

# The Dismantling Perception toward Mersault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*

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**Abstract:** *Every human being born becomes a part of a society by following certain system of it. Society has specified ideologies through which every individual are thought to view the world. Those who follow are considered as normal but those who are not will be tagged as stranger. So, the question is how far we are independent in expressing thoughts, actions and speeches in so called an independent world. In The Stranger, Albert Camus exhibits the characteristics of an existential individual through the actions of Meursault. Meursault does not obey the societal ideologies, for which the community isolates him. Society considers him a threat to their very existence and tries to get rid of him in every way. Society wears a mask and judges every move Meursault makes as he does not act like one of them. This paper will focus on the judgment based on the societal stereotype over an individual characteristic in revealing the real truth. It will examine whether Meursault is an unconventional character or the external force makes him one like that.*

**Keywords:** Alienation, conventional, existentialism, ideology, society, stereotype

Existentialism is a philosophy whose primary concerns are individual existence, freedom and choice. This philosophy differs from conventional thoughts where each individual life has its own meaning in life. Existentialism is all about life being meaningless, because there is no purpose for individual existence. It says, there is no God or afterlife. The only way to find meaning in life is by embracing existence.

Existential movements began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when religion had influences on this philosophy. At that time, philosopher had complete faith in God. Up until 20<sup>th</sup> century, existentialism was not much popular. This term had influenced many writers in 20<sup>th</sup> century with the two World Wars in Europe. French writers often used this term to express their views during World Wars. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers were influenced by religion, but in 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers such as Camus and Sartre lost their faith in God as they experienced trauma in World Wars. Wars had fed them up, made them not to believe in God anymore. In 1940, Sartre was imprisoned in Germany, but he escaped the prison and became one of the leaders who started existential movement.

During World War II, Paris became the center of existentialist movement. Existential writers constituted a new form of theatre called "The Theatre of the Absurd". A huge number of writers made contribution to the sudden popularity of existentialist in France to the gruesome revelations of gas chambers and war atrocities that took place in Germany after the war. The primary purpose of The Theatre of the Absurd was to show man's helplessness and pointless existence in a world that has no purpose.

Soren Kierkegaard, who was a Danish philosopher, is considered the father of existentialism. He was the first writer to call himself an existentialist. His beliefs were based on religion as he was a religious man. He lived in a time,

where religion ruled and had major impacts on the lives of people. According to Kierkegaard, human freedom is based on faith, meaning that if a person has no faith in God, he is not free. Kierkegaard states example of Adam. Adam had many possibilities to grasp and he chose to disobey God, and this is where Soren Kierkegaard's and Jean-Paul Sartre's beliefs match. They both believe that each individual is responsible for his actions; therefore, he is the one who has to take responsibility of his actions. Adam had freedom of choices, but he chose to go wrong way which does not necessarily condemn every human being, as Adam was the one who made mistake. Timothy P. Jackson, who is a professor at Emory University, states, "All fall freely, as did Adam; we are radically individually responsible" (244). This proves that every man is for himself, therefore, we have to take responsibility of our actions.

Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus lived in an era where urbanization ruled and had major influences over people. People started to lose their faith in God as they witnessed two World Wars. Both Sartre and Camus had gone through war, and this differed their beliefs a little from the father of Existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard. As the surrounding has impacts on the lives on people, this is what happened to these philosophers. As the American writer Sarah Dessen states that "The choices you make now, the people you surround yourself with, they all have the potential to affect your life, even who you are, forever". They had to adjust their beliefs depending on their time when fairy tales no longer existed. People became urbanized and religion lost its authority over people.

Albert Camus was born in French Algeria in 1913. He was among the most popular playwrights who contributed to absurdism. The principal theme of his work is that life is meaningless. Camus demonstrated the problem of absurdity through the story of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was punished by the

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gods. Every time Sisyphus continually rolled a rock up a hill only to watch it roll back down again. This struggle seems meaningless and absurd because Sisyphus cannot achieve anything here, but Sisyphus did it anyway. Camus also talked about this in his other famous book, *The Stranger*, in which a man accepts the irrational and meaningless ways of life by stopping himself from making any judgments, by befriending the worst sorts of people, and not even feeling discomfort when he kills someone.

