Meursault's Motive for Murder in *The Outsider*

by

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Introduction

When I began brainstorming this project, I became set on discussing the absurdism and existentialism that appears evident in Albert Camus's novella *The Outsider,* or *The Stranger* as some people may know it. I was introduced to this book and viewing Camus's story in that light when I read it in my English class senior year of high school. It was just after we had finished Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, another book that follows the life of a young man and his internal struggle to find his purpose. I went from reading about one man seeking enlightenment to another man who seemingly feels indifferent to what happens to him both emotionally and physically; and these two contrasting belief systems had my interest for philosophy reach its peak. While both characters' way of life caught my attention, I felt I understood Siddhartha's character to the point where, at that time, I did not need to think too much beyond the message that we were learning in the classroom. Siddhartha embarks on a journey hoping that he will find his purpose and in death he will be in nirvana. The reader experiences various parts of Siddhartha's life and in many of them he has different careers than what he had in the prior chapters. Basically, he is searching for the life path that will bring him peace in life. Well like Siddhartha, everyone at some point or another has an identity crisis–maybe even more than once. As a senior in high school I was really questioning what path I was going to take after high school, and Herman Hesse's message impacted my life not only as a soon-to-be highschool graduate but now as a twenty-two year old woman ending her college experience. *Siddhartha* reminds me that I have options, even at times when I am not content with myself. Camus's character Meursault offers readers a more complex character who convinces himself, as well as readers, that he does not care where he ends up. As I am an avid people watcher, I am especially

interested in the people that I do not understand and Meursault was someone who was difficult to understand.

Here is some context behind the book *The Outsider*: it is told from the perspective of the main character Meursault, a French Algerian man, and it takes place in Algeria in 1942 at the time the country was being colonized by the French; although this information is never mentioned in the text. Throughout the book, Meursault seemingly displays an indifferent attitude towards his peers and circumstances, making him an outsider to his society. Some examples of his indifferent attitude: not crying at his mother's funeral, showing no interest in a job promotion offered to him by his boss, he willingly and nonchalantly becomes involved in a domestic abuse incident, he does not get excited when he becomes engaged, and ultimately he murders an Arab on the beach without cause and without remorse. While Meursault does go to trial, instead of being questioned about the murder of the unnamed Arab, the magistrate directs their attention to the absurd emotional responses I have just mentioned. At first, my interest in Meursault was the result of how cold and numb he appears, and how he gives absolutely no insight into what he is feeling. Even when telling the readers what he's thinking he is more so analyzing all of his decisions, observations, and thoughts, rather than connecting any real emotion to them. This absence of care and empathy is what makes the magistrate and jury agree to his execution by the guillotine–I will rephrase that claim with more context to emphasize the wrongness of this trial in regard to the murdered Arab. Meursault was sentenced to death as a result of his unaccepted social morals and hardly questioned by the magistrate about the violent murder he committed. Meursault, as well as the reader, is faced with three deaths throughout the novel–Meursault's mother, the Arab, and Meursault–and with every death that Meursault faces, his emotional state

never seems to alter. Or so, that is how I was taught to read this book. This theory is just another one I hope to debunk in my paper.

This character intrigued me considerably seeing as he has stuck with me for five years now. Since the first time I read it I have recommended the book multiple times a year to people I have met who either told me they love to read or who say they want to start reading. I would try to convince them of its worth by telling them it is a fast read with an interesting narrative and unique main character. Ultimately though, I would admit it is a simple read and it seems to end in a way that leaves the reader walking away from the book thinking they understand everything it has to offer—in my opinion, something that every reader appreciates once in a while.

However, despite being set on arguing the absurd and existential theory about the book, I was recommended looking at it from a less common, and in my opinion more stimulating, argument, which is the underlying racism hidden in between the lines of this famous novel of absurdity. Once I decided to switch my thesis to this argument, I was turned off to the idea of talking about absurdism at all. Discovering that Camus denied multiple times that existentialism was not an intended aspect in the story also made me feel silly for even considering focusing on that. However, since I am arguing against these themes I have realized that by refusing to talk about them I would be shying away from the opportunity to dismantle the existential theory and redefine the absurd theory that is extremely popular amongst critics. Ultimately though, my goal for this project has changed to establishing an interesting, creative, and well informed paper that makes Camus's reader recognize that the inclusion of history plays a significant role in determining how this book is portrayed, therefore perceived.

Camus's Political Stance on Algeria

I want to begin my project by looking into Camus's political stance on the French colonizing Algeria, which he devoted much of his writing career to talking about. I will take Aneed Thanwan Rustam's article "Albert Camus' Idea of Rebellion in *The Outsider*," David Carroll's article "Camus's Algeria: Birthrights, Colonial Injustice, and the Fiction of a French-Algerian People" and Arthur Scherr's article ""Albert Camus's 'L'Étranger' and 'Les Muets': Violence and Reconciliation Between Arab and Pied-Noir" to provide a timeline that shows he supported the idea of a country that provided equal rights and freedom for both the French and the Arabs. Also, it will show that Camus understood Algerian's opposition to French rule. His empathy is important to understanding that Meursault was a character created by him to show the hypocrisy of what French people deem as right or wrong.

