

العيش بلا سبب: رحلة العبث في رواية "الغريب"

حنين رياض رحيم

وزارة التربية

[h7537535@gmail.com](mailto:h7537535@gmail.com)

أ.د. هديل عزيز محمد رضا

قسم اللغة الإنكليزية / كلية التربية الأساسية

/ جامعة بابل

[basic.hadeel.azez@uobabylon.edu.iq](mailto:basic.hadeel.azez@uobabylon.edu.iq)



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## Living Without Why: A Journey of Absurdity in *The Stranger*

**Prof. Hadeel Aziz Al-Hilu (Ph.D.)**  
Department of English / College of  
Basic Education / University of  
Babylon  
[basic.hadeel.azez@uobabylon.edu.iq](mailto:basic.hadeel.azez@uobabylon.edu.iq)

**Haneen Reyadh Raheem**  
Ministry of Education  
[h7537535@gmail.com](mailto:h7537535@gmail.com)

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### المُلخَص:

تُعد رواية الغريب لألبير كامو إحدى الركائز الأساسية في الأدب الحديث، وتُجسد بشكل عميق التأمل الوجودي، لا سيما حين تتقاطع مع فلسفة العبث. تعيد هذه الدراسة النظر في الرواية من خلال أربعة محاور تحليلية: الوجودية، والعبث، والحرية، والاعتراب—وهي محاور تكشف تطور شخصية ميرسو من الناحيتين الفلسفية والعاطفية. ومن خلال الاستناد إلى كتابات كامو نفسه، بالإضافة إلى مقارنات مع مفكرين وجوديين مثل سارتر، وكيركغارد، ونييتشه، تبرز الدراسة ميرسو ليس كشخصية باردة أو لا مبالية، بل كبطل عبثي يختار الصدق على حساب التوافق الاجتماعي.

تتناول الورقة كيف تعكس أفعال ميرسو، وموقفه من المحاكمة، وتجذره العاطفي، وقبوله النهائي لعدم مبالاة العالم، رؤية كامو الخاصة للحرية والتمرد في عالم صامت. كما تسلط الدراسة الضوء على دلالات البيئة الجزائرية في الرواية، والرمزية الأدبية المستخدمة، لتُظهر

كيف يصبح اغتراب ميرسو عبثاً وجودياً من جهة، وموقفاً فلسفياً صادقاً من جهة أخرى. ومن هذا المنظور، لا تظهر رواية الغريب كحكاية يأس، بل كتأمل هادئ وجريء في الصدق، والاستقلالية، وإمكانية التصالح مع الحقيقة الوجودية في عالم خالٍ من المعنى كما يعتقد البطل.

### Abstract

Camus' *The Stranger* remains a cornerstone of modern literature and a profound exploration of existential thought, particularly as it intersects with the philosophy of the absurd. This paper reexamines the novel through four thematic axes—existentialism, absurdity, freedom, and alienation—each offering insight into Meursault's philosophical and emotional evolution. Drawing on Camus' own writings as well as related existential figures such as Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, the study contextualizes Meursault not merely as an apathetic protagonist, but as an absurd hero who chooses authenticity over conformity. It investigates how Meursault's actions, courtroom defiance, emotional detachment, and eventual embrace of the world's indifference reflect Camus' unique vision of freedom and revolt in an indifferent universe. The analysis also engages with the Algerian setting and literary symbolism, revealing how Meursault's isolation becomes both a burden and a philosophical stance. Through this lens, *The Stranger* emerges not as a novel of despair, but as a quietly radical meditation on integrity, autonomy, and the possibility of peace in the face of existential truth.

### I

Existentialism is a philosophical movement rooted in the idea that individuals must create their own meaning in a world that offers no predetermined purpose. Originating in the 19th century with figures such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, the movement came to prominence in the 20th century through philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Albert Camus. These thinkers rejected absolute truths or divine plans, insisting on the primacy of personal experience and choice. As Sartre put it, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 22), emphasizing the radical responsibility each individual bears for defining their own existence. In the aftermath of world wars and the collapse of traditional certainties, existentialism spoke to a generation confronting uncertainty about human purpose. The existential attitude that emerged was to confront the void of meaning honestly, yet still resolve to live authentically.