Society has set ideologies which we are to maintain, or else they alienate us. In *The Stranger*, Meursault does not follow society's ideologies, thus he becomes a target of society. He is an outsider in *The Stranger* as he possesses existential attributes. He believes that his life has no purpose, therefore, he is content the way he is. He does not maintain social norms. All these things make him a target in the eyes of society.

Existential beings are hated by other people. "I have lately been told of a lady who, whenever she lets slip a vulgar expression in a moment of nervousness, excuses herself by exclaiming, "I believe I am becoming an existentialist." So it appears that ugliness is being identified with existentialism" (*Humanism* 1). These lines show that existentialists are not very welcome in our society. They are somewhat peculiar to normal people. As a result, they are isolated from society as they do not live up to the norms that society has set. The purpose of this thesis paper is to defend the actions of Meursault and to unmask the true nature of so-called society.

Meursault received a telegram stating that his mother has died. With the permission from his boss, he went straight to his mother's funeral. At funeral, he does not act the way he is supposed to, therefore, he draws the attention of society. Over the next few weeks, he ran into Marie with whom he formed a relationship, befriended Raymond, and went to a vacation on beach to Mason's. At beach, Meursault, Raymond and Mason confronted the Arabs with whom they indulged into a fight. At some point, Meursault fired a bullet and killed one of the Arabs. Afterwards, he was sent to prison. The persecutors seem to be more interested in his personal life than his crime. He was given death penalty which he embraced gladly.

The novel begins with the death of Meursault's mother, and this is when the society starts being judgmental. Meursault talks about the time when his mother and he lived together, and she "was always watching him" (Camus 13). It does not demonstrate a healthy relationship between a mother and a son, but Meursault does not say they were close. As a person, Meursault is very honest, and his honesty turns out to be his downfall. Meursault's brutal honesty clashes sharply with society's polite insincerity, as seen with the telegram that announced his mother's death. "Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Your sincerely" (9). These lines were written in the telegram which does not show any real sentiment. This small letter seems to be more similar to shallow politeness, as they could not even bother to use an entire sentence to express their sentiments. Although Meursault and society are not on the same page, they are actually operating in the same way. Meursault is simply honest about his lack of true caring for societal norms and

empty sympathies. At the funeral of his mother, Meursault looked relaxed as he dozed off and smoked a cigarette. This is not accepted behavior in the society in general, but he does not have to cry himself out because his mother has died. Death is inevitable and beyond our control, and there is nothing we can do to avoid death. Meursault is a realist as a person who knows crying and screaming will not bring his mother back. "I remain in the realm of possibilities" (*Humanism* 16). It is not necessary to cry to show grief, because not everyone feels the same way. Shedding crocodile tears at funeral would have been hypocrisy, which Meursault did not do as he is an honest person.

Throughout *The Stranger*, Meursault does not act the way society expects him to. As Germaine Bree points out in her article, "Heroes of Our Time: The Stranger", "Meursault acts in a human situation as though human relationships, and therefore responsibilities, do not exist" (37). Meursault does not care about getting promoted at his work because he is happy with his current position which seems to offend his boss as Meursault is less ambitious. His boss, representative of society, expects him to accept the job opportunity. As Meursault acts indifferently here, he becomes a stranger to his boss. Likewise, Meursault acts indifferently towards Marie's marriage proposal, for which Marie thought him to be peculiar. She was surprised at his lack of emotions towards serious matter such as marriage. Meursault does not have much friends, but a low-life person such as Raymond is a friend to him which is absurd to society. Before this point, he was not involved with anything outstandingly sinister. Befriending Raymond opens the door for society to judge Meursault and isolate him as a stranger. He seems to be judged by "peculiar little woman" (45).