Furthermore, I will provide information from Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* as a source of historical context. *The Wretched of the Earth* is significant to this paper because it was written by a man who spent years in Algeria fighting for its freedom. The book studies the mind of the colonized peoples path to independence and Fanon's narrative heavily acknowledges reasons on why they would, and should, revolt against their colonizers. Fanon's goal is for the Europeans to realize that when they seek to take things away from the natives, but allow them to stay on the land "the 'half natives'...transformed within them the stubborn refusal of the animal condition…become lazy: of course–it's a form of a sabotage…But their petty thefts mark the beginning of a resistance which is still unorganized. That is not enough…Others make men of themselves by murdering Europeans, and these are shot down; brigands or martyrs" (Fanon 18). In other words, when you take everything away from someone and make them see that you have it, you cannot expect them to not do anything. Moreso, Fanon calls out the

hypocrisy of colonizers who blame natives who revolt. He states, “First, the only violence is the settler’s; but soon they [natives] will make it their own; that is to say, the same violence is thrown back upon us as when our reflection comes forwards to meet us when we go toward a mirror” (Fanon 17). Understanding the history in Meursault’s story while also knowing what Camus’s thoughts were on Algeria being colonized should make the reader question if he would really allow his “heroic” main character to have an Arab’s blood on his hands and get away so easily for it. Or, possibly there is another meaning behind Camus’s novel that has been buried by existential and absurd theory which inevitably allows for Meursault’s racist motive to go unnoticed.

So, Camus started taking public political stances in 1934, only 21 years after he was born. First he joined the Communist Party in 1934, 100 years after the French started colonizing Algeria. However, it only took him a year to lean more towards the Socialist Party. He was “one of the outstanding members of the French Resistance during the occupation of France by Germans…the event that most influenced his writings…his only attitude towards such a force was a revolt through which man finds his freedom” (Rustam 10). In 1938, he became a staff member of the newly founded paper *Alger-Republican*, a journal that considered enemies of democracy, the fascist fellow travelers, the feudal supporters of the industrial, banking, and agricultural order, their opponents. Scherr comments that in his 1939 writing in the socialist journal, Camus described his travels through the desert Kabylia region of northern Algeria and the despair he felt when he saw the people suffering and hungry. While Camus respected the Kabylian’s desire for autonomy, still, “he demanded that the French government recognize the humanity and worth of the Arabs…and assimilate them into the French nation as the equals of European Frenchman, possessors of an equally authentic culture”(Scherr 77). However, one

thing Fanon observes is that "violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to dehumanize them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours" (Fanon 15). Camus's novels also do not shy away from the "anguish of seeing Europe divided" (Rustam 10).

Rustam begins his article claiming, "the circumstances of Albert Camus' life in one way or another left their imprint on the thoughts he implied in his art" (Rustam 9). He points out that through his play *The State of Siege,* Camus makes it evident that the totalitarian government drives men to despair, and in his book *L'Homme R'evolte* "he sees history as a succession of scenes of horror and acts of imbecility. Contemporary Europe is depicted as a hell, devoid of spiritual and intellectual significance…" (Rustam 10).David Carroll has termed the Algeria that is displayed in Albert Camus's literary work as "Camus's Algeria" an imaginary place that is connected to the Algeria where Camus was born and raised. However, Carroll leans toward the notion that "Camus's Algeria is a construct or fiction which does not so much ignore or negate historical reality as recast or redirect it" (Carroll 518). To help explore his thesis, Carroll cites Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Albert Camus: Of Europe and Africa*, a controversial book that "highlights the dark underside of his vision and it's allegedly crippling Eurocentric limitations" (Carroll 519), and claims that Camus's Algeria is imitative work of other (left-wing French Algerians) which gives "renewed life and credibility…to the French political and education systems propagated" (Carroll 520). O'Brien analyzes Camus's writings where Camus reveals that he fully realized he was a stranger on the African shore, surrounded by other strangers "in that part of France of which they are legally supposed to be part" (Carroll 521), and feels that a man who fought against the racism and oppression of Arabs should have come to different

conclusions from this realization. In other words, he should have accepted his estrangement and not given an excuse that he sees as logical, but really just holds the same arrogance as other French colonizers who feel they have a right to the land. Fanon calls out the hypocrisy of those that have similar feelings to Camus's, saying, "You, who are so liberal and so humane, who have such an exaggerated adoration of a culture that verges on affection, you pretend to forget that you own colonies and that in them men are massacred in your name" (Fanon 14). Furthermore, O'Brien believes Camus's literary work "should have portrayed the political situation differently, and above all…enthusiastically supported Algerian independence and a total French withdrawal from Algeria" (Carroll 521). He takes one of Camus's 1947 articles and observes that while he is condemning racism, he is not working to resolve the colonial problem in Algeria. While I do agree with O'Brien's opinion about Camus's realization and, somewhat, the portrayal of the political situation in Algeria, I believe that all of his opinions can be argued with the fact that Camus has always been public about his love for his homeland, and that his choice of words is merely because of the natural human desire to belong somewhere as well as feel accepted there. While he did not entirely support a total French withdrawal from Algeria, I do not think it is fair to ignore the amount of times Camus publicly showed his disgust for the oppression and racism of Arabs, as well as promote a country with two cultures living in harmony and learning from one another. Scherr points out that at the time Camus was writing *The Outsider*, Camus hoped for "Algerian assimilation into a French nation based on multicultural anticolonialism" (Scherr 77). He promoted religious freedom and an integrated educational system to the Algerians. After France refused to grant freedom and democracy to the colonies, even after their help in defeating Nazism in World War II, the Setif riots happened, "in which Arabs killed and mutilated dozens of French and French mobs and police killed thousands in retaliation" (Scherr 77). Camus defended

the Arabs in his work “Crisis in Algeria,” when he implied that they were justified in rioting as victims of French oppression and said that the only thing inferior about them is the living condition in which they find themselves. In 1958, 20 years after visiting the previously mentioned Kabylia region, Camus interceded with the president of France “to obtain pardons from the death sentence for numerous convicted Algerian insurrectionists” (Scherr 78). He insisted that in order to live together peacefully in one country under “titular” French rule “people must stop thinking of Arabs of Algeria as a nation of butchers…they must be given a voice and a future free of fear and hunger” (Scherr 78).

