
EXPLORING LAW AND THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE IN THE STRANGER BY ALBERT CAMUS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to perceive law and the idea of justice best, using the book authored by Albert Camus as a medium. The short fictional story, written by the French philosopher, has two parts. The first part describes the protagonist's indifference towards the death of his mother, and the second part involves the arrest and questioning of our main character for killing an Arab. *The Stranger* is a philosophical novella that explores themes of absurdism and existentialism. While absurdism deals with embracing the irrationality and futility of human existence, existentialism emphasizes the need to question or find one's purpose in life. The research aims to juxtapose these themes with the law and the administration of justice. The researcher also explores society's influence on justice and how it can alter the court's perception of morality.

Keywords: Albert Camus, The Stranger, Law and Camus, Existentialism, Absurdism

INTRODUCTION

Albert Camus, the French-Algerian philosopher and writer was born on 7 November 1913. His father had died in the battle of Marn during the First World War when Albert was a year old. His deaf mother then took him along with his brother, Lucien, to Algiers' French territory. His parents and the poor living conditions had a consequential impact on his writings. He completed his studies At the Algier's University in the study of philosophy . He won the 1957 Nobel Prize in Literature "*for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times*" (The Swedish Academy, 1957). As a philosopher, his views gave rise to a branch of philosophy called absurdism. He was also regarded as an existentialist but had refused to be considered the same throughout his life. As a writer, his works such as "*The Stranger*", "*The Myth of Sisyphus*", and "*The Fall*" were highly acclaimed. Albert Camus died in 1960 in a car accident and was buried in Lourmarin Cemetery, France.

The Stranger was one of his more well-known books published in 1942. The short novel introduces Meursault, the protagonist, who is nonchalant and blasé about his mother's recent demise. The story further portrays his detachment from the world around him in a comical manner. He does not seem to find joy in anything other than the frivolous physical aspects of life, such as the scent of flowers carried by a light breeze on a warm summer. The first part of the novel is narrated in the first person and is tonally dull and monotonous. The funeral of his mother is described, and new characters are introduced. The relationships he encounters and his choices throughout lead him to get arrested for murdering an Arab. During court proceedings, Meursault's lack of response at the death of his mother was pointed out by the jury. Meursault's indifference and amorality towards the crime committed are looked down upon, and he is soon after sentenced to death by beheading. In prison, he comes to realize that life as we know it has no purpose and that only death is inevitable. His coming to terms with the fruitlessness and banality of living frees him from the shackles of false hope and fantasy and enables him to make the most out of the few days he has left. Meursault is a character that does not fit into the 'normative society' and is often ostracized and cast out for being different. *The Stranger* truly represents Albert Camus' philosophical views of irrationality and existentialism.

"Absolute freedom mocks at justice. Absolute justice denies freedom" (Camus, 2012).

Law and literature have always been in harmony with one another. Some of the best literary works have had legal and jurisprudential themes explained efficiently. On the other hand, judges have used literature to illustrate their points and turn judgements into beautiful literary works. This research tries to bring the same kind of mutualism between law and legal theory with written pieces like *The Stranger* by Albert Camus. Here the law is used as a tool to filter out and punish the anomalies of society, those who stray out of what is considered to be normal, to maintain the smooth functioning of the mundane living. These anomalies are shunned for not abiding by the rules laid down by the general public and may not receive the justice they deserve. Although Meursault was arrested for shooting the Arab man for no particular reason, he was standing trial for the violation of societal etiquettes, predominantly by his unwillingness to shed tears at his mother's funeral. These themes are further probed into as the research progresses.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the current research are stated below:

- To give a brief summary of the 'The stranger' by Albert Camus
- To explore themes of existentialism and absurdism in the story
- To Find connections with Law and Justice with 'The Stranger'

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher has gone through various sources of literature to help with the research paper.

(Minda, 1995) authored by Gary Minda traces the history of the Law and Literature movement. It further explores the various interpretations of law made by judges and legal scholars using literary works of famous authors.

