

***“I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world.”***

Meursault, *The Stranger*

***The Unquiet Unconscious:  
Psychoanalysis of Meursault in  
Camus’s “The Stranger”***

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## Abstract

This essay examines the enigmatic protagonist, 'Meursault' in book, "The Stranger" by Albert Camus. This book is emblematic to the concept of absurdism, a strand of philosophy that is a constant in Camus' works, dwelling on the clash between human's search for meaning and the 'indifference' of the universe. In this book, Meursault notably presents his indifference in an atypical manner on two separate occasions where his morality and humanity are questioned: his emotional reaction to his mother's death and the seemingly arbitrary murder of an Arab on the beach.

## Introduction

Like many of his characters, Camus presents Meursault as a complex yet candid person. His absurdity, painful and effortless nonchalance and an aimless way of living makes him an intriguing individual in the world of philosophy and literature alike. The behaviour exhibited by Meursault is just not fascinating in terms of philosophy but also psychology. Camus' genius in creating characters is not hidden, and yet his underlying philosophical views make his characters so difficult to understand. The mind's labyrinthine working in different situations and circumstances is conspicuous in this book.

This paper uses concepts by Freud, Minkowski and others to understand Meursault as a character. It is an attempt to partially come close to understanding why Meursault is the way he is.

## Freudian theory

The concept of Id, Ego and Superego given by Sigmund Freud, characterises the different branches of the human mind in these three different ways (Freud, 1923).<sup>1</sup> The Id is the unconscious source of bodily needs, impulses and innermost desires. Freud perceived id as the “the dark inaccessible part of our personality” (Freud, 1923). The id is also supposed to be reflected through sexual desires or libido. The ego works on the ‘reality principle’, which seeks to fulfil the desires of an individual through a realistic and logical medium. The superego is developed from cultural ethos, ideals and morals. It is thus believed, that ultimately it is the working and the strength of each of these components that determine a person's nature and personality. Throughout the book, there have been many incidents where Meursault is seen channelling his id through his actions. For example, the sexual desires for his partner and his quick actions on impulses as reflected by his killing of the Arab. He expressed his emotions unconsciously without thinking about the outcomes which shows that he acts according to his impulses. There is little to no cooperation between the id and the ego, while the superego is seen having almost no influence.

The character also shows insecurity, with which he uses defence mechanisms that defend this trait of his. For instance, he feels that the people around him are judging him at his mother's funeral and the way he was uncomfortable with Perez's (Meursault's mother's friend) presence. Defence mechanisms are unconscious reaction patterns employed by ego to protect itself from psychological conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

Meursault uses ‘intellectualisation’ i.e. thinking about stressful things in a clinical way, for example, when he reflects on his mother's passing and conclusion of the burial, he remarked, “when all was said and done, nothing had really changed”, as he

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<sup>1</sup> See also, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://dictionary.apa.org/defense-mechanism>

is **feigning belief** in his own emotional resistance. Albeit, harshly also reflecting that it should matter more than it is and uses his unfeeling nature to get back to his routine.

## Emotional Derealization

Derealization has been defined as dissociative symptom which leaves a person feeling detached from their surroundings and perceiving the real world as foggy or unclear. As a concept, however, it has evolved over time drawing many scholars' attention. To understand Meursault in this light, drawing on Eugene Minkowski's phenomenological account of derealization (Minkowski, 1970 ) and Sartre's existential view of contingency (Sartre, 1964), Meursault can be seen as experiencing existential derealization — explaining a stripping away of the world's emotional and moral coherence.

The book begins with Meursault's internal monologue, "my mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know" and preparing to go to his mother's funeral is a powerful launch into the book capturing the reader's immediate attention. This somewhat revealing opening is not straightforward- it is unlikely for a man to forget such an event and there could be a myriad of reasons why Meursault did not remember the day his mother died. For example, the concept of derealization- a mental state where one's surroundings feel unreal or distorted- which can also result from being stuck at the denial stage<sup>3</sup>, consistent with the first stage in the Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Meursault's statements regarding his mother throughout the book such as the instance where he forgot his mother's age or when he mentioned his mother crying because of a change in routine and not because she might have missed him might be a reflection of his intellectualization reinforcing his apathetic nature. Moreover, another reason behind this nonchalance could be the failure to go through all stages of grief, and landing onto acceptance as he could think that showing emotions is a sign of weakness.