Camus has defended and shown support for the Algerians both before and after the writing of his famous novella *The Outsider*, a work that is often viewed as a philosophical masterpiece. While he does not discuss the removal of the French from Algeria, that is not matter in my argument. Like I mentioned before, Algeria is Camus' homeland and I believe it is a natural thing to not want to entertain the idea of being removed from your home. Furthermore, Camus was already beginning to be ignored by the French due to his stance for equality. If he presented extreme views (such as supporting the idea that all French people should leave Algeria) it would only turn more people away from him. What matters in my argument is that Camus would not make an Arab, who never gets justice, be the victim in his French protagonist’s story unless there is a point he is trying to make. If Camus supports a country with two cultures living in harmony and defends their deprivation of civil rights, while also implying that they were justified (do not get justified mixed up with supporting) in rioting, why would he choose a nameless Arab to be the man that Meursault murdered? I think it would be smart to question what Meursault’s trial would have looked like had it been a French man murdered. Would the same questions that the magistrate asks Meursault, regarding his mother’s death and more

personal things that have nothing to do with the murder, be as prominent? Would he still be seen as a man whose lifestyle and indifference to everything represents a threat to society? Or would the magistrate, who has just as little care as French authorities have for Arabs, finally stop looking for other reasons to throw him in jail now that they have someone they consider worth worrying about.

The Meursault Investigation: Unreliable Narration

In Kamel Daoud's novel *The Meursault Investigation* the reader is presented with a narrator who retells the long-lasting story of *The Outsider,* which is originally told by the main character Meursault. The difference is that in this narrator's universe, Meursault (not Camus) is the one who has written the book (not just narrated it) and it is called *The Other*, not *The Outsider*. In Daoud's novel, the narrator's name is Harun, and he is the brother of the infamous Arab that Meursault murders and refuses to give a name to. The murdered Arab's name is Musa. Harun is telling Musa's story to a young interlocutor to "speak in the place of a dead man…finish his sentences for him" (Daoud 1). He even learns to read and speak French to read newspaper articles and watch clippings of Musa's death. The fact that Musa's name is never revealed in *The Other* is something that Harun dwells upon for much of this novel, and rightfully so as, "For centuries, the settler increases his fortune, giving names to whatever he appropriates and taking them away from whatever makes him feel uncomfortable" (Daoud 13). Harun hopes that by retelling the story of the convicted murderer who killed Musa, he will make his brother's name known; he even asks the young man interested in this seventy year old crime to write down Musa's name in big letters. This crime may be seventy years old, but Meursault's story is still, even after all of this time, one of the most famous stories ever written and Harun refuses to die knowing that Musa's name was never even mentioned to a supporter of Meursault's story. Ultimately, Harun refuses to let Musa die as some nameless object in Meursault's story. By not giving a name to Musa, Meursault erases any identity that he has, thus eliminating any chance that Musa has in saving his reputation. Giving little identity to Arabs seems to be common for Meursault because throughout *The Outsider*, Meursault interacts or at least sees many Arabs and most times he refuses to give the reader any more information on the character besides the fact

that they are an Arab. This is very significant because it tells the reader a lot about Meursault's character in the colonial era, where the reader can assume that he holds the same arrogance as any other French colonizer. Moreso, by dehumanizing the Arab characters in this way, our protagonist Meursault sets them up to be judged as possible antagonists by the readers, but it is our job not to allow us to fall for it.

Author Scheer points out in his article "Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*: A Parable of the Overthrow of French Rule in Algeria," that the Arabs in this novel are "always nameless, shadowy creatures, and as a number of commentators have observed, this tends somewhat to depersonalize and even dehumanize them altogether" (Scherr 40). Obviously, this is the case with Musa. Meursault's and Raymond's assumption about Musa's relationship with Zubida was wrong, and this false assumption that Musa and Zubida are siblings takes away any opportunity the reader has to find out about the Arab Algerian's culture. Meursault does not allow Musa to be seen as anything other than a protective brother looking to start violence with the man abusing his sister when really, he was only acting out of good faith. During this time when the French had taken over many areas of Algeria's lives, "their land, their wells, and their livestock, women were all our guys had left" (Daoud 19). This and the fact that Musa had tattoos that said phrases like "God is my support" and "March or die" (Daoud 20), it is fair to say that Musa was proud of where he came from and he was tired of seeing the injustices being done to his people. Fanon talks about this in The Wretched of the Earth, saying that "if he shows fight, the soldiers fire and he's a dead man; if he gives in, he degrades himself and he is no longer a man at all; shame and fear will split up his character and make his inmost self fall to pieces" (Fanon 15). This shows that Musa stayed true to himself and did not let the fact that Raymond was a French man stop him from protecting the women in his culture. Harun labeled him as a man just trying to save

Zubida's honor, and this is definitely the case. Musa was someone who recognized that his culture and country had been violently taken from him by the European colonizers. After everything the French have taken from the Arabs, it is an honorable and brave thing to protect your people. If Meursault had talked about this in his version of the story, perhaps Musa would have at least got the opportunity to be respected as a martyr, but more so the reader could have determined that he is the real hero in the story. Meursault's assumption and refusal to give light to this topic means he is taking part in erasing that identity altogether—just like the French did in Algeria. Furthermore, he hides any possibility of the murder he committed being labeled as racially motivated.