One of the best-known tenets of existentialist philosophy is the motto "existence precedes essence." Popularized by Sartre, this slogan



expresses a fundamental rejection of essentialism. Rather than being born with a fixed nature or divine purpose, human beings must define themselves through their actions and choices. The word “existence” itself (derived from the Latin *existere*, meaning “to stand out”) suggests an active process of coming-into-being (Cuddon, 2013, pp. 259–260). In existential terms, a person first exists and only later becomes something through living. Sartre describes this as “the first principle of existentialism,” explaining that “man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards defines himself” (Sartre, 1946/2007, pp. 22–23). In other words, there is no predefined human nature or fate; we are what we make of ourselves. This idea carries a profound implication: with freedom comes responsibility. Human life is a project of self-creation undertaken in conditions of uncertainty. The upside of this freedom is the potential for authenticity—living in accordance with one’s true self rather than merely following social roles. The downside is the burden of anxiety in the face of radical responsibility and an indifferent world.

Early existentialist thinkers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche laid the groundwork for these ideas with their critiques of complacent belief systems. Kierkegaard, often considered the father of existentialism, examined the individual’s inner struggle with faith, dread, and despair. He famously wrote, “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom,” highlighting how the awareness of one’s freedom can produce both empowerment and a kind of existential fear (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980, p. 61). For Kierkegaard, this anxiety (Angest) is not mere fear of specific things but a deeper uncertainty about one’s own potential and choices. Alongside anxiety comes the risk of despair: the condition of a self that cannot or will not become itself. He described this existential despair as a spiritual sickness, a state of “not wanting to be oneself” that he termed the sickness unto death (Kierkegaard, 1849/1989, p. 43). While Kierkegaard ultimately hoped that a leap of faith in God could resolve such despair, his analysis of the individual’s predicament laid the groundwork for the more secular existentialists who followed.

Nietzsche, by contrast, proclaimed that “God is dead,” signaling the collapse of traditional sources of meaning and the urgent need for individuals to create new values (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 181). In Nietzsche’s view, the decline of religious and metaphysical certainties had left modern humanity facing a crisis of nihilism. Without the old moral framework, people risked feeling adrift in a valueless universe. “Are we not wandering as through an endless nothing?” Nietzsche’s madman asks, capturing the disorientation of a world that has lost its



guiding absolutes (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, pp. 181–182). Yet Nietzsche did not counsel despair; instead, he challenged individuals to overcome nihilism by affirming life and exercising creative freedom. He even urged the emergence of a new kind of individual who could transcend conventional morality and create new values in the void left by the death of God. This idea of self-creation in the face of nothingness strongly influenced later existentialists. It underscored the point that meaning is not given from above but must be generated from within, through a courageous act of will. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, each in his own way, shifted philosophy's focus to the individual living in a world suddenly bereft of certainties (a theme that would come to define existentialism).

In the 20th century, Martin Heidegger carried these ideas further by examining the structure of human existence itself. Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, or "being-there," reframed the question of existence as one of situated presence and temporality. According to Heidegger, to be human is to be aware of one's finite nature: to exist toward death. Human life is time-bound: we are thrown into a specific world with a past, we project ourselves toward future possibilities, and we exist in the present as an interplay of what we have been and what we are becoming. Heidegger insisted that an honest confrontation with mortality is essential to living authentically. Only by facing the inevitability of death can one grasp the true urgency of life. He describes the authentic individual as one who achieves "a freedom towards death—a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the 'They'" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 266). Here the "They" (or "the One" in some translations) refers to the anonymous social norms and conventions that dictate much of our behavior. To live authentically means to break away from this they-self, the impersonal mode of existence where one simply follows the crowd, and to make choices based on one's own genuine understanding of being. Heidegger's student Hans-Georg Gadamer extended these ideas by asserting that all understanding is interpretive and historically situated (Abrams, 2012, p. 178), a view that reinforced the existentialist emphasis on context and personal perspective.

Existentialism as a whole is characterized by a critique of the modern world's emphasis on rationality, efficiency, and social conformity. The rise of industrial society and bureaucratic thinking led these philosophers to ask what becomes of the individual spirit in an age of mass organization. As Childs and Fowler (1987, p. 78) explain, a narrow focus on technical progress and productivity tends to displace deeper existential concerns, leading to alienation and spiritual fragmentation. People



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become estranged not only from others, but from themselves, as they adopt inauthentic roles dictated by societal norms. This loss of individuality and authenticity is precisely what the existentialists denounce. They urge a return to the personal and the concrete—to the inner experiences of anxiety, choice, and moral responsibility that make us human. Sartre, for example, described bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) as a form of self-deception in which one lies to oneself to escape the anguish of choice (Sartre, 1943/1956). Existentialist literature often portrays characters trapped in such self-deception and emptiness, then follows them through crises of self-discovery. The remedy, in existentialist thought, is to live authentically: to acknowledge one's freedom and limitations, to choose one's own path, and to take responsibility for what one makes of oneself. This humanistic rebellion against dehumanizing social pressures made existentialism not just a philosophy, but a cultural movement that influenced art, theater, and fiction.