## Delusion of persecution

There have been various incidents in the book where it can be seen that Meursault is having delusions of persecution, i.e., the belief that you will be harassed or threatened.<sup>4</sup> At his mother's funeral, while everyone was crying, he felt uncomfortable at the thought of being judged and embarrassed. On other occasions, he also felt that

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0149763420305492#:~:text=Depersonalisation/derealisation%20refers%20to%20a,American%20Psychiatric%20Association%2C%202013>)).

<sup>4</sup> See also, Kraepelin, E. (1913). *Dementia Praecox and Paraphrenia*. Translated by R. M. Barclay. Edinburgh: E. & S. Livingstone.; [https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/persecutory-delusion#:~:text=In%20subject%20area:%20Medicine%20and,Psychiatry%20\(Second%20Edition\)%2C%202011](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/persecutory-delusion#:~:text=In%20subject%20area:%20Medicine%20and,Psychiatry%20(Second%20Edition)%2C%202011)

people were trying to trick him and make fun of him which often led to him thinking that he is being judged.

## Alexithymia and embodied cognition

Alexithymia is a personality trait where an individual faces trouble expressing, describing or differentiating one's own emotions (Sifneos, 1973).<sup>5</sup> The character fails to describe his emotions when he killed the Arab to the judge and also fails to express them. In this phenomenon, the individual tends to place his/her focus on external events, which is clearly seen in Meursault's constant analysis of how people react, behave and think about him. Psychologically, alexithymia can be linked with depression and anxiety. An important aspect that repeats itself is the character's sensitivity to temperature as he feels hot and sweaty in his environment. This can be a sign of anxiety as he has displayed this symptom in stressful situations. This sensitivity to temperature can also be supported by the theory of embodied cognition which provides for the internal feelings and behaviour being influenced by external surroundings and sensory and motor experiences of the environment.<sup>6</sup> The concept of "affordance" (Gibson, 1979)<sup>7</sup> has been understood as something that is offered to the individual by the environment, further opens a new perception of the character's behaviour. Meursault is an individual who is hesitant to such affordance for example, he chose not to react upon his mother's death and the time when he did not react to Raymond's abusive behaviour with his mistress.

In the next section, the idea of 'meaning', is viewed from the perspective of another brilliant writer, Victor Frankl.

## Frankl's theory of meaning

It is no surprise that many voices would regard Meursault to be someone with serious mental health disorders and some voices (although sparse) would rationalize him. Victor Frankl's view of the world is dominated by meaning, thus unsettling with Meursault or even his creator Camus.

Frankl proposed the concept of logotherapy which describes life's motivational force as searching its purpose (Frankl, 2006)<sup>8</sup>. What Meursault could be experiencing is existential vacuum where he finds life to be meaningless and/or purposeless which can be linked to feelings of emptiness and depression. throughout the story, the character tries to find a purpose of his life and from here rises absurdism- founded on

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<sup>5</sup> See also, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/alexithymia#:~:text=Alexithymia%20is%20a%20trait%20characteristic,patterns%20and%20inform%20decision%2Dmaking>.

<sup>6</sup> See also, <https://aeon.co/videos/embodied-cognition-seems-intuitive-but-philosophy-can-push-it-to-some-strange-places>

<sup>7</sup> <https://cs.brown.edu/courses/cs137/2017/readings/Gibson-AFF.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See also, <https://viktorfranklamerica.com/what-is-logotherapy/>

the belief that we live in a chaotic, purposeless universe and human existence has no inherent meaning. He is often misinterpreted as nihilistic but in reality, he was struggling to find a meaning to his life. Meursault is indifferent to the external world and his life as is seen in his indifference for the capital punishment at the end of the book. He welcomes it as he accepts that his life has no meaning and embraces his fate with this state of mind. This end to the story also reflects Meursault's acceptance to absurdism and leads him to think that he lives freely and authentically.

However, despite the psychological and moral analysis, R.D Laing's thought is also an interesting perspective that does not fit neither the psychologists nor thinkers like Frankl. Laing's idea would be that which supports Meursault's outlook of the world and life i.e., a "sane response to an insane world" (Laing, 1960) and a positive personality as someone being true to his nature. Such disagreements or divergence in views should be viewed as a sign of healthy discourse and society.

## Conclusion

The Stranger is an appreciated book because of the depth of the characters in the story and the complex inner conflicts faced by Meursault. The analysis of his character and personality is subjective and this research has shown some of the aspects which are related to his character. There can be many other reasons why Meursault acted upon his impulses. This further exemplifies Camus's intention of showing Meursault as an anti-hero and a disturbed character, while maintaining his own position as one of the greatest thinkers of the philosophy of absurdism through sheer brilliance in writing.

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