Harun states to the reader that the reason for Meursault's crime is not as philosophical as Meursault leads his readers on to believe, and that it does inevitably have to do with race. While I am sure that everyone can agree that Meursault's book does present absurd actions and circumstances, it can also be agreed that there is another reason other than "the way he suffers from the sun and gets dazzled by colors" that caused Meursault to commit a crime so "majestically nonchalant" (Daoud 5). To figure this out, it is important to extend our knowledge even more on the hostility between the French and the Arabs. This will provide supportive information that will help the reader better grasp how this murder has to do with race.

The Algerians' actions were similar to their pre colonial actions, but were given new meaning within a colonial war context. Steven Loyal states in his essay "The French in Algeria, Algerians in France: Bourdieu, Colonialism, and Migration" that: "by adhering to Algerian traditions, codes of conduct and values, that the Algerians showed their symbolic refusal and opposition to the European order and colonialism since: 'any renouncement of their original way of life would have meant, in fact, a renouncement of themselves and the acceptance of an

allegiance to another civilization, that is to say, to the colonial order." So, the Algerians opposed the new traditions that the French were trying to impose on them, because if they gave into French authority then they would inevitably be giving up themselves. Arthur Scherr makes note of the first Arab character that appears in the book; the nurse that looks over Meursault's mother. The caretaker informs Meursault that she has leprosy, and that is when Meursault sees that she has "a bandage around her head just below her eyes. It sat where her nose had been eaten away by the disease. All you could see was the whiteness of the bandage against her face" (Camus 6). Scherr theorizes that "the Arab nurses' cancer might be a physical manifestation of French's rule's noxious effect on her country, eating away its primordial identity" (Scherr 79). He furthers his theory by saying the colored scarf on the Arab's head that Meursault takes notice of symbolizes Algerian Arabs' enjoyment of their culture before the French invasion in the 1830s, while the white smock covering her body and white bandages covering her face "represent the straitjacket of white rule" (Scherr 79). He also makes note that during this time, racial segregation made it so that no Arabs reside in the nursing home, so the Arab nurse tending "moribund old pieds noirs" represents "the impending demise of French rule in Algeria" (Scherr 79). This symbolization shows the resilience that the nurse has, just like Musa. It seems that Camus is doing his best to discreetly support the Arabs, just like he does in his personal life as well. I say discreetly because I assume, just like I assumed previously, that Camus did not want to fully turn away his French supporters' eyes. However, he does hope they are smart enough to catch on to the Arabs' peaceful portrayal.

Despite Meursault attempting to erase the Arab characters' identities, their presence is observed enough times by Meursault that we can observe that Arabs are not at all "negatively depicted as a brutal felon" (Scherr 37). Scherr points out examples throughout the novel, such as

when Raymond throws the first punch during Meursault's first encounter with the Arabs. This was not even Raymond's first encounter because there was a "previous fight at the bus stop that Raymond describes to Meursault during their fateful dinner when he writes him the letter" (Scherr 44), and again he is the one who initiates it. Scherr also acknowledges the Arabs that Meursault encounters while in jail saying, "Even though he tells them that he is in jail for killing an Arab, they reveal a compassionate camaraderie with him as a fellow victim of the unjust legal system. Although he is a white colon, they assume that for him to be in the dire situation he is in, he must have offended the powers-that-be; hence, they sympathize with him" (Scheer 42). They even show him "how to set up the sleeping mat where I would sleep. By rolling up one of the ends, you could make a sort of pillow" (Camus 65). This is an important moment to point out given that the French (Meursault's people) were taking everything from the Arabs (like Meursault took an Arab away from them). Even though the French were taking the Arabs jobs, houses, and land, the Arabs in the cell do not automatically turn to violence for the loss of another Arab, though "they all went quiet" (Camus 65) once Meursault told them. This belies the colonial stereotype of Arabs as violent and prone to violence. More moments that Scheer points out to attest to the Arabs peaceful nature is when Marie is visiting Meursault in jail, and while he is behind bars there is still a great deal of distance between them. Meursault observes while many of the prisoners are noisy, "Arab prisoners and their families sat on the floor, facing each other. They weren't shouting. In spite of all the commotion, they managed to hear each other even though they spoke very quietly" (Camus 66). Although Meursault observes and takes notes of these behaviors, we cannot forget that he refuses to give any of these Arabs a name ultimately, like Scheer suggests, depersonalizing or dehumanizing them. Not only does he not give a name to them, but he also does not provide any physical characteristics of the Arabs that he encounters.

Except for when notices the Arab nurse's scarf over her head, but I believe it is only mentioned because it is the telltale sign that she is Arab. Yet he does provide physical descriptions for other seemingly insignificant characters, such as the director of his mother's home, who "was a short elderly man who wore the Legion of Honour" and he had "pale blue eyes" (Camus 4). Furthermore, Meursault comments on the caretakers "beautiful light blue eyes" and his "ruddy complexion" (Camus 6), as well as Monsieur Perez's "nose dotted with blackheads…odd, misshapen ears that drooped down" (Camus 13). Maybe the reason that many of Camus' supporters allowed this to go unnoticed for so long is because "in the eyes of most readers…the inherent inferiority of Arabs and the threat which they felt to pose to Europeans would reduce or eliminate any elements of guilt attaching to Meursault" (Scheer 40). If this is true, then it explains how Meursault was able to get away with being a "heroic" main character who challenges societal norms, instead of being called out for portraying Arabs as people who do not have their characteristics or stories. Meursault categorizes them as if each of them are from the same group made up of the same entities. While this is a harsh and bold claim for anyone to hear, as it is basically saying that the readers who did not take time or did not have the realization to question why Meursault really murdered the Arab who made no evidential move to harm him is inherently racist, it is an honest one that we should not shy away from. How can we make note of the Arabs behaviors that are depicted in this book and not question Meursault's portrayal of the Arabs on the beach as a violent group of people?