Although Camus is often linked with existentialism, he famously rejected the label. Camus saw himself as an absurdist, a writer grappling with the feeling that human life has no ultimate rhyme or reason. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), he argues that the central philosophical question is whether life is worth living in the face of its absurdity. "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem," Camus writes, "and that is suicide" (Camus, 1955, p. 3). This stark formulation encapsulates the existential predicament: if the world offers no clear purpose, why not give in to despair? Camus' answer is to reject despair through an attitude of defiant affirmation. His response is not resignation or religious consolation, but revolt: the refusal to give in to meaninglessness. To live, for Camus, is to live without appeal to any higher power or future salvation, yet also without surrendering to nihilism. He insists on maintaining awareness of life's absurdity while simultaneously rebelling against it by living as fully and as honestly as possible. Importantly, Camus diverges from other existentialists in that he will not accept any "leap of faith" or abstract philosophical system to resolve the absurd. As Arinze and Onwuatuegwu (2020) observe, "Camus diverges from traditional existentialism by refusing the leap into metaphysical solutions such as religion or transcendence" (p. 530). Where a thinker like Kierkegaard turned to faith, Camus remains firmly within the human realm, confronting the absurd head-on and without illusions. In this sense, Camus shares the existentialists' emphasis on individual integrity and authentic living, even as he denies that existential anxiety can be cured by any grand meaning or divine answer. Camus' philosophy "emphasizes the need to face life's

intrinsic meaninglessness with courage and integrity” (Khan, 2024, p. 105).

In *The Stranger* (1942), Camus dramatizes these ideas through the character of Meursault, a man who lives with uncompromising honesty. Meursault refuses to lie about his feelings, to seek comfort in religion, or to fabricated emotions he does not feel (all assertions of authenticity that set him apart from society). His apparent indifference is not nihilistic apathy but a refusal to pretend that life has meaning where he perceives none. As Camus noted in an afterword to the novel, “Meursault doesn’t play the game. He refuses to lie” (Camus, 1978, p. 337). The “game” here refers to the societal expectation that one will hide the truth in order to conform; something Meursault will not do. His emotional honesty and detachment mark him as an embodiment of the absurd man who will not sacrifice truth for comfort. Through Meursault, Camus illustrates the existential challenge of living authentically in a world that demands conformity.

## II

The absurd is the cornerstone of Albert Camus' philosophical vision, capturing the profound conflict between the human desire for meaning and the unresponsiveness of the universe. Camus articulates this condition in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, stating that “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, 1955, p. 28). Unlike nihilism, which may lead to despair or moral collapse, Camus’ absurdism insists on clarity, revolt, and a refusal to escape life’s contradictions. Absurdism, as a philosophical stance, emerges not from hopelessness but from the recognition that life’s lack of deep meaning demands a radical kind of honesty and endurance.

At the heart of Camus’ thought is the idea that the universe lacks rational order or metaphysical justification. This realization is not abstract, but deeply personal: it often arrives through mundane moments when familiar routines break down. Camus writes that the absurd begins when “the stage sets collapse” and “rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday according to the same rhythm” suddenly reveal themselves as meaningless repetition (Camus, 1955, p. 12). It is in these disruptions of daily life (when the “why” behind our actions evaporates) that the absurd announces itself.

The absurd is not merely the absence of meaning, but the human response to this realization. It arises from the clash between two certainties: “my appetite for the absolute and for unity” and “the impossibility of reducing





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this world to a rational and reasonable principle” (Camus, 1955, p. 51). The absurd, therefore, is relational: it exists in the tension between human consciousness and a mute universe. As Robert Solomon (2001) notes, absurdism “acknowledges the futility of seeking transcendental answers while maintaining a resolute commitment to the dignity of human experience” (p. 84). This commitment defines Camus’ unique position: to accept the absurd without yielding to despair or deception.