Camus introduces this peculiar woman in chapter five of part one. She "came in and asked if she might sit at his table" (45). At first sight, she may seem a minor character, but she is actually a representative of so-called society. She is introduced right after Meursault has befriended Raymond and helped him write an attractive letter to lure his cheating girlfriend into a trap. Arthur Scherr states that Meursault "commits his one untruthful, inadvertently 'evil' act" (192). It seems to be true in this manner. This is not a coincidence that the peculiar woman appears right after this incident, because she is a representative of society, and she is here to judge Meursault. She politely asks if she can sit next to Meursault, meaning that with Meursault's acceptance she is going to sit next to him, so that she can scrutinize his actions. Society sees Meursault as an emotionless monster, where society masks their lack of emotion under fake politeness. One of the major themes of this novel is society's hypocritical judgment that isolates Meursault and lead him to his downfall. This peculiar woman is just the beginning.

There are a few factors that motivated him to kill the Arab. He has experienced emotional traumas such as the death of his mother, and seen his friend being brutally attacked. Death of any loved ones put mental pressure on anyone. It even hurts Meursault himself, though society takes him for a monster. When he got back to office after the death of his mother, his boss confessed his condolences. Meursault tells his boss that it is not his fault that his mother died. As his boss becomes quiet after hearing this, Meursault thinks the

matter and says, "I shouldn't have said that" (9). This demonstrates that Meursault is aware that what he said to his boss was not very appropriate though he does not understand the reason. Afterwards, Meursault apologizes for what he said to him, because he realizes that this is not appropriate to say. This means that he cares about surrounding people and what they think. This proves Meursault is not what society thinks of him, after all. He may not have as much emotion as a normal person would, but he is not an emotionless monster. It is possible that death of mother has put him into emotional trauma for which he has committed the murder.

Another fact could be that Meursault had to protect himself and his friends. Arab's sister was Raymond's mistress. Arab was upset with Raymond because he had beaten Arab's sister due to the reason that she was cheating on him. This made the Arab violent. The first time Raymond, Mason and Meursault faced off the Arab, Raymond was wounded by the Arab. "But already Raymond had his arm cut open and his mouth gashed" (55). Later that day, Raymond, Mason and Meursault faced off the Arabs again. This time Meursault had to do something, because if he does not attack first, either he or his friends are going to get hurt as his past experience told him. "We are defined by our experiences and how they affect us, not by reason, and this is what Meursault teaches us" (Herring 36). It is possible that Meursault had assumed that the Arab is going to hurt all of them. So, it comes down to either him or the Arab. Meursault chooses him and triggered in self-defense or else he and his friends would have been killed. "The sun glinted off Raymond's gun as he handed it to me" (56). This was when Raymond passed the gun to Meursault. This was immediately after Raymond's altercation with the Arab. Raymond gave him the gun in case the Arab turns to Meursault, so that he would be able to defend himself. Meursault was pinned by the Arab. On top of that, they were beating Raymond and Mason. He had to fire a shot in order to defend himself and save his friends. The African-American minister Malcolm X states that "I don't even call it violence when it's in self-defense; I call it intelligence". Before shooting the Arab, Raymond wanted to kill the Arab with the same gun that Meursault fired to kill the Arab. But Meursault interfered as his sense of rationalism tells him so. "He has not said anything yet. It would be unfair to kill him just like that" (57). This proves that he is a lawful citizen who would not hurt other persons unnecessarily. As he triggered in self-defense, he also saved his friends, which means he is not emotionless, after all.