Injustice towards Arabs is a key theme in both Meursault's and Harun's stories. After Musa's death, Harun and his mother walk in the French towns in Algeria, and she is carrying a photo of Meursault and asking the French people if they recognize him. When she obtained a specific address and went there, she immediately confronted the woman who opened the door.

This woman had a few words to say and then fell unconscious in the doorway, and while one person yelled for the police, another woman spoke in Arabic telling her to run away fast. This shows that although Harun's mother never laid a finger on her, the odds of the police believing her were not in her favor. Now, if we think about the time that Raymond got the police called on him for beating his mistress, Zubida, we can remember that his punishment was just a slap in the face by an officer who did not like his smugness. Meanwhile, the mistress that was repeatedly telling the police officer that she was beaten was just told that she should leave. In that scenario, an Arab lady was beaten and the police officer paid her no attention, telling her to leave and ultimately letting Raymond off the hook for the abuse. Imagine, during that same year, what would happen if an angry Arab woman went knocking on a French woman's house yelling profanities with witnesses all around, and that French woman happened to fall. Again, the odds of the police believing her are not in her favor. The same injustice for Musa can be seen in Meursault's murder trial. Reading *The Stranger*, the reader starts to realize that while Meursault is on trial for murder, he gets questioned more about his personal life rather than why he chose to murder someone. He gets questioned about his tearless and indifferent reaction to his mother's death, and why he wrote the letter to Raymond's mistress, but he rarely gets questioned about the violent murder he committed against an Arab. While the magistrate does give Meursault the death penalty, it has nothing to do with the murder. Therefore the magistrate does not give any justice to Musa by ignoring his death.

It is easy to get sucked into Meursault's absurdism where his views about life start to become the main motivation for the magistrate to try to execute him with the death penalty. However, while getting sucked into this theme of existentialism, the reader overlooks the motive that caused Meursault to commit murder, which is the underlying racism and history going on in

Algeria, which the narrator Meursault never addresses in the book. Realizing this now, the reader should begin to question whether the trial would have been different if Meursault had killed a Frenchman instead of an Arab.

The Meursault Investigation: Unreliable Narrator

The reason *The Meursault Investigation* is so significant to Meursault's version of the story is because Harun provides the reader with historical information so prevalent to helping supporters of Meursault realize that he is unreliable, and not just a man whose way of feeling piqued our interest. Furthermore, this should make them question everything that Meursault says. He should not be able to get away with the fact that he killed Musa because he was an Arab, but by the reader not questioning his story and just accepting the theory that is most popular, then he will get away with it. By showing the reader Meursault's unreliability, it will make the task of showing his real motive for murder much clearer.

Harun mentions how Meursault portrays Musa as the brother to a mistress that his neighbor's been abusing. The neighbor, Raymond, abuses and devises a plan to humiliate Zubida as he thinks that she has been cheating on him because "he'd found a pawn ticket she'd been given as a receipt for two bracelets. Up until then, he didn't even know she owned any bracelets" (Camus 28). Anyway, he gets Meursault to follow along with his plan. However, as we already know, Harun tells the investigator that he and Musa never had a sister, and it has always been just the two of them. This is important because Raymond's assumption of Musa being his mistress's brother not only takes away any chance of Musa being a martyr, but it also acts as a catalyst for the reason why Raymond seemed to be on edge and carrying a gun around in Meursault's telling of his story. More importantly, it takes away any possible threat of violence from Musa who cannot now be presumed to have antagonistic feelings towards Raymond on account of an abused sister. Giving some outside information to the reader, Harun tells what women in Algeria were like around that time, stating "Now there *were* a few skirt-wearing, firm-breasted Algerian women who shuttled between our world and the world of the *roumis*, down in the French

neighborhoods… Those women often inspired violent passions and hateful rivalries, the sort of thing your writer alludes to a few times in his book" (Daoud 19). Harun predicts that based on this information, Raymond's mistress was probably just one of Musa's girlfriends. He then concludes that had Raymond and Meursault not acted off of assumptions, this would have been nothing more than a "banal score-settling" between the two men but instead turned into a "philosophical crime" (Daoud 19).

Taking a closer look at the first physical altercation that occurs the day of the murder, we can assume that Harun's prediction may be correct. Here is a play-by-play: Meursault informs the reader that when he, Marie, and Raymond are about to leave to get on the bus to go to the beach, he saw "a group of Arabs leaning against the wall of the tobacco shop…watching us in silence…as if we were rocks or dead trees. Raymond said that the guy on the left was the one he'd told me about" (Camus 44). However, even though Musa and his friends were the ones to follow Meursault and Raymond to the beach, it is Raymond who starts the fight. The groups end up seeing each other on the beach but now Raymond's friend Masson is there, not Marie. They begin walking towards each other, and Raymond tells Meursault and Masson, "If there's a fight, you take the second one, Masson. I'll take care of mine. If another one shows up, Meursault he's yours" (Camus 48). So, before they even know what is going to happen, Raymond is already predicting a fight, and this makes sense seeing that he is the one to start it. Meursault notes that when they are just steps away from each other "the Arabs stopped. Masson and I slowed down. Raymond walked straight up to his man. I couldn't make out what Raymond said to him, but the Arab made a menacing gesture as if he was going to punch him in the face. So Raymond hit him first and called out for Masson" (Camus 49). Therefore, the fighting started, Masson taking out his opponent, and Musa's face covered with blood. Then, Raymond yells out to Meursault "Just