Camus draws a crucial distinction between absurdism and nihilism. Nihilism is the belief that life has no value or significance; absurdism, by contrast, is the recognition of meaninglessness combined with a defiant insistence on living. To yield to nihilism is to embrace philosophical suicide (a term Camus uses to describe the impulse to escape the absurd by positing false meanings, whether religious, ideological, or metaphysical). “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem,” Camus writes in the opening of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “and that is suicide” (Camus, 1955, p. 3). Yet his answer is not death, but revolt: to live fully in the face of the absurd, refusing both resignation and illusion. This theme finds its fullest literary expression in *The Stranger*, where Meursault embodies the absurd hero. His emotional detachment and refusal to lie about his feelings, even in the most socially charged contexts, mark him as someone who has encountered the absurd and chosen to live without appeal. At the beginning of the novel, Meursault’s indifference to his mother’s death shocks both characters within the story and readers alike. He neither cries nor performs grief. “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know,” he says in the opening line, a sentence that encapsulates the neutrality and ambiguity that infiltrate his worldview (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 3).

This emotional detachment is not apathy, but a refusal to participate in the societal game of imposed meaning. As Camus clarifies in his 1955 preface to the novel, “Meursault is not a heartless man...he is simply a man who refuses to lie” (Camus, 1978, p. 337). His refusal to pretend, to mourn conventionally, or to seek solace in religion becomes an act of existential integrity. In this sense, Meursault is a literary embodiment of Camus’ philosophical position: a man who lives in full awareness of the absurd and chooses honesty over comfort.

The pivotal moment in *The Stranger* (the murder of the Arab) can also be read through the lens of absurdism. Meursault shoots the man not out of malice or premeditation, but in a moment overwhelmed by sensory stimuli: the sun, the heat, the glare, and the shimmer of the sea. “It was this burning, which I couldn’t stand anymore, that made me move forward,” he explains. “The trigger gave” (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 59).



This irrational act, committed in a moment of blurred perception, underscores the collapse of traditional moral logic. As Curzon-Hobson (2013) notes, “Camus does not present Meursault as a calculated killer, but as a man caught in an absurd situation where intention and consequence are tragically misaligned” (p. 463). The murder becomes an absurd event, not because it lacks consequence, but because it emerges from a convergence of chance, sensation, and existential ambiguity.

The trial scene that follows further exposes the absurdity of human institutions. Meursault is judged less for the act of murder than for his indifference at his mother’s funeral. The prosecutor exploits Meursault’s emotional detachment to portray him as morally deviant. As Saadan and Ridha (2023) argue, “The prosecution weaponizes Meursault’s lack of sentiment to paint him as morally deviant, illustrating how absurdism challenges the ethics of conformity” (p. 13). The courtroom becomes a theater in which society’s need for moral coherence is enacted, and Meursault, in refusing to perform, becomes intolerable.

This reversal of logic (where emotion becomes the real offense) highlights Camus’ critique of societal expectations. The absurd, in this context, is not only a metaphysical condition but also a critique of institutional hypocrisy. Society demands that individuals not only follow rules but also pretend to believe in their legitimacy. Meursault’s refusal to participate in this performance marks him as a stranger not only to others, but to the entire cultural apparatus of meaning.

The novel’s symbolic language reinforces its absurdist themes. The sun, in particular, functions as a recurring motif of existential oppression. On the day of the murder, Meursault is overwhelmed by light and heat. “The sun was the same as it had been the day I’d buried Maman,” he notes. “And like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all the veins throbbing under the skin” (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 58). The physical environment blurs perception and heightens disorientation. The sun is not a neutral background, but an oppressive force: an indifferent presence echoing the cosmic silence of the absurd. As Curzon-Hobson (2013) observes, “the blinding Algerian sun becomes a metaphor for the irrational and overwhelming force of the absurd” (p. 464).

Camus’ absurdism is ultimately a call to lucidity. To live absurdly is not to embrace chaos, but to accept the lack of ultimate purpose while affirming life nonetheless. Camus insists that we must live “without appeal”: without recourse to metaphysical consolation or ideological certainty. In his words, “Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully” (Camus, 1955, p. 55). This acceptance is not passive





but defiant. The absurd individual recognizes the void yet chooses to continue, creating values through action rather than dogma.