(Liston, 2013) is an journal that shows how children's literature explains on the various interpretations and presumptions about the concepts of rule of law.

The Literature of Existentialism is a journal article that talks about the nihilistic despair and concepts of existentialism of the current generation. (Waters, 1950)

The Absurd in Modern Literature is an article that tries to find analyze literatures of the twentieth century having concepts of absurdism related ideas. (Wenger, 1967)

(Klara Helene Stumpf, 2016) is a journal that looks into Justice and its various interpretations and tries to explore and analyse its conceptions.

The Stranger and The Critics, is an overview of the book and its perception by various generations over time. It also talk about Albert Camus and his Ideologies and how they influenced the people who read his books. (Hudson, 1960) (Hudon, 1960)

Theorizing Politics after Camus, explores the works of Albert Camus during the post-war, post-Holocaust era and the difficulty in theorizing on the reforms of political society. (Robinson, 2009)

“Meursault’s Dinner with Raymond: A Christian Theme in Albert Camus’s L’Etranger” talks in detail about the Christian ideals and themes in Albert Camus’s novel and how he portrays the protagonist as a type of Christ Figure. (Scherr, 2009)

(Manly, 1964) is a journal article that tries to draw similarities between two of Albert Camus’s most popular work, “The Stranger” and “The Myth of Sisyphus”

“Camus and The Novel of the Absurd”, Explains the absurdism and its themes as seen in the novel “The Stranger” by Camus (Brombert, 1948)

THE STRANGER BY ALBERT CAMUS: A SUMMARY

Part 1

- 1) The novel begins with Meursault, the protagonist, receiving news about his mother’s death, who lived in an older person’s home in Algiers, through telegram. He asks for leave for two days from work which the boss grudgingly grants after making him feel guilty. Meursault takes a bus to his mum’s place and sleeps for the entire duration of the trip. He meets the director of the older person’s home on his arrival and takes him to the morgue where his mother’s casket was placed. When the caretaker suggests to open the sealed coffin, Meursault advices him not to do so. They have a small conversation during the vigil, and Meursault finds the place comfy and pleasant and nods off. He is woken up by old people from the home but eventually goes to sleep again. The next day, when the director urges Meursault if he wants to witness his mother for the final time, he turns it down. The supervisor then introduces Thomas Perez, a close friend of his mother, and tells Meursault that he is the only resident allowed to

attend the funeral. During the funeral procession, the undertakers' assistant asks the protagonist his mother's age, to which he answers vaguely as he is not sure of her correct age. He feels no sadness or grief but finds the sun's heat during that day intolerable. He sleeps peacefully on his ride back home.

- 2) Meursault goes to swim at the beach and runs into an erstwhile colleague named Marie Cardona. He appreciates her beautiful figure and proceeds to flirt with her and swim together throughout the afternoon. He invited Marie to watch to a film, which she accepted. She is surprised to hear about his mother's funeral the day before but forgets about it. After watching the film, they spend the night in bed. When Meursault gets up the next day, Marie was nowhere to be seen. He chooses not to have his usual lunch at Celeste's to avoid asking his mother questions. Instead, he spends the afternoon on the balcony and observes people on the streets. He further cooks dinner as evening approaches. He thinks about his mother's death but claims nothing has changed since he works tomorrow.
- 3) The next day, his boss appears to be amiable and asks him about the funeral . Later that day he and his colleagues go to to have lunch. Celeste questions him about his mother's death, but Meursault tries to change the subject after a short response quickly. After work, he runs into Salamano walking his dog, who suffers from Mange. He was also invited by another neighbour named Raymond Sintes, widely believed to be a procurer but claimed to be a warehouse guard. He talks about his paramour and how he hurt and left her when he suspected she was having an affair. This led to a fight between Raymond and the mistress's brother, an Arab. Raymond wants to teach a lesson to his lover by writing a letter to stir up guilt and come back to him. He then decides to join in bed with her and degrade her face by spitting at the last minute. He asked Meursault to write the letter, to which he agreed and didn't mind doing. Raymond respects Meursault's attempt and claims that they are now "pals."
- 4) Meursault and Marie go swimming again. He is mesmerized to see Marie, and after swimming in the pool, they hurry up to Meursault's apartment to engage in coitus. She stays for lunch and has a good time with Meursault. Then Marie asks him if he loved Marie. The main character replied by saying he didn't care for it., which saddened Marie. Soon after, they hear an argument at Raymond's place. There were noises of

