

## The Portrait of an Outsider

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### Abstract

The 1957 Literature Nobel Prize winner, Albert Camus' *The Outsider* is an experiment in "obstinate honesty and logic", as Camus himself describes the book that establishes the Truth of the Absurd. The Truth of the Absurd explores "conscious death" for the Absurd Man who will be, at first, acutely conscious to unhappiness from missing Liberty and Truth in Life for he feels that there is nothing – let alone the little goals we set for ourselves in Life, and happiness therefrom – that cannot be made defunct by the ineluctable reality of Death. He will detach from this moral framework, murder to reset the existing framework to start from nothing, feel the agony of imprisonment and soon to be guillotined, know hope of living a second time – whatever little is left of it – and, be happy in spite of death approaching, and thereby, re-establish the moral

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framework on its pillars of Truth and Liberty. The significant here is to challenge death by searching for happiness, in spite of death. Ignorance implies happiness bypassing death.

Keywords: Albert Camus, The Outsider, Secular Humanism, The Myth of Sisyphus, Zur Genealogie der Moral

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## Introduction

Albert Camus was born in Algiers in 1913. He died from a road accident in 1960. His mother was Spanish. His father a Frenchman, by vocation a farmer and died in World War I. Camus studied philosophy in Algiers University and wrote his thesis in philosophy. He was a communist in the start of his career but he exited the party later. According to him "*the ideal of freedom or human emancipation that is taken as the starting point of rebellion and which, with time, reaches a climactic stage, is itself destroyed.*" The comment was made against Marxism and Stalinism.

Albert Camus promulgated the new philosophy called Secular Humanism. His belief was in establishing international or world's government. Else, the human race was in danger.

The novella 'The Outsider' was written when Camus was at Oran in Algiers as a schoolteacher, just after France was brought under the control of Germany in the Second

World War. But he returned to France to subvert German control of France from within. With him were the manuscripts of *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. *The Outsider* was first published in France in 1942.

### **The Outsider: Introduction**

The 1957 **Literature Nobel Prize winner, Albert Camus'** *'The Outsider'*<sup>2</sup> is still now a thought provoking novella whose theme – why life should inspire us, and continue to enjoy primacy that death cannot disparage – is an awe-inspiring investigation into the human mind. The book, on one hand, challenges conventional wisdom – about life's purpose lying in continuing in the face of life's vicissitudes – and on the other, establishes the thought – not acceptance of societal edicts on death nor unfettered despair of approaching death, but to answer death's finality with the hope that is life by owning up to responsibilities of one's actions and know happiness of indifference to all else, thereby removing the stink of detachment to worldly ways in the face of death as a flawed view of life. This furthers Camus' intention of an anguished search for Truth about happiness and thereby progresses thought from static stoicism in death to dynamic hope in the face of death moving man forward in

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<sup>2</sup> Camus, Albert, Translated by Joseph Laredo. 1983. *The Outsider*. Penguin Books.

life's journey. The book is also a caring treatise on the issue of **The Absurd**, not to mention an invitation in serious contemplation on society's handling of its outliers and imagination's function in finding solutions to human interest problems. Truth '*mysterious, elusive, always to be conquered*' and Liberty '*dangerous, as hard to live with as it is elating*'<sup>3</sup> become a torch each in the hands of Honour of Living.

## Definitions

**The Absurd:** the philosophy that Life is without meaning if death is a Hobson's Choice, and every situation that is life-changing is actually trivial, where one has no choice really. Result: estrangement of man from society, characterised by unwillingness to comply with societal mores, the telling the truth, and moral indifference.

**Nihilism:** Derived from the Latin word for *nothing*, nihil, nihilism is the belief that nothing in this universe has any worth and, in Nietzsche's famous phrase from *Zur Genealogie der Moral*<sup>4</sup>, "everything is permitted". It consists in rejection of established religions, beliefs,

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<sup>3</sup> Camus, Albert. 1957. *Albert Camus - Banquet Speech*. Accessed June 15, 2016.

[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1957/camus-speech.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1957/camus-speech.html).

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1887. "The Genealogy of Morals Essay."

morals and principles; radical discontinuity of cultural conventions; a perspective on life akin to boredom, emptiness, despair, self-destructiveness, and all-round negation<sup>5</sup>

**The Death:** The 'absurd wall' in the futility that is life as the point where man must choose between ignorance and consciousness as the break point between sorrow and happiness. If he chooses ignorance as retreat from the wall unchallenging of death then he will be miserable unable to decide on his own whether what society prescribes for him is really what he wants. If he chooses consciousness then he will be happy as the wall becomes a stimulus to a step forward in life by searching for the open door to truth.