Meursault's transformation in the final chapters of *The Stranger* illustrates this acceptance. Faced with his impending execution, he reflects on the inevitability of death and the absurdity of seeking comfort in religious belief. When the prison chaplain urges him to turn to God, Meursault lashes out: "He seemed so sure of everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair" (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 120). This rejection of consolation is not despair, but a final act of philosophical clarity. Meursault embraces death not as a failure but as the conclusion of a life lived without illusion.

His final words encapsulate this stance: "I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate" (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 123). This line, which is both ironic and resolute, expresses Meursault's full alignment with the absurd: he neither craves redemption nor fears condemnation. His indifference becomes an affirmation, his solitude a victory over false belonging. As Khan (2024) puts it, "Meursault's journey illustrates the possibility of existential peace—not through meaning, but through the acceptance of meaninglessness" (p. 108).

Thus, Camus' philosophy of the absurd, as embodied in *The Stranger*, insists that life's lack of meaning is not a verdict against it. Rather, it is an invitation to live with integrity, without evasion, and in full awareness of life's fragility and grandeur. Absurdism is not a failure of meaning but a triumph of honesty: a refusal to compromise the truth of the human condition for the comfort of illusion.

### III

Freedom, for existentialist philosophers, is both a gift and a burden. It is a condition that not only defines human existence, but also confronts individuals with the responsibility of shaping their own lives in the absence of predetermined meaning. Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, though often associated with similar philosophical ideas, offer differing visions of freedom. While Sartre emphasizes the radical nature of freedom and the ethical weight of every human choice, Camus roots his conception of freedom in the acceptance of absurdity and the refusal to seek solace in illusions. Camus' distinctive understanding of freedom is vividly dramatized in *The Stranger*, where Meursault, a man seemingly detached from emotion and convention, lives a life that embodies the existential challenge of choosing in a meaningless world.



Sartre's famous declaration that "man is condemned to be free" encapsulates the central existentialist belief that there is no human essence preceding existence. Since God does not exist (as they believe) and moral absolutes are illusory, each individual must define their own values through choice. As Sartre explains in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, "man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself" (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 22). In this framework, freedom is inescapable; humans are always choosing, even when they attempt not to. This condition produces anxiety, since no external authority can guarantee the correctness of one's choices. However, it also opens the possibility for authentic living: to live sincerely and with full awareness of one's freedom is to become fully human.

Camus, though influenced by this existentialist vision, departs from it in many ways. He rejects the existentialist belief that freedom can overcome the absurdity of existence by sheer will. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that the recognition of the absurd arises from the collision between human beings' search for meaning and the silent, indifferent universe. "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world," he writes (Camus, 1955, p. 28). The question then becomes: how should one live in the face of this absurdity? Camus does not offer metaphysical consolation, nor does he advocate suicide. Instead, he proposes revolt: a persistent, conscious defiance of meaninglessness through lucid and passionate engagement with life.

Freedom, for Camus, begins with the recognition of absurdity. In acknowledging that life has no ultimate purpose or cosmic justification, one paradoxically becomes free to live without illusion. This is not the absolute freedom of Sartre, which seeks to transcend conditions through moral responsibility, but a situated freedom—a freedom rooted in the acceptance of one's limitations, including death, chance, and the absurd. Camus writes, "Accepting the absurdity of everything around us is one step, a necessary experience: it should not become a dead end. It arouses a revolt that can become fruitful" (Camus, 1955, p. 53). This revolt does not promise redemption or moral clarity; instead, it affirms life on its own terms. The absurd man, Camus explains, is one who chooses to live "without appeal"—that is, without relying on external sources of meaning.

*The Stranger* dramatizes this philosophical stance through the character of Meursault. From the very first line—"Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know"—Meursault announces himself as someone who neither conforms to conventional sentiment nor pretends to feel what he





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does not (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 3). His reaction to his mother's death, marked by emotional detachment and attention to physical details (the heat, the light, his weariness), shocks both the reader and the characters in the novel. However, this indifference is not coldness; rather, it is honesty. Meursault refuses to perform grief simply because it is expected. In Camus' view, this is not a lack of feeling, but a refusal to lie: an act of existential integrity.