The fact of the power of nature also justifies his killing of the Arab. The scorching heat made Meursault exhausted. "All that heat was pressing down on me and making it hard for me to go on" (57). This proves how hot it was outside in that particular day. The reflection of sun on knife dazzled Meursault's eyes. "The light leapt up off the steel and it was like a long, flashing sword lunging at my forehead" (59). This line demonstrates how powerful and intolerable sun heat is. Sun is a representative of nature, and in a way it controls people. In *The Stranger*, nature has controlled Meursault, and got the best of him which leads him to his downfall. On a hot summer day, people tend to lose water which can lead to symptoms such as discomfort, headaches and dizziness. Throughout the novel, sun was bothering Meursault, and he felt uninterested about things

are occurring. When Meursault was at his mother's vigil, he thought about how the sun affected him: "glare on the white walls was making me drowsy" (9). On the day of killing Arab, the light was brighter and more intense. The thing is that the nature had a powerful control over him, and it is quite impossible to go against nature as it seems from Meursault's perspective. Hot weather makes people exhausted, depressed and angry. "Raised temperatures cause an increase in heart rate, testosterone, and other metabolic reaction that trigger the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for the fight-or-flight response, so people are more inclined to fight" (Burnett). This is enough to prove that Meursault had no control over himself because of scorching heat.

From existential point of view, he can be defended as well. After the murder, he was sent to police station where he confronted the examining magistrate, took full responsibility of his actions. An existential being is generally honest with their actions. They would rather take full responsibility of their actions. "Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders" (*Humanism* 4). A man is defined by his actions and he becomes what he chooses to be. Meursault committed a crime and admitted himself guilty. "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is" (*Humanism* 2). Meursault is a free man, therefore, he is free to do anything. However, according to Sartre, freedom has its own cost which is taking responsibility. "Everything that happens to me is mine" (*Being and Nothingness* 708). And Meursault took the full responsibility of his actions, as he stated "On my way out, I was going to shake his hand, but I remembered just in time that I'd killed a man" (64).

Society is not very comfortable with the ways Meursault acts, but there is not much they could have done to Meursault until he commits the sinister. The moment Meursault kills the Arab; society gets the opportunity to judge him. The Arab, Meursault murders, has no name; thus the Arab lacks characterization. This means that the murder is not emphasized on the Arab, it is rather used as a weapon to persecute Meursault. As Robert Brock points out, the Arab "simply does not exist other than as a means to get Meursault condemned to the guillotine . . . it forces the reader to concentrate on Meursault" (98). Through this murder, we get the clear picture of society and it reveals society's true nature. For long, society has been looking for something to use against Meursault as he does not maintain societal rules, and they got it.

If we analyze carefully, we can blame the society. Meursault murders a man for which he should be condemned. But the conviction seems to ignore the matter, and rather deal with his personal life. Meursault showed lack of emotions at his mother's funeral, and solely based on this ground, the whole prosecution has been carried. The prosecutors or the jury never thought for a moment that some people may show less emotion as everyone is different. Meursault does not live up to societal rules; so society gets rid of him. Camus himself even explained that "The hero of the book is condemned

because he doesn't play the game" (118). This sums up that Meursault was sentenced to death not because he murdered a person, but for not following norms of so-called insincere society. The examining magistrate, who is a representative of society, wants him to lie about his feelings, or else that would turn the court against Meursault. This should not have been the case. The court should have dealt with this case based on his actions, and as to why he did it. Rather they dug out things from his personal life. Meursault gained himself the wrath of the examining magistrate by mentioning that he is an atheist. The examining magistrate should have been objective about it, but he took it personally and acted on it. When the caretaker was asked to deliver his witness, he mentioned about offering Meursault a cup of coffee. But the court took it negatively. "A stranger may offer a cup of coffee, but a son must refuse it beside the body of the one who brought him into the world" (88). As Meursault does not act like a normal person, the court wants to get rid of him.

At first glance, *The Stranger* seems to be story of a monster who is a threat to society as he does not care about his surroundings. However, as we begin to observe and analyze his actions carefully, we get to see a different picture. He is not what society thinks he is. He neither a monster nor a murder; rather he is a hero. He is happy with the way he is, therefore, he does not change himself. Unlike society, Meursault is honest. He does not maintain society's norm, because they mean nothing to him. At the end of the story, he dies as society sends him to guillotine. This rather shows the true nature of society. According to society, he is an evil, but as we observe the whole incident and we can come down to this: Meursault may lack emotion and may not care about the world but that does not necessarily make him more evil than the perception of a society.

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