Raymond smacking his mistress. The officers arrive, and the woman tells him that she was beat up severely. He was reprimanded and ordered to stay in his home until ordered to arrive at the police station. Later that afternoon, Raymond pleads the protagonist to prove in court that his mistress had cheated on him. Meursault agrees. The two on returning to their houses here Salamano searching for his dog. He curses and cries in his room.

- 5) Raymond's friend Masson requests Marie and Meursault to hang out with him and his spouse at Masson's house at the beach. Meursault's boss is angered when he shows his lack of ambition when Meursault is offered employment in a ,brand new workplace that he was thinking opening in Paris. Meursault ponders about his ambitious nature during his student years did not matter. Marie thinks it strange of the protagonist's indifference towards the proposal of marriage but would like to be his other half anyway. She lets him know that she wouldn't be spending the night, and so he eats his dinner alone. When he reaches back to his apartment, he notices his neighbour waiting outside. He confesses that he bought a dog to overcome the isolation he experienced after the death of his spouse. He goes on to express condolences for the passing of Meursault's mother and tells him that he was aware that he loved his mother. Salamano go back to talking about his loss, expressing his sadness because the dog's presence had changed his life dramatically.
- 6) Marie, Raymond and Meursault gets ready to catch a bus to Masson's beach house. On their way to the bus, they observe a group of men, including the brother of the mistress looking towards them. They are glad when they do not take the bus with them. Masson's house is a petite bungalow made of wood. Meursault encounters Masson's wife, and he thinks what marrying Marie would feel like. They all went to swim before lunchtime and enjoyed themselves. After that, Raymond, Meursault, and Masson go for a walk. The heat of the beach is unbearable for Meursault. There they notice the Arabs, and a fight ensues. Raymond suffers injuries and is taken to hospital by Masson. Meursault didn't want to explain what happened and decided to smoke a cigarette and watch the sea. Raymond returns to the beach house wrapped in bandages. He goes to the beach, and Meursault follows. They find the two Arabs lying down beside a spring. Raymond takes out a gun from his pocket and points it at the two Arabs. Meursault convinces Raymond not to shoot and eventually gets a hold of his gun. They decide to go back to

the beach house. Meursault is tired due to the heat and doesn't want to face the women, and stays on the beach. Due to the oppressive heat, he has a headache and walks back to the spring to cool off. He encounters the brother of Raymond's mistress, who draws his knife. The sunlight is reflected on the blade and stings his eye. He is annoyed, fires the gun, and kills the Arab with one shot. He then pauses and shoots four more bullets into the Arab.

Part 2

- 1) Meursault was subsequently arrested for murdering the Arab and thrown into jail. The court-appointed lawyers informed Meursault that the investigators had probed into Meursault's life and found that he had shown no emotion during the funeral of his mother. They further questioned him about how he felt during his mother's burial. His indifference towards his mother's death disgusts the lawyer. At noon, he engages with the examining magistrate. He was asked if he had any feelings towards his mother, to which he replied he loved her essentially as anyone else would love their mother. The magistrate questions as to why he waited after taking the opening shot at the Arab. Meursault's silence made the judge wave a crucifix in front of him and asked him if he believed in Almighty. Meursault replies in the negative. The justice concludes that Meursault has an irrevocably hard soul and refers to him as "Monsieur Antichrist" during the eleven months of investigation.