Meursault's conception of freedom becomes clearer in his interactions with others. When Marie asks him if he loves her, he replies that it "didn't mean anything" but that he probably did not love her (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 42). He agrees to marry her, not because he feels a deep emotional commitment, but because he sees no reason not to. This apparent indifference is not rooted in cynicism but in the belief that such labels are arbitrary. Likewise, when his boss offers him a promotion, Meursault expresses no ambition, saying that "one life was as good as another" (p. 41). These moments reveal a man who lives without illusion (not because he is apathetic, but because he sees all human endeavors as equally devoid of inherent significance). Yet he still lives: he enjoys swimming, good food, and the warmth of the sun among other things. Meursault's freedom lies in his refusal to ascribe meaning where none exists.

The novel's pivotal event (the murder of the Arab) further illuminates Camus' vision of freedom. The act is not premeditated; rather, it arises from a confluence of physical discomfort and environmental pressure. "It was this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward," Meursault explains. "The trigger gave" (p. 59). The sun, the light, the sweat: all these sensations overwhelm him in a moment where rationality collapses. The killing is an absurd event, a moment of existential rupture in which intention and consequence are tragically misaligned. Camus does not exonerate Meursault, but he uses the event to challenge traditional moral categories. If actions can arise from such irrational, contingent circumstances, what becomes of free will and moral responsibility?

The answer is complex. Meursault must take responsibility for his act, even if it defies explanation. In this sense, Camus does not deny moral consequence; instead, he insists that freedom entails living with the outcomes of one's choices, however absurd their origins may be. Yet Camus also points to the limits of human understanding. Meursault's act, like life itself, resists neat interpretation. This tension between freedom and uncertainty underscores the tragic nature of the human condition.



The trial scene offers one of the clearest illustrations of Meursault's existential freedom. The court is less concerned with the murder than with Meursault's character. His failure to cry at his mother's funeral becomes the primary evidence against him. As he observes, "I was being judged for not crying at my mother's funeral" (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 90). Society demands emotional performance, and Meursault's refusal to follow the rules makes him hard to understand. The court insists on motives, remorse, and redemption; Meursault offers only truth. He does not pretend to feel regret. He will not fabricate a moral narrative. In the eyes of the court, this makes him dangerous. As Khan notes, Meursault's trial becomes "a symbolic confrontation between existential authenticity and societal hypocrisy" (2024, p. 104).

Even in prison, Meursault remains faithful to his freedom. He refuses to appeal his sentence, choosing instead to face death on his own terms. In doing so, he exemplifies Camus' absurd hero—one who does not flee from the truth of death but embraces it. Toward the end of the novel, Meursault achieves a moment of profound clarity. He realizes that all human beings are condemned to die, and that "since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter" (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 114). This realization, far from depressing him, brings peace. He feels a connection with the world, describing its "gentle indifference," which mirrors his own (p. 122). In accepting the inevitability of death, Meursault attains the highest form of freedom: the freedom to live and die without appeal, without illusion, and without fear.

Camus distinguishes this absurd freedom from nihilism. While nihilism sees meaninglessness as a cause for despair, Camus sees it as a call to rebellion. The absurd hero does not seek comfort in religion or ideology; he affirms life despite its lack of ultimate meaning. As Camus writes, "The point is to live" (Camus, 1955, p. 63). Meursault lives. He accepts the absurdity of his existence and continues to engage with the world: its pleasures, its pain, and ultimately, its silence.

In contrast, Sartre would likely view Meursault as an example of bad faith, not because he lies to himself, but because he does not assume full moral responsibility for his actions. Sartre's concept of freedom requires that individuals choose values that could be universalized: that they live as though all of humanity were watching. For Sartre, Meursault's apparent indifference would be ethically problematic. However, Camus does not share this moral optimism. He does not believe that freedom may be universalized or that values can be invented from nothing. For Camus, the highest moral stance is to live without illusion, even if that means living without justification.





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Meursault's final act of rebellion is his refusal to seek divine mercy or hope for an afterlife. When the priest visits him, Meursault rejects his attempts at consolation, insisting that "none of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair" (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 120). His faith is in nothing but the truth. His death is not a failure but a triumph of existential clarity. As Camus notes, Meursault "agrees to die for the truth" (Camus, 1978, p. 338). In a world without God, without justice, and without inherent meaning, this commitment to honesty becomes the highest form of freedom.

