him totally disillusioned about life. We find references to situations caused by poverty in other sections of the novel. He mentions it, as we said earlier, in his answer to the presiding judge's question about why he sent his mother to a home. It's because he "didn't have enough money to have her looked after by a nurse" (85). Following the same conversation we also come to know that he had realized long ago that there's none that he can expect anything from: "neither mother nor I expected anything more of each other, or in fact of anyone else" (85). From these very subtle and casual references we can trace that he wasn't a stranger to society all through his life, but situation made him so disillusioned that he became alienated from and apathetic to everything of life.

But we may at the same time find that this lack of passion is a deliberate one with which he covers his true self and sort of wears a mask of apathy and logical reasoning in all spheres of life. But he can't hide it fully at every point. There are some moments when he is not able to guard his emotions entirely, and we encounter a man who has buried all his emotions with utmost care and is always at pains to denounce it through such expressions as 'as usual', 'got used to, etc. Exposure to painful realities of life doesn't make him disillusioned only, he becomes stubborn. He is a rebel to this universal absurdity of human condition, and his rebellion could be symbolized by his encounter with the benign aspects of nature, mainly the sun. The sun in this novel is the symbol of naked truth. So, throughout the novel we find Meursault confronting an extremely hot sun which leaves no shadow. His rebellion lies in the fact that he is never afraid to face it. Instead of taking refuge under some shade, he constantly keeps facing it even though it hurts:

I was walking slowly towards the rocks and I could feel my forehead swelling up under the sun. The heat was pushing full against me as I tried to walk. And every time I felt the blast of its hot breath on my face, I set my teeth, closed my fists in my trouser pockets and tensed my whole body in defiance of the sun and of the drunken haze it was pouring into me. With every blade of light that leapt up off the sand,

from a white shell or a piece of broken glass, my jaws tightened. I walked for a long time. (58)

So it is no wonder to find him behaving the way he does after his mother's death. Since he knows that he has to lose his mother some day and that he will still have to go on living his life after that, he confronts it boldly and tries to reason it out in every possible way which appalls others severely. But we must say that he overdoes it. And though he refuses to accept his lawyer's proposal that he should say he (Meursault) restricted his natural feelings on the day of his mother's funeral, as it will be untrue, we cannot but think the same way, because we really find him broken into pieces which he won't admit. Such a conclusion can be drawn from his comment about how keenly he observes the inmates of the home during the vigil:

I saw them more clearly than I've ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces and their clothes escaped me. (15)

It is important to note here that he doesn't say he saw them as clearly as he usually sees things, but 'more clearly'. Now the question is why more clearly? Can't we say that it is because he wanted to divert his thoughts away deliberately from his mother? Again, though he declares on the following day of the funeral that nothing has changed because of his mother's death, we find him, in spite of himself, mentioning his mother's absence very casually while he wanders around his flat lazily and describes its furniture. There he mentions that his flat is too big for him now because he lives in only one room and the other room is empty. It was perfect when his mother used to live with him. In his words: "It was just right when mother was here. But now its too big for me" (25). This reference to his mother for the first time after her death indicates the emptiness of his heart caused by her demise. No matter how indifferent he seems to be towards her, it's her he clings to in his utter loneliness or misfortune, and moreover, identifies himself with her.

During his prison life we find him referring to his mother over and over again which is unusual on the part of a son who declares that her death has not affected his life in any way whatsoever. So in his desperate effort to rationalize his situation before his execution, he draws parallel between his mother's ideologies and his. One such moment is when he tries to convince himself that he was not utterly unhappy; which, he says, was an idea of his mother. There he says that he was lucky throughout the period when everyday at dawn he used to wait to hear footsteps towards his cell signaling the end of his life. He feels lucky because he could have heard footsteps in one of those dawns, which he didn't and he feels happy for gaining another day to live. At the end, he completely identifies himself with his mother, when he mentions his mother after his entire inner struggle to prepare himself for accepting his destiny without fear.