**The Sun:** On one hand, if Sun is the symbol of happiness, in brightening the dour walls of the insulated room of unquestioning Existence with the light of deeds, then the wall of death is a verity to be withstood and overcome by catching up with others in Life's many ways to happiness, like love, career and achievements. The Sun nurtures man and his life in various ways so that he is happy in its shine.

On the other hand, if the Sun is the metonymy of happiness, explained as the Sun's indifference to the

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<sup>5</sup> Seigneuret, Jean-Charles. 1988. *The Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs*. Vol. 2. Greenwood Press.

finality of its own death, figuratively, emphasised by its shining down on the earth every day, then the Absurd Man – convicted to the gallows – who knows happiness in spite, is that Sun and is defined by its glow. Then, sorrow piling up one over the other, as Death shows its implacable face everywhere, is not defensible in this world. Man must move instinctively to find the open door.

**The Outsider:** A man who always speaks the truth and refuses to comply with societal norms about proper behaviour.

### Topic

**Background:** Meursault, a Frenchman, works in an office in Algiers and lives alone in an apartment there. He used to live with his mother but rising expenses make them reach a decision together that she should be transferred to Marengo at an old age home. The story starts with the death of his mother and Meursault reaching the old age home to see through her last rites, when he knows a contradiction of truth that what he felt was detachment and not sorrow as explicit in the funeral rites to be followed for his mother.

What starts of as detachment, apparently harmless but intriguing to society, turns sordid when Meursault kills an Arab, his friend Raymond's enemy, and is arrested and tried for man slaughter. The trial ends and he must be

decapitated in front of society. ***The Birth of the Subject in Camus' L'Etranger*** by Gilbert B. Chaitin<sup>6</sup> comments '*The hole at the centre of L'Etranger is of course the enigma of the murder, Meursault's apparent lack of motive and the unanswerable question of why, after killing the Arab, he puts four additional shots into the dead body.*'

**Topic:** This essay carries out a post-mortem of the events leading up to the murder, and after, to establish the thesis that Truth of Absurd – as well as having a choice between life and death – is not closed in by the absurdity of death but depends on man's ability to change the status quo following his instincts for that Truth that neither fear nor sorrow in death can suppress.

*The uniqueness of Camus' 'raisonnement absurde' is that he(Camus) accepts the truth of the Absurd and maintains that if this be the truth then in all honesty we should be bound to follow this truth in all its consequences as well as to make it a guide of conduct. The "absurd line of reasoning" is an experiment in obstinate honesty and logic'*<sup>7</sup>

**Truth of Absurd:** Meursault is to discover sorrow, and murder its face – a Truth; and, when taken to task by a furious society, sitting up in its chair of Disbursal of Justice,

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<sup>6</sup> Chaitin, Gilbert B. 1993. "The Birth of the Subject in Camus' L'Etranger." *The Romanic Review*.

<sup>7</sup> Hanna, Thomas. 1958. *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus*. Henry Regnery Co.

he is pursued by his just-fledged consciousness into an anguished search, and later its discovery, for Happiness, in the face of death. This leads to further revelations, one leading to other, like the Indifference to death, buoyed by Hope at a second chance at happiness and facilitated by the avowal of Liberty to act differently in crisis. This strive for life's meaning when life has been cut short by circumstances and death is acutely felt nearing comprise the '**Truth of the Absurd**'.

## Analysis

Camus has the following options for Meursault, and only the last gives him the freedom of choice that death, as a Hobson's Choice, had taken away, so that if there is a choice to exercise and it's not of death, then it's that of Liberty and Truth – the inviolable and the absolute known:

**Option 1:** Life copies its charted moves within society, ignorance of Liberty and Truth.

Man, faced with an 'absurd wall' of death, can be cornered with his back to the wall and do what most people do, compromise with reality by retreating from death and carrying on with life as before.

**Option 2:** physical death, Liberty unused, Truth unknown.

Man is unhappy to make a compromise and is immobilised at the wall that leaves society where it was unknowing of the rot. Meursault could have struck out for

the open door to Truth (Option 3) if he had the realisation of Liberty – perhaps, he had, but he chooses not to.

**Option 3:** conscious death, liberty used, truth known.

But, the Absurd Man faced with this situation – that offers no choice at all – contemplating life's choices as unappealing and with death so close as to nestle against his back, moves with an instinct to survive the wall of death in a way society will never prescribe: *murder*. Murder, like the many moves he would have taken with society's approbation if he were going along with society's ways, unpremeditated and thoughtless, is one without much thought for its consequences, and even less for Liberty and Truth. But, murder, while being thoughtless, moves him a step forward by asking that he contemplate its misdeed as society would see it. In letting justice take its course and society take over the events, he still chooses Liberty to act differently from societal dictums as a facilitator of Truth, which is further strengthened by breaking away from atrophied societal conventions that ask for repentance from a murderer, while knowing happiness of life lived – whatever little there is left of it – without fear of death. Unfurled to him for the first time, 'conscious death' would thus be revealed a Truth.