you watch what I'm going to do to him" (Camus 49), before he is slashed in the arm by Musa's knife. I believe it is fairly common for those who have read *The Outsider* to immediately note that Musa was the one who first brought a weapon into the fight, but it cannot be forgotten that this is not Raymond's first time initiating a fight with Musa. Given the violent fight that Raymond started with Musa in the past, I think it is fair to assume that Musa only brought the knife to defend himself. That would also explain the defense tactic Musa used with the knife to keep Raymond and Meursault away before running off. Moreso, I think the reader should focus on the fact that if Musa really wanted to hurt Raymond then he could have. Being the only one with a weapon, Musa and his friends had an advantage, but instead of further using the knife to attack their opponents, they "walked slowly backwards…keeping us at a distance by wielding the knife" and "when they saw there was enough distance between us they ran away very quickly" (Camus 49). It is clear that Musa's intention never was to kill anyone.

Diving deeper into what happened that day, it can also be concluded that Meursault was the only person to decide Musa's fate, as well as his own. This was obviously not the last time that Meursault saw Musa that day, in fact they saw each other two more times on the beach shortly after their first interaction. Immediately after the first fight, Raymond went to see the doctor and once he got back Meursault said he appeared "very gloomy…he said he was going down to the beach…Masson and I said we'd go with him. Then he got angry and swore at us…But I…I followed him anyway" (Camus 50). He notes that even though they were walking for a long time he "got the impression that Raymond knew where he was going, but I was probably wrong" (Camus 50). It is obvious that Raymond did know where he was going because moments later Meursault says that they "came upon our two Arabs" (Camus 50). Raymond showed a gun to Meursault which the sun reflected off of, drawing Musa's attention to the

weapon. Frightening him enough to cause them to hide behind a rock, Raymond seemed satisfied enough because he and Meursault walked back to the beach house once they were out of sight. I believe that while Raymond is clearly a seething hot headed French man with an ego, his only intention was to scare Musa and have the last word. Like Musa, if Raymond really wanted to kill the man then he would have. A gun has the upperhand over a knife.

Now here is where the reader becomes confused, because scaring them clearly was not enough to satisfy Meursault, who chose not to enter the beach house with Raymond but instead turn around and seek out the two Arabs once again. Meursault never admits to seeking out Musa, telling the reader “as far as I’m concerned, the matter was closed and I’d ended up here by chance” (Camus 52). Yet on his walk over, his “jaw tensed tightly everytime a piercing ray of light shot up from the sand, a white seashell or a piece of broken glass” (Camus 52). Perhaps Meursault’s tense jaw was the result of being on edge in case the ray of light happened to come from Musa’s knife, just like what happened with Raymond's gun. Or maybe he was just an angry man who wanted to put an end once and for all to his friends' rivalry. Either way, I believe that Meursault’s steady and calm tone in Camus’s writing tricks the reader into thinking that they can believe Meursault, when really we should be questioning the little information that he does give us. Also, Meursault’s innocent and nonbothered tone helps him maintain his heroic qualities. While it cannot be certain why Meursault went back to the rock, it would not be far off to assume that “he retained the primitive man’s desire to kill those who stood in his way of his enjoyment or who devalued his ego as the Arab did” (Scheer 173). Ultimately by acknowledging that he did not go back there just by chance allows the reader to realize that he had intentions to go back, with a gun, and act on possible heightened emotions.

Going forward in my paper, I want it to become evident to my reader that the existential framework of the novel allows the possibility of escape for the murderer. The inclusion of history that I provided as well as the unreliable narration that the reader is presented with will blow away this facade of existentialism and tell a fuller, more honest story.

Redefining the Absurd

As I have mentioned before, many critics have popularized the idea that *The Outsider* deals heavily with themes like existentialism and absurdism. However, there are enough moments in this short story to conclude that existential philosophy is not as authentic as Meursault's nonchalant tone wants the reader to believe. While the absurd theory is present throughout the novel, it is present in more than one way and the often overlooked presence of absurdity is the most significant one. Given the information from the last section, I believe that Camus purposely masked the significant absurdity (Meursault being sentenced to prison for his unusual response to his circumstances, not for killing a person) in the novel with one that would appear more intellectually stimulating to the reader (a character study of Meursault's unusual responses). Assuming that Camus's target audience was French-Algerian people, by doing this he would be revealing to them the hypocrisy that they have displayed for blaming Arabs as the "violent" ones through Meursault's experiences with the Arabs. However, many critics of *The Outsider* have eliminated this opportunity by supporting Meursault's seemingly absurdist views by layering it with existential views toward death–existential views that you will learn do not exist. Ultimately though, Camus has left it completely up to the reader to decide whether they want to read between the lines or take the story as it is.

In the article "Beyond Education: Meursault and the Ordinary," author Andrew Gibbons explores Meursault's thinking and experiences and offers the theory that *The Outsider* tells the story of a man who presents "an educational challenge to a society to reflect on…the ways in which the sociopolitical machinery deals with perceived anomalies" (Gibbons 1104). Gibbons's goal is to show how Meursault's "refusal to take certain things for granted offers a problematization of the will to educate" (Gibbons 1105). In other words, how society reacts

when an individual rejects to conform to what is ethically taught as right and how when that happens, they are easy to cast as an outsider to the public. He claims that the way Meursault acted at his mothers funeral (where not a single tear was shed), his interaction with the caretaker (where no sorrowful emotion was seen on his face or heard in his voice), and the way he returned to work (again, like his mother had not just died) "all contravene more or less the common senses of his society" (Gibbons 1106). It becomes evident by the end of the trial that these circumstances are what landed Meursault the death penalty. Moreso, he explores the idea of Meursault's "existential views" being a threat to the community; Gibbons supports this thought with the fact that Meursault refuses to feel guilt or ask for mercy for the murder he committed. However, I would argue that these are not existential feelings being shown at all toward the matter, rather the feelings of a man who feels his actions are justified.

