

To Lie or Not to Lie: Revisiting Albert Camus' *The Outsider*

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Abstract

Meursault is different. He will not lie. He will not pretend. He is true to himself. So when his mother dies and he is unmoved, he refuses to do the proper thing and grieve. Returning to his native place after the funeral, he carries on life as usual until he becomes involved in a climatic murder scene. In court, it is clear that Meursault's guilt or innocence will not be determined by what he did or did not do. He is on trial for being different- an outsider. For example in court when the police man asked Meursault if "he is 'nervous'". He said no. In fact, in a way it would be interesting to watch a trial" (Camus, *The Outsider* 81).

Keywords: Unmoved, Climatic, Determined, and Different

Written in French, Albert Camus' first novel, *L'Etranger* translated into English as *The Outsider* is a novel. It is based on the philosophy of Existentialism, Nihilism and Humanism. It is autobiographical in tone. The philosophy of Existentialism emphasizes concrete individual existence, individual freedom and choice. It was founded by Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher. According to him, the highest good for an individual is to find his own unique vocation. One must choose one's own way of life without the aid of universal objective standards. Again he must be prepared for the consequences of choice made by him.

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French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, says 'existence precedes essence'. Choice is centroid to human existence and it is inevitable. Even the refusal to choose is a kind of choice. Freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility. An existentialist artist comes to lay stress on existence and not on essence because essence is illusory and problematic. The situation given and perceived in a state of anguish is real existence.

The Outsider is a story of a man who, without any heroic pretensions, agrees to die for the truth. Camus says-

In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death. I simply mean that the hero of the novel is condemned because he doesn't play the game. In this sense, he is an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on the fringe, on the outskirts of life, solitary and sensual. And for that reason, some readers have been tempted to regard him as a reject. But to get a more accurate picture of his character, or rather one which conforms more closely to his author's intentions, you must ask yourself in what way Meursault lies. Lying is not only saying what isn't true. It is also, in fact especially, saying more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, saying more than one feels. We do it every day, to make life simpler. But, contrary to appearances, Meursault doesn't want to make life simpler. He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings and society immediately feels threatened. (*The Outsider* 118-119)

The novel begins abruptly with the death of the protagonist's mother. "Mother died today. Or may be yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday" (09). Meursault, the paramount figure in the novel, was unmoved by his mother's death but decided to attend the funeral. He had sent his mother at Marengo because she needed a nurse and he had a modest income. He took leave for two days. Borrowing a black tie and armband, he caught the two o'clock bus and reached the old people's home in the afternoon to keep the vigil at night. He assured himself saying that "after the funeral though, the death will be a classified fact and the whole thing will have assumed a more official aura" (09).

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The dead body was kept in the mortuary, so as not to upset the others. When the caretaker came to unscrew the coffin to let Meursault see his mother for the last time, he immediately stopped him. He began to feel sleepy due to the late-afternoon sunshine. He took white coffee and enjoyed smoking in front of his mother. He also asked the caretaker to turn off one of the lights in the room as it was tiring his eyes. During the vigil, mother's friends came in the mortuary and sat opposite to Meursault. They all felt sorry for him. But he felt very uncomfortable among them and for a moment he had a ridiculous impression that they were there to judge him. He slept during the vigil as he was exhausted. The vigil was very tiring for him and left him with 'ashen face'. In the morning he refused to see his mother when he was asked by the warden. "The undertaker's men have just arrived. I'm going to ask them to close up the coffin. Before I do, would you like to see your mother one last time?" I said no" (19).

The church was in the village and it was a little far from the old people's home. During the funeral procession, Meursault was completely hot under his dark clothes. Sweat ran down his cheeks and he fanned himself with his handkerchief. The heat of the sun was unbearable for him and his joy knew no bound, when he entered Algiers and went to bed for repose. Next day, he went for swimming to refresh himself. He met Marie Cordona and had sex with her in his room. He also went to watch a Fernandel film with her.

One day Meursault wrote a letter to a Moorish girl to please Raymond, his next door neighbor, who wanted to punish his mistress. He even acted as a witness for him. After some days Raymond's friend Masson invited him to his chalet. He went down to the chalet accompanied by Marie and Raymond. After lunch Meursault, Masson and Raymond went out for a walk. They were followed by some Arabs. Raymond at once started fighting with one of the Arabs who was his mistress' brother. He was wounded in the fight and was taken to a doctor. When he returned he again went out and Meursault followed him. Finding the Arab on the beach he calmed him and took his gun. They returned towards the chalet but while Raymond climbed the wooden steps, Meursault stayed back. He walked to the beach all alone.

The whole beach was reverberating in the sun. In order to escape from sun Meursault advanced towards the cool spring behind a rock.