For the first time in a very long time I thought of mother. I felt that I understood why at the end of her life she'd taken a 'fiance' and why she'd pretended to start again. There at the home, where lives faded away, there too the Evenings were kind of melancholy truce. So close to death, Mother must have felt liberated and ready to live her life again. No one, no one at all had any right to cry over her. And I too felt ready to live my life again. (116-7)

At any case, he like his mother wants to make the most of life under any circumstances. His mother, being left alone at the home, which was not as normal and acceptable in those days as it is now, being detached from her only son (we don't find any reference to any sibling of Meursault) because of poverty and generation gap, doesn't yet give up her hope on life. In other words, she even in such difficult circumstances doesn't give up, rather tries to make some meaning of her life by engaging in a relation with Mr. Perez. Meursault, condemned to death, tries to enjoy life to the fullest capacity within his limits, and doesn't want to waste a minute on things like religion and God. He wants to think, on the contrary, of the happy times he had and draws to the conclusion that he had been happy and still is happy and prepares himself to face his destiny boldly without any discontentment and regret.

In the same way we may observe that no matter how hard he tries, he is not successful in denying Marie an emotional bond. She is the only attachment he is left with after his mother's demise, and he tries to deny it in order to save himself from any despair and pain. So he tells her plainly that he doesn't love her, though he uses the word "probably" (50), and offers to marry her leaving the matter to her decision and choice. Throughout the novel he just mentions his sensuous desire for her, the pleasure he gets at the sight of her physical beauty. But hers is also a case like his mother's, and he cannot hide it properly under the mask of coldness. The first such situation is the one when he says he thinks about marriage seriously: "For the first time perhaps, I really thought I'd get married" (52). This is the section in the novel, rather quiet in tone, where some real sense of life to be worth living pops up. There at the house of Raymond's friend Masson, we see the only instance of healthy domestic life where, unlike Salamono and his wife, the husband and the wife, don't live together only because they have become habituated to a life like this; but they, in spite of their differences regarding habit and liking, hang on to each other because of love and warmth in the midst of a soothing and blithe spirit of nature. There, Meursault, cannot guard him any longer, and starts aspiring for a life of love and passion, the very idea of which he so far kept carefully locked within his heart. There he can not repress the idea anymore that Marie could be the very anchor of such a life for him. But the irony of his life is that the very moment he starts unlocking his heart from its iron cage of reason and habit, he sinks back into the quicksand of despair and disillusionment. He kills an Arab, apparently for no reason, in his

words "because of the sun" (99). At the beginning he cannot help express his despair in a most touching outburst:

That was when everything shook. The sea swept ashore a great breath of fire. The sky seemed to be splitting from end to end and raining down shits of flame... I realized that I'd destroyed the balance of the day and the perfect silence of this beach where I'd been happy. And I fired four more times at a lifeless body and the bullets sank in without leaving a mark. And it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness. (60)

From this point on he puts on his mask again, perhaps a face to meet the faces he meets, though this time it's tougher since he is faced with the most difficult and painful part of life—his own death.

Yet he is unable to be totally indifferent, though it is a wonder for us how he is able to maintain such a clear reasoning in a situation when he is waiting to be hanged. His revolt against his punishment could be understood if we notice how he deals with his need for cigarettes and women. He says that his need for cigarettes was the most tormenting thing for him. He is so shaken by not getting them that he almost questions the validity of depriving him "of something that didn't do anyone any harm" (77-8). Later he understands that it is part of his punishment and gets used to not smoking. So it is no longer a punishment for him. Again, though his desire for women disturbs him, he also sees a positive side here: "it killed time" (76). In short, he has attained a temperament through which he can rationalize every situation and which enables him to get used to it. So it is impossible to punish him in any way. But at the same time we see that it's not that he has no emotional response to such situations, but that he has to struggle a lot to come to such solutions.