- 2) Meursault depicts his first few days in jail. He was transferred to a private cell after initially putting him in a cell with several people. Marie comes to visit one day and tells Meursault to have hope. She wears a forced smile and says that she believes that he would soon be free and that they would have their marriage. Meursault focuses on the inmate beside him, who has his mother visiting. Marie is not allowed to revisit Meursault because she is not his wife. Meursault is tormented by not being able to enjoy swimming, smoking cigarettes, and having sex. But it eventually ceases to be a punishment, and he gets accustomed to his confinement. He tries to sleep as many hours as possible and think about all the tiny details of his apartment. He remembers a tale he read in a scarp of paper about a Czechoslovakian male who abandoned his town at a young age. He returned, after being prosperous, in disguise to find his family running a hotel. He had thought to give a surprise by disclosing himself after showing off his

wealth, but the family had stolen his money and killed him. When the sister and mother found out about the truth, they killed themselves.

- 3) Meursault's trial was held in summer and was crowded as the media had showered the incident with a lot of publicity. The court asks Meursault his mother was put in a nursing house.. He says he was not financially stable to accommodate another person. When the Honourable Justice questioned whether the choice agonized him, he said that his mother and he had become accustomed to the situation and did not expect anything from one another. But the home's director confirmed that his mother objected his decision to put her in an old age home. He further describes Meursault's nonchalant demeanor and lack of expression during his mother's funeral. Meursault soon understands that everyone in the court despise him. He is further derided as a unfaithful son by the prosecutor for not declining coffee offered by the caretaker. Thomas Perez takes the stand and mentions that he was too overwhelmed by despair to see whether the protagonist cried during the funeral. Celeste testifies that his murdering of the mistress's brother was sheer bad misfortune. Marie's testimony discloses her plan to marry him. The counsel agrees that their sexual correspondence took place in the weekend subsequent to the burial. Favourable accounts both from Masson on Meursault's honesty and by Salamano about his kindness counters the prosecutor's assertions. Raymond confesses that it was just by mistake that Meursault was mixed up in a fight with his mistress's brother.

- 4) During closing arguments, the counsel states Meursault's clear intelligence and absence of repentance as evidence of wilful and intentional manslaughter. He further proclaims that his scarcity of torment over his mother's death goes against the foundation of the world at large. The prosecutor claims that the criminal is as guilty as a person who murders their own parents. Meursault declares untrue about returning to the coastline with the intention to kill the victim. Upon clarification for the motivation behind the crime, he blames the scorching heat of the sun. Meursault's defence attorney tries to offer an evaluation of the happenings that resulted in the offence, speaking in the first person as the offender. In the end, the protagonist was charged with intentional murder and given the death sentence by guillotine.

- 5) After the trial, the press and media characterized the series of events as the dues owed to society. Meursault hopes to escape the system of justice that has cursed him to death. Meursault also hates the uncertainty of the guillotine working on the first try. When the chaplain asks Meursault why he hasn't met with him, he reasserts his denial of the existence of God. The chaplain states that his denial results from despair, to which Meursault corrected him by claiming he is not desperate but afraid. When the chaplain insists that all the condemned have eventually taken solace from God, Meursault becomes enraged and goes on about how nothing matters and the only thing certain about human life is the eventual passing of man. During this discourse, he took a hold of the chaplain, and the police had to move them apart. In the end, Meursault opens up to the harsh reality of the world, and he is only hopeful of the of angry spectators showering him with screams of despise during his death penalty.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS OF THE PROTAGONIST

Meursault is a person detached from the people around him. He is uninterested in socially significant events of marriage, love, or even death. This is depicted in the lack of concern shown during his mother's death and the indifference shown when Marie expressed her love for him.

Meursault is an honest but emotionless man who tries to defy the standards set by society but is struck down and is deemed as a threat to society. During the trial, his honest reaction to the lack of emotion during the death of his mother makes him look like a monster having no morals. Meursault is an amoral protagonist who finds no distinction between the good and the bad. Camus portrays Meursault as a poor protagonist who replies but never questions, and his responses are seen as a threat to a society that finds it hard to accept the truth. For all his many flaws, his character is misunderstood by the society he tries to detach himself from. The title of the book, "The Stranger", may imply the protagonist being unable to experience emotions and deal with feelings.