In an article by Scherr titled "Camus and the Denial of Death: Meursault *and* Caligula," he looks at Camus's *The Stranger* to examine the arrogance of a French man raised in Algeria. He argues that Meursault is portrayed as an arrogant young man who lacks respect for the life of the Arab that he murdered. To aid his claim of Meursault's arrogance, he mentions how "Meursault does not think of the Arab's death as a murder that he committed but as an incident that ended in unfortunate results for *him*" (Scherr 170). This can be supported by many things that Meursault states in *The Outsider* during the first time he is being questioned by the prosecutor. When the prosecutor asks Meursault if he has a lawyer, Meursault questions why he would need one, replying "I found my case very simple" (Camus 57). Furthermore he admits that he "didn't take him seriously" (Camus 57) in the beginning, however after their conversation he "really looked at him… he came across as very reasonable" (Camus 58) and seemingly considered him worthy enough "to stretch out my hand to shake his, but I remembered just in

time that I'd killed a man" (Camus 58). Meursault's audacity to assess other people and deem whether or not they are worthy of him, given the fact that he has murdered a man just hours before, shows that he not only has no regret for what he has done, but also proves the superiority that Meursault felt during a time when his people were colonizing the Arabs. Moreso, at the end of the novel Meursault admits "I understood that I had been happy, and I was still happy" (Camus 111).

Gibbons also acknowledges the frustrations felt by other characters when Meursault is reluctant to make seemingly obvious decisions, like taking a job offer from his boss or showing remorse for killing someone. Meursault could not be persuaded to do these things by his boss and the prosecutor, and that makes Gibbons question the peculiarities of Meursault's immediate response to follow out Raymond's plan to pursue his cruel act—suspecting that it may be Raymond's honesty that Meursault accepts, but he could not find any more excuses for Meursault's part in Raymond's plan of humiliating his mistress. However, I find it strange how when Meursault hears the mistress's name he notes, "When he told me the woman's name, I realized she was an Arab. I wrote the letter" (Camus 30). Meursault's mental note about her name immediately followed by him telling the reader that he wrote the note, should make us question whether or not the reason he "tried to write it in a way that would make Raymond happy" (Camus 30) is the fact that she is Arab.

Furthermore, Meursault's lack of excitement about the job promotion and his engagement to Marie gives the reader the opportunity to explore Meursault's past with his mother. Meursault says, "It was an idea of Mama's that people could eventually get used to anything…" (Camus 69), which gives the reader an explanation for why Meursault does not display much emotion in

these scenes; he knows he will get used to that new lifestyle. Meursault also admits that he has "lost the habit of analyzing my emotions" (Camus 58).

That does not mean that Meursault does not feel these emotions though. The magistrate argues that Meursault has an unusual response to his mother's death, and they get support for this idea from outside sources:the caretaker, Perez, Raymond, Salamano, and Marie. While I cannot judge the magistrate viewing Meursault in this light (though I can judge them for other things), Meursault has implied to the reader that his mother's death does affect him. When Salamano loses his dog, Meursault hears him crying through the walls later that night and "I don't know why, but I thought of Mama" (Camus). Another instance that proves Meursault's mothers death does in fact impact him is when the prosecutor asks him if he had been upset the day of the funeral. Meursault says that he "found the question quite surprising and thought how embarrassed I would have been if I'd had to ask it" (Camus 58). It is important to know that Meursault did feel grief after his mother's death, because it removes the magistrate's notion that he is a monster, therefore the jury was wrong to sentence him to death based on these claims. . By removing that notion, it becomes easier for the reader to comprehend that absurdity does not apply in this relationship, which will push them to realize that Camus purposely placed this subplot there as a cover-up for Meursault's racism.

While Gibbons still speculates on the absurdity of life being the problem, giving an example of a time when Meursault recognized the way he made someone feel, "I could tell I made him uncomfortable…But it was all really a bit pointless and I couldn't be bothered" (Camus 66), author Aidan Curson-Hobson takes the argument away from absurdity. In his article "Confronting the Absurd: An Educational Reading of Camus' *The Stranger*" he claims that "...Albert Camus examines a humanity wrestling with its own sense of individual and communal

strangeness" (Curzon-Hobson 462). If we examine more instances when Meursault's awkwardness shines through we can determine that this is again the case. The reader can notice how uncomfortable Meursault is with his feelings right on the first page when he asks his boss for two days off to attend his mothers funeral. While his boss was not able to say no given the circumstances, Meursault states "but he didn't seem happy about it. I even said: It's not my fault…' Then I thought I shouldn't have said that. Although I had nothing to apologize for" (Camus 3). Meursault feeling like he needs to apologize cancels Gibbons's theory that the absurdity of life is what propels him to not take accountability for his actions.

While absurdism is not present in Meursault's relationship with his mother nor his relationship with himself, absurdism can also be seen in the magistrate, who condemns a man to death not for murder but for "not behaving according to the codes of society during his mother's death" (Rustam 9).