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From a distance I could see the small, dark lump of rock surrounded by a blinding halo of light and spray. I was thinking of the cool spring behind the rock. I wanted to hear the murmur of its water again, to escape from the sun and the effort and the women's tears, and to relax in the shade again. (58)

He noticed that Raymond's Arab had come back. When the Arab drew his knife towards him, he became nervous. Irritated by the sun he couldn't decide anything. Without further thinking he killed the Arab. He discovered that he had deliberately destroyed the perfect silence of the beach.

The sun was beginning to burn my cheeks and I felt drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows. It was the same sun as on the day of mother's funeral and again it was my forehead that was hurting me most and all the veins were throbbing at once beneath the skin. And because I couldn't stand this burning feeling any longer, I moved forward. I knew it was stupid and I wouldn't get out of the sun with one step. But I took a step, just one step forward. And this time, without sitting up, the Arab drew his knife and held it out towards me in the sun. The light leapt up off the steel and it was like a long, flashing sword lunging at my forehead. At the same time all the sweat that had gathered in my eyebrows suddenly ran down over my eyelids, covering them with a dense layer of warm moisture. My eyes were blinded by this veil of salty tears. All I could feel were the cymbals the sun was clashing against my forehead and indistinctly, the dazzling spear still leaping up off the knife in front of me. It was like a red-hot blade gnawing at my eyelashes and gouging out my stinging eyes. 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 sheets of flame. My whole being went tense and I tightened my grip on the gun. The trigger gave, I felt the underside of the polished butt and it was there, in that sharp but deafening noise, that it all started. I shook off the sweat and the sun. I realized that I'd destroyed the balance of the day and the perfect silence of the beach where I'd been happy. (60)

Out of tension he fired four more times at a lifeless body and "it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness" (60). Meursault was arrested. It was found that he had 'displayed a lack of emotion' on the day of his mother's funeral. People described him as

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being taciturn and withdrawn. During the trial, he was reduced to insignificance. A great deal was said about him than about his crime and the ‘extenuating circumstances’. The prosecutor reminded him of his ‘insensitivity’ and declared that the crime was abominable and premeditated. “Meursault didn’t have one, a soul, and that had no access to any human heart” (98). In his reply, Meursault only said that he never intended to kill the Arab and he killed him “because of the sun” (99). The judge decided that he “would be decapitated in a public square in the name of the French people” (103).

In the cell, he had a tormenting desire for a woman. As smoking was forbidden, he broke bits of wood off his bed-plank and sucked them. He killed his time by sleeping and remembering the past. He ended up getting used to everything. As Meursault did not believe in God he directly refused to see the chaplain. The presence of the chaplain was tiresome and aggravating for him. He insulted the chaplain in a “paroxysm of joy and anger” (115). Eventually he prepared himself for death. He remembered his mother and he had a tormenting desire for women. He was sure of himself, sure of everything, sure than he was, sure of his life and sure of the death that was coming to him” (115). “What did it matter if he was accused of murder and then executed for not crying at his mother’s funeral?” (116)

When he was asked if he’d felt any grief on the day of his mother’s funeral, it really surprised him and he said that “I probably loved my mother quite a lot, but that didn’t mean anything. To a certain extent all normal people sometimes wished their loved ones were dead” (65). By nature his physical needs often distorted his feelings. On the day of mother’s funeral he was very tired and feeling sleepy. So he was not fully aware of what was going on. Meursault’s lawyer asked to control his natural feelings on the day of investigation. When he was asked to say that he regrets his crime, in “time-honored fashion” (119), he replies he feels more annoyance about it than true regret.

Then the magistrate stood up, as if to indicate that the examination was over. Only he asked me in the same rather weary manner whether I regretted what I’d done. I thought it over and said that, rather than true regret, I felt a kind of annoyance. I had the impression that he didn’t understand me. But on that occasion that was as far as things went. (69)

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Meursault did not hide his feelings. He spoke in a natural way. While waiting for death, Meursault's last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at his execution and that they should greet him with "cries of hatred" (116). Camus says-

Meursault is not a reject, but a poor and naked man, in love with a sun which leaves no shadows. Far from lacking all sensibility, he is driven by a tenacious and therefore profound passion, the passion for an absolute and for truth. This truth is as yet a negative one, a truth born of living and feeling, but without which no triumph over the self or over the world will ever be possible. (119)

Camus, a profound, honest and effective advocate of liberal humanism, has exhibited existential philosophy in the very existence of Meursault. More over Meursault progresses from a desperate nihilist to an introvert thinker. The portrait of Meursault is not simply a caricature of an indifferent man but a deep psychological study.

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