**Premise of Conscious Death:** For Meursault, as far as he was concerned, if 'conscious death' should act out its promise – happiness, *in the face of death* – then the punitive system should work perfectly to deny him the pardon he hoped, and still the prisoner of justice must

see-saw between "*the dawn (when execution is carried out) and my appeal(which granted him pardon when it shouldn't)*". The significant event here is consciousness of death approaching and to challenge its power over man by searching for happiness, in spite of it. Non-conscious signifies happiness bypassing death.

**Ignorance of consciousness and increasing societal aspirations:** To start the process of Truth of Absurd, when Raymond goes to the rock on the beach with Meursault, they find the Arabs there, and are left nonplussed because the Arabs were lying down, '*in their greasy boiler suits. They seemed quite calm and almost contented. Our arrival had no effect on them. The one who had attacked Raymond was watching him in silence. The other one was blowing down a small reed.*' When Raymond asked Meursault whether he should kill the Arab, Meursault thought any advice would be ineffective and so he, instead of saying 'yes' or 'no', pointed out that since the two Arabs hadn't made any move to attack them '*it'd be **unfair** to shoot just like that*'. Raymond said that he would insult the Arab and when he answers back Raymond would shoot. Meursault said it sounds good but if the Arab doesn't draw the knife then he can't shoot. The two then decided that it'd be better if Raymond and his enemy Arab fought it out by hand, and if the second Arab intervened Meursault would shoot. However, in the silence of the day, Meursault had Raymond's gun, and Raymond waited for the Arab to attack but nothing happened.... '*And still we remained motionless as if everything had closed in around us.*'

To interpret the sense of everything “*motionless*” is to discover a situation requiring a change of the status quo but which fails to take shape – for, each Arab is happy to continue with life unchallenging of the ‘absurd wall’ of death, even if they think of it or know of it, perhaps silently prompted by their ‘*greasy boiler suit*’ of habit of living they wouldn’t destroy for arriving at a transcendental meaning of life. On the other hand, outsiders, like Meursault, take the ‘absurd wall’ as the point of departure in the quest for that Truth, and Liberty to act differently shows the way. To be different is to not just to detach from the moral framework underlying society – one that accommodates life’s deficits, like death, by being made stationary at the wall of Death, like the Arabs; or, one that enjoys the benefits accepting no rule and yet flouting most making life a matter of joke, like Raymond – but also, trounce the society its moral base by attacking its nerve centre of an agile consciousness – the system of disbursing Justice.

Meursault and Raymond turned back to the chalet but while Raymond climbed the stairs to the chalet, Meursault didn’t. *‘I stayed at the bottom, with my head ringing from the sun, unable to face the effort of climbing the wooden staircase and having to confront the women again. ....whether I stayed there or moved, it would come to the same thing.’* Meursault is detached – but contemplating what is wrong with climbing the staircase of livelihood that had nothing to offer him except life as a mistress who offers incompatibility and distress exchanged on the

money of lies and deception whose natural children are cruelty. "Ignorance of consciousness" is thus revealed – a Truth. Therefore, Meursault's climbing the staircase becomes infructuous as his mind will continue to be in the bottom of societal aspirations, as his detachment enforces on him.

**Sorrow of Weak consciousness and Murder:** Thereafter, Meursault turns back to the beach and '*walked for a long time*' in the sun when '*the heat was pushing full against me as I tried to walk.*' As the reality of detachment became the heat of death, he reached the rock and saw the Arab lying there, with his hands behind his head, his forehead in the shade of the rock and his whole body in the sun – a symbol of satiety and sanity from the despair of death while imbued with the pleasure that is life. As soon as he saw Meursault, he sat up and put his hand in his pocket. '*Then he lay back again, but without taking his hand out of his pocket.*'

Meursault took a step forward and he knew it was stupid but '*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.*' The unpremeditated move will bring up Meursault against the dare of the knife of logic in the hands of Satiety – if Life is to be lived, then death is to be withstood for the time being – but which reflects the radiance of the truth of happiness – that is, if Life is to be weaned away from preoccupation with death, to take those little steps in Life

(otherwise societal prescriptions of happiness) from a growing consciousness of responsibility in own actions as understanding of Liberty guides and desire for Truth propels. But even while consciousness has had its embryonic inception, reason was stronger in making its choice clear in trivialisation of death, that consciousness was too weak to prevent – *"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"* – and sorrow stupendous that he is about to transgress into lawlessness. 'Sorrow' is thus revealed – another Truth.