Lonely as he is now in his prison, Marie is the only person who reminds him of a free life he is deprived of but aspires for. During the first phase of his prison life we don't see him agitated or worried about his fate. He mentions casually how he gets used to this new phase of his life though he mentions his troubles as well. But he identifies the cause of such unrest and once he does so, getting rid of that is not a problem for him. He mentions that the most severe problem he faced in his prison life is that he kept thinking like a free man and this thought unsettled him because he felt suffocated within his cell. Such thought of pain has arisen by Marie's visit to the prison, before which he declares that he even felt "being one of the family" (70) with the institution that was conducting the processes of his execution. But Marie's visit disturbs his mental equilibrium. She, the only incarnation of his involvement to life, makes him aware of and admit the acute pain he is going through:



From the day I got her letter (telling me that they won't let her come any more because she wasn't my wife), from that day on, I felt that my cell was my home and that my life was at a standstill. (71)

This is an instance that his life was not a sterile one, not merely a repetition of the same routine without a unity heading towards a meaning. His use of the word "standstill" suggests that there was once a current in his life which he tries to establish otherwise in the earlier part of the novel.

As he says that during his prison life he never thought of Marie specially, we see him mentioning her very casually in order to establish points which don't grant her much importance in his life. One such example is when he wipes her out of his life at the end of the novel. Since Marie didn't write to him anymore and there is no way left for him to know why, he assumes that maybe she has lost interest in him or she might have been dead. In any case, it doesn't matter to him any more, nor does he find it hard to believe. He then arrives at the conclusion that from then her memory doesn't mean anything to him. This declaration implies that her memory meant something to him which he denied himself before. Again, in trying to convince the chaplain that he never saw any divine face emerging from the stones, that is, the walls of his cell, he says:

Maybe, a long time ago, I had looked for a face in them. But that face was the colour of the sun and burning with desire: it was Marie's face. (114)

It is unusual for him to try to see Marie's face in the walls if we remember his earlier comments on his involvement with her expressed in such manner that he didn't love her, neither did he think of her specially during his imprisonment, etc. This shows that he really had an emotional bond with her even though he refused it from the beginning.

We also see his emotions gushing out in several other situations. During the proceedings of his case at the court he behaves and comments on the whole process and people's behaviour there, as if nothing did concern him at all. He says, for instance, it will be an interesting experience for him to watch the trial because he never had a scope to see one. But as the trial begins, we see his emotions coming out. There his emotion pours out for Celeste when he sees how exactly he (Celeste) has understood him and how desperately he tries to help him. As Celeste realizes that with all his good will and effort he cannot help Meursault, his eyes fill with tears and his lips start trembling. Meursault observes him very passionately and is able to read his mind: "He seemed to be asking me what more he could do" (90). He is so moved by a feeling of kinship that he says, "it was the first time in my life that I'd ever wanted to kiss a man" (90). Again, when his reaction and behaviour during the vigil and the funeral of his mother are being used in order to define his character, he feels very helpless. Seeing how

inappropriately and cruelly he is being judged and how much these people hate him, he feels like crying.

Thus after a long inner struggle he gets prepared to face his execution courageously. The thought that enables him to do so is that it doesn't matter whether one dies at thirty or at seventy because in both the cases it's not going to change the course of action of the world in any way. But it is not easy for him to reach such conclusion, and just a little while before he is able to take his mind in this direction, he can't help being overwhelmed with joy at the thought of being given another twenty years to live. So he concludes, rather jovially that "Given that you've got to die, it doesn't matter exactly how or when" (109). So at the very dawn when he is to be executed, he exposes himself to the benign indifference of the world and declares that he had been happy and is still happy. And whereas he felt like crying seeing extreme hatred in the people during his trial, he now wishes to be greeted by the spectators "with cries of hatred" at his execution.

#### Note

- <sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Outsider*. Penguin Books. 1983. All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition of the text, and pages are cited in parentheses.

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