In conclusion, *The Stranger* presents a vision of freedom that is both liberating and tragic. Meursault's life and death reveal the existential cost of living without illusion. His refusal to feign emotions, repent, or believe in a higher purpose isolates him from society but also grants him a profound, hard-won autonomy. Camus' absurd hero is not a moral guide or political activist, but a man who refuses to lie—especially to himself. In this refusal lies his dignity. Freedom, in Camus' thought, is not the power to control one's destiny but the courage to live lucidly within its limits. Meursault accepts the indifference of the universe and responds not with despair, but with defiance. In doing so, he becomes a figure of existential integrity—a man who lives and dies without why.

### IV

Alienation is one of the most enduring motifs in existential literature, and in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, it functions not only as a narrative theme, but as a lens through which we understand Meursault's moral, emotional, and philosophical position in the world. From the very first page, Meursault is isolated: not by accident, but by disposition and by choice. He does not cry at his mother's funeral. He does not pretend to love Marie. He does not show remorse for his crime. For many, this emotional detachment marks him as a cold or even monstrous figure. However, Camus invites the reader to look closer. Meursault's alienation is not cruelty. It is honesty. Moreover, it reflects something deeper: a person confronting a world that offers no comforting answers, only indifference. His isolation, then, becomes both a burden and a strange kind of liberation.

Meursault is, quite simply, emotionally unavailable to those around him. He does not behave the way people expect: not at his mother's funeral, not in his relationships, not in court. After her death, he goes about the rituals of mourning with little inner turmoil. "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know" (Camus, 1991, p. 3). That casual uncertainty sets the tone for a character who does not assign the kind of dramatic importance to life's events that others do. It is not that he feels

nothing, but that he refuses to act grief-stricken when he is not. In this sense, his alienation begins with a refusal to lie about what he does or does not feel.

This emotional honesty extends to his relationship with Marie. When she asks if he loves her, he replies, “It didn’t mean anything, but I didn’t think so” (Camus, 1991, p. 42). He does not hide behind poetic language or give the answer she wants to hear. Instead, he sticks to what he feels in the moment, which is not much at all. For many, this makes him unsympathetic. However, Camus is showing the reader a man who simply does not attach metaphysical or emotional weight to things unless they truly move him (and in Meursault’s world, very little does).

Even with Raymond and other acquaintances, Meursault remains aloof. He agrees to help Raymond write a letter: not out of friendship or shared values, but because he sees no reason not to. In all of his interactions, Meursault’s isolation emerges through his limited emotional vocabulary and refusal to conform to expected social scripts. He does not ask much from others, and he does not offer much in return. His emotional life is quiet, internal, and not jumbled by pretense. In a society built on emotional performances, this detachment isolates him.

Society, in *The Stranger*, is deeply uncomfortable with people who do not follow the script. Meursault’s trial is where this discomfort explodes. In theory, the court is there to determine whether Meursault committed murder. In reality, they are more concerned with whether he cried at his mother’s funeral. The prosecutor spends more time talking about Meursault’s emotional coldness than about the actual crime. His failure to display socially acceptable grief becomes proof of his supposed moral depravity.

Camus is making a pointed critique here. The legal system, which is supposed to be rational and impartial, becomes a theater of social conformity. Meursault’s real crime, in the eyes of the court, is not that he killed a man: it is that he does not fit in. He does not grieve, he does not repent, he does not pray. He is sentenced to death not just for what he did, but for who he is: a man who lives outside society’s moral expectations.

As Saadan and Ridha (2023) argue, “The prosecution weaponizes Meursault’s lack of sentiment to paint him as morally deviant, illustrating how absurdism challenges the ethics of conformity” (p. 13). This is one of the novel’s key insights: society prefers comfortable lies to uncomfortable truths. Meursault is alienated not only because he cannot (or will not) feel the right emotions, but because he exposes the fragility of the norms others take for granted.





## Living Without Why: A Journey of Absurdity in *The Stranger*



At the heart of this alienation lies a paradox: Meursault's detachment is not a symptom of moral failure, but of existential honesty. In Camus' world, to live authentically is to face life without illusions. Meursault does not pretend that life has more meaning than it does. He does not sugarcoat his emotions, nor does he invent values that he does not believe in. In many ways, this makes him more authentic than the people judging him.

Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, emphasizes the importance of living with full awareness of life's absurdity: "Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully" (Camus, 1955, p. 55). This is exactly what Meursault does. He lives in the present, not clinging to ideas of higher purpose or salvation. When the chaplain comes to comfort him before his execution, Meursault reacts with anger (not because he fears death, but because the chaplain insists on offering 'illusions'). "He seemed so sure of everything, didn't he?" Meursault thinks. "And yet none of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair" (Camus, 1991, p. 120). In this moment, Meursault's isolation becomes defiance. He is alone, yes, but on his own terms.