**Indifference to Death and strengthening Consciousness:**

If jeopardising the base – that, there is no true Liberty and no enduring Truth which murderer's impulse cannot infringe – shakens the society and puts him under the guillotine, then it also starts consciousness on its journey along the wall – which had been in stasis till now. From that point onwards, each move, unpremeditated, like the murder, that reason made trivial – like *"What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me"* – caused consciousness to reject as condemned – knowing of Liberty and Truth – and, now, what mattered was 'conscious death' – 'a vague breath' – that drifted *'across all the years that were still to come'* and that made it matter little – 'evened out' – *'everything that was being proposed....in the equally unreal years I was living through.'* That is, in the terminal moments, he would not repent and show-off grief that given the chance he wouldn't have

done it, bypassing death. Neither would he wish for another life as such a wish would put him back where he started – ignorance of death, and plausibly condemned. On the other hand, he would definitely move from that point on with happiness, that greater understanding what his actions entail produce, that Liberty to carry out those actions gives drive to, and that Truth to live without fear rounds off. There was also the equanimity of knowledge where “(a scream of sirens) announcing a departure to a world towards which I would now be forever indifferent.” Indifference towards Death' is thus revealed – a Truth.

**Hope in a second life and growing consciousness:** To think along with Camus and his construct of 'conscious death', if the 'truth of happiness' is the objective, the goal is 'happiness, in the face of death'; and the goal is reached when the particular realisation is made of 'indifference to death'. But *this* indifference takes wings from the knowledge of a sorrow as big as the end of the world that murder adds to, and, which his indifference to death expunges, so that the move from murder to indifference is delivered on the slow kindling of Hope in having a second chance at happiness – like his mother did when she took a fiancé in her terminal years, but this time without committing murder. In this connection, Camus addresses the Nobel Committee thus: '*They* (Camus himself, among they who refused nihilism) *have had to forge for themselves an art of living in times of catastrophe in order to be born a second time and to fight openly against the instinct of death*

*at work in our history.*' Meursault would wish for the same when he appeals for pardon of sentencing to death that he dismisses himself, time and again, in his worst dreams, all the time strengthening his hopes for another twenty years still to live, in the last pages of '**The Outsider**' when he says: '*And I too felt ready to live my life again.*' 'Hope' is thus revealed – a Truth.

**Happiness in affirmation of societal consciousness:** Meursault had killed, and also committed the outrageous of having fired four times into a dead body – taking the offensive to the society at its extreme – where, it's not just a dead body of an Arab, it's the disjunction from the society made complete. The indifference of society, that was standstill and was oblivious to his sorrow, which overlooked his detachment that was pointing out his distress to its eyes, will be jolted awakening her at last. Gilbert Chaitin says: 'In an ironic allusion to the Christian Bible, three times the magistrate asks Meursault, "*Pourquoi, pourquoi avez vous tire sur un corps a terre(Why, why did you shoot into a dead body?)?*" The third time he positively insists that Meursault answer: "*Pourquoi? Il faut que vous me le disiez. Pourquoi (Why? It's necessary you tell me. Why?)?*" But the latter maintains his silence, '*Je me taisais toujours(I still maintained my silence).*'"

Meursault's happiness does not come easily and, in prison, he would agonise over having another chance to live and his sentencing being pardoned. But Camus had already decided the outcome of murder when he created

its setting: the Arab was lying down at *'the cool spring behind the rock.'* Symbolically, it invited Meursault into 'the shade' of his sanity facilitated by the 'spring' of recovery 'behind the rock' of condemnation by society propelling Meursault's reintegration with society and regain of life's balance. Meursault would say: *'For the final consummation and for me to feel less lonely, my last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that they should greet me with cries of hatred.'* 'Happiness' is thus revealed – a Truth.

## Conclusion

If from a rational point of view, it's *not true* that he will stay on at the wall, and if honesty be his desired prerogative, it's *a compulsion* to hope, as Meursault would do during his imprisonment after the murder thinking up his own appeal but dismissing them every time – where, murder of the Arab is the chance happening but a necessary manoeuvre from sorrow to indifference about death, that knows death approaching and the despair but is conscious of hope for life ready to be lived again to arrive at full-fledged consciousness of Truth of Absurd. But the story leaves the end for the readers to complete, given that Meursault is conscious of death approaching, and is happy, in the face of death, achieving true transcendental value in Life. *'The only progress in civilization,'* wrote Camus early in his life, *"is the creation of conscious deaths.'*

To conclude, the Absurd Man is no longer cooped in by the 'absurd wall' of death, closed in by the static Truth in collective happiness into an insulated room with a closed door of imagination, but arrived at a 'succession of presents(*truths*)' – death notwithstanding – willing as he was *'to locate, among the obscure walls against which we are blindly stumbling, the still invisible places where doors may open.'*



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