EXISTENTIALISM AND MEURSAULT

Existentialism states that there is inherently no meaning or purpose to life on earth, hence it is up to each individual to decide and establish his own sense of the world and take responsibility for his efforts. The concept and feeling of existentialism can be best portrayed by Herman Hesse words, "*We fear death, we tremble at life's instability, we grieve to see the flowers wilt*

again , and the leaves dry , and in our hearts, we know that we, too, are ephemeral and will soon vanish. When artists create pictures and thinkers discover laws and formulate thoughts, it is in order to find something from the great dance of death, to make something last longer than we do” (Hwsse, 1971). The story of Meursault and his life experiences have characteristics of existentialism in them. His detachment from emotions and lack of response to situations is not normal according to the society. When Meursault encounters a situation, he sees actions as neither good nor bad, but as the action itself. The scorching heat of the sun at the beach was significantly more painful thinking about the death of his mother .By being hated by society , he is retaining his individuality and freedom to choose.

THEMES OF ABSURDISM

Absurdism holds that human life is sans purpose due to the irrationality of the universe, and that searching for meaning in life would lead to personal chaos. Meursault was ostracized by society due to his inability to show emotion or grieve for another individual. His individuality is seen as a threat and is sentenced to death.

“Because he is true to his beliefs, Meursault is judged as a monster by society and is condemned to die” (Gnanasekaran, 2016)

As an absurdist, The protagonist is an individual who believes that the existence of one individual will not affect or change the world. Though the readers may find it challenging to understand his disregard for everything around him, it is the foundation of absurdism itself. Meursault holds on to the certainty that everybody eventually dies. He finds it comforting to know about his death. He refuses to turn to god even at his final moments but instead thinks about the comforting moments he had experienced in his life.

“The concept of death makes one aware of one’s life, one’s vital being — that which is impermanent and will one day end. When this vitality is appreciated, one feels free — for there is no prioirty to perform some act that will nullify the possibility of death, seeing as though there is no such act. In that sense, all human activity is absurd, and the real freedom is to be aware of life in its actuality, of its beauty and its pain” (Gullette, 1997)

JUSTICE PORTRAYED IN THE STRANGER

It is clearly undeniable that Meursault is guilty of murdering the Arab. No court could excuse

the irrational killing of the Arab by Meursault. It is the irrelevance of the shooting in the course of the court preceding that makes room for Camus's critique of justice an law. Instead, he stands before the court for refusing to abide by social norms, mainly, by showing no hint of emotion at his mother's funeral and is thus condemned for this transgression. This has been well established during the beginning of the second part of the novel:

"I noticed then that everyone was exchanging greetings and talking, as though they were in a club where people are happy to find themselves among others from the same world. That is how I explained to myself the strange impression I had of be being the odd man out, a kind of intruder" (Camus, *The Stranger*, 1942)

When he is on trial, Meursault is only being relentlessly asked about the funeral of his parent and his calm replies are points of clear contention for the judge. This is in stark contrast to Thomas Perez, a witness of the prosecution, who was too sad to see anything that happened during the funeral. He represents society's ideal individual, one that abides by the norms of society. It is when the home's attendant testified that Meursault did not want to see his mother after her passing, that the protagonist notices a commotion and disturbance in the courtroom and comes to understand that he is going to jail. It is this farcicality of the trial that shows the perverse outcomes of justicia. Camus's impression of what can be called justice is thus based on an irrational basis which gives away the ambiguous nature of critique of power in the legal system. The defence lawyer tried to remind the courtroom that Meursault is in trial for killing a man and not for burying his mother. The stranger depicts the truth that Meursault's culpability is far from the offence of killing the Arab, further strengthen the idea of justice as a fabrication. Camus, consequently, is hinting that had he been on trial for the killing instead of a moral based judgement of his personality, then there would have been a chance of winning.

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