Khan (2024) observes that Meursault's alienation is "a precondition for genuine self-awareness" (p. 105). Being cut-off from the comforting rituals of society, Meursault sees the world more clearly. His solitude becomes a form of clarity. This does not make him happy in any conventional sense, but it does give him integrity.

Camus uses the physical environment (especially the sun and the heat) to reinforce Meursault's emotional solitude. At his mother's funeral, the oppressive sun makes him physically miserable. At the beach, moments before the murder, the sun again dominates: "The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman, and like then, my forehead especially was hurting me" (Camus, 1991, p. 58). It is as though the environment is conspiring with Meursault's emotional state: blinding, silent, and inescapable.

Andrew Curzon-Hobson (2013) suggests that the sun functions as "a metaphor for the irrational and overwhelming force of the absurd" (p. 464). The natural world, in its indifference, reflects the emotional landscape Meursault inhabits. It does not judge or console; it merely exists. In a world without God, the sun is the only witness. For Meursault, this is oddly comforting. Unlike people, the sun makes no moral demands. It simply is.

The novel's setting (French colonial Algeria) adds another layer to Meursault's alienation. Although Camus does not directly address colonial politics in *The Stranger*, the anonymity of the murdered man

speaks volumes. It reflects the erasure of native identity under colonial rule and subtly critiques the moral blindness of colonial society.

In this context, Meursault's alienation can also be understood politically. He is not only estranged from society's emotional expectations, but from its political structures as well. He does not feel loyalty to the systems that shape his world—neither to the legal system, nor to the religious institutions, nor to the colonial state. His indifference, then, becomes a kind of passive resistance. He is not politically radical, but he is personally radical: he lives by his own internal code, and this places him at odds with the institutions around him.

Meursault's alienation echoes, but also departs from, other existential characters. Like Kafka's Josef K., he is caught in an incomprehensible legal process. However, whereas Josef K. struggles to understand and resists his fate, Meursault remains calm and untroubled. He does not ask why. He accepts.

He is also reminiscent of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who is tormented by his isolation and constantly questions himself and the world. Meursault, by contrast, does not question. He observes. He endures. This quiet alienation, unmarked by inner turmoil, is what makes him such a unique figure in existential literature. It is not that he does not suffer; it is that he refuses to pretend that life offers something it does not. In the final pages of the novel, Meursault's alienation gives way to a kind of peace. Facing death, he embraces the absurd with open eyes. He no longer hopes for escape, and he does not ask for forgiveness. Instead, he welcomes the "benign indifference of the world," feeling that it is "so much like himself" (Camus, 1991, p. 122). This alignment with the universe (so stark, so impersonal) marks the end of his journey. He no longer feels like a stranger. He belongs to the same indifferent world he has always inhabited. Now, he accepts it fully.

Camus' message is not that alienation is comfortable. It is not. But it can be true. Moreover, in a world without higher meaning, truth may be the only thing worth holding onto. Meursault's isolation is the cost of living without illusions, but it is also the reward. He has nothing left: no friends, no religion, no future, but he has his truth. In the end, that is enough.

### Conclusion

Camus' *The Stranger* offers more than a story of crime and punishment; it presents a philosophical odyssey through the landscape of the absurd, traced through one man's radical honesty. Across the novel's unfolding events, Meursault stands as a figure of disconcerting simplicity and relentless clarity. His refusal to pretend, to fabricate grief, to claim love he does not feel, or to seek religious comfort makes him





incomprehensible to those around him—but it also makes him utterly authentic in the existential sense.

What at first appears as emotional coldness becomes, on closer reading, a portrait of a man who refuses to lie to himself or others. Meursault's alienation is painful, yet it is the consequence of an ethical stance: to live without illusion in a world that offers none. His murder of the Arab, the surreal trial, and his final acceptance of death are not moral parables, but expressions of life lived without false meaning. Camus does not ask us to emulate Meursault, but to understand the cost of his existential choice.

Through the expanded exploration of existentialism, absurdity, freedom, and alienation, it becomes clear that *The Stranger* is not a nihilistic novel. Rather, it is a deeply human affirmation of living truthfully in a universe that remains silent. Meursault's journey invites us to consider whether