In Aneen Thanwan Rustam's article "Albert Camus' Idea of Rebellion in *The Outsider*, Rustam provides an explanation for why Meursault's emotional mentality is the way it is, which she claims stems all the way back to his childhood with his mother. Meursault himself says things such as:"Mother and I had so little in common" (Camus 100), and "When we lived together, mother was always watching me, but we hardly ever talked" (Camus 13). As it becomes apparent early on to the reader, Meursault does not show interest in talking much to anyone, even those that he is considered to have serious relations with. Perhaps we can assume that Meursault observing but never talking is a characteristic that he picked up from his mother. Rustam speculates that "the lack of love in his relationship with his mother results in an unhealthy love experience with his mistress" (Rustam 13). As Gibbons examines the theme of understanding the truth of life and death, he seems to agree with the notion that Meursault may

have carried his mother's personality within himself since childhood. Meursault's lines at the end of the novel, "But I was sure of myself, sure of everything, surer than he was, sure of my life and sure of the death that was coming to me" (Camus 115) suggests that Meursault was "deeply conscious of…life, and that his resistance to the system was not mere…ignorance or immorality…for…he might just as well have accepted…to defend himself as innocent of murder, and that either choice would have been no more or less right" (Gibbons 1109). This goes along with what his mother told him at two years old; it seems as though Meursault has become accustomed to the lifestyle of getting used to things happening, whether it be good or bad, a job promotion or marriage proposal or the death of the Arab. It seems a habit for him to accept every situation as it is. Furthermore, going back to the quote "Neither mother nor I expected much from one another, or for that matter of anyone else" (Camus 93), also supports this theory, because it provides an explanation for why Meursault is so determined on refusing the chaplain's help. That being said, Camus "ridicules the moral and social codes" through the magistrate by making them appear as fools. Through this mockery, Camus's goal is to show the corruption of young French Algerians by French authority and their claim of what is and is not socially moral. He uses the absurdism of the trial in an attempt to show that "the dishonesty of the law can't be redeemed unless by the moral view of Camus's hero" (Rustam 12).

Redirecting the theory of absurdity by making evident that Meursault's punishment for rebelling "against the rigid system imposed on man and his attempt to transcend the limits of his society…" helps show Camus's well thought out plot to symbolize how Arabs felt during French colonialism. Meanwhile Meursault's violent act and indifferent attitude, as well as the magistrates avoidance of actually talking about the murder represents "the brutality of the colonial society he belongs to…" and the way "Europeans treat the 'others' as 'things', and for

the European judges, the murder of an Arab is not different from breaking a stone or cutting a tree" (Rustam 9).

Conclusion

Since its publication, *The Outsider* has been labeled by critics as the greatest existential novel of all time. Meursault is continuously praised for his heroic qualities that consist of endless honesty and loyalty. Camus makes his readers believe that Meursault is a fair man who minds his own by giving him a tone so nonchalant that his unique personality may be favored by readers. Unfortunately, it seems he just got caught up in unlucky business. His sentencing to death, and other important events, do not bother him for he seemingly finds life pointless anyway. Camus does not give his readers any access to Meursault's emotions which leaves them questioning why he is the way he is. However, this surface level narrator somehow gains the trust of his readers–until he does not. Meursault's endless honesty and portrayal of a fair man is just a cover-up to hide the racist colonizer that is inherently inside of him. He gets away with this because of his unreliable narration and his absence of history. He leaves out any information that could indicate a possible racist motive, by doing this.

Furthermore, Meursault's unreliable narration distorts the story into one where Meursault and Raymond are victims of Raymond's mistress's brother, when really no reader of *The Outsider* can even be certain that his is her brother. Therefore, no one can be sure how far he was willing to go in defending the mistress abused by Raymond; which was obviously not very far since he could have done more to Raymond than just cut his arm during the first altercation on the beach. Due to Camus's technique of unreliable narration, the reader allows Meursault to cover up his racially motivated crime with a facade of absurdism, inevitably keeping the reader's attention on him and his unique perspective. Meursault's narration is heavy on observation and lacking in emotion, which is the reason that tricking Camus's readers into thinking that absurdism is the main premise of the book is quite easy for him.

However, it can be assumed that Camus did not want this interpretation of the book to stick for all these years. Seeing that he was a heavy advocate of equality for Arabs, it would not make sense for Meursault's victim to be so, and for his death to go unjustified. I believe Camus's intent for this novel was to show the absurdism of the French authority's negligence towards the lives of Arabs, and that is the reason why Meursault's murder trial turned into a trial that questions his reaction to his mother's death. By doing this, the hypocrisy of French people would be revealed, hopefully to themself, as they can easily spot unfairness when it happens to their people, yet they do not say anything when a murdered Arab is not given proper justice.

Like I said in my introduction paragraph, when I read this book the first couple of times, I too was mesmerized by Meursault. I seriously thought that he was one of the coolest characters that I had ever read about and I was excited to write about what so many literature critics have written about already. I was inevitably going to be writing the same exact words that they were writing, since this book is only so long and the critiques of it are even longer. Therefore, my writing would not have been my own and my ideas would not be original. Still, when I was presented with the idea of writing about this viewpoint, one where I turn against my beloved Meursault, I was scared that I would not do it justice. I was also worried that I would not be able to find the amount of information that I needed in order to make this task successful, because truthfully I had no idea what race had to do with the novel and, as far as I knew it, no one really had this idea. I was as blind as to it as Camus's other readers. However, my informant on the matter and the person who suggested I write my project this way assured me that I would be fine; all I needed to do was first look at the history of French-Algeria. After doing this, I reread *The Outsider* with a different mindset and I viewed Meursault in a different light. Sure enough, everything pieced together like a very complex puzzle. Given how popular the novel is and how

significant absurdism is to the novel's supporters, it is a puzzle that is worth putting together again and again until all of its supporters get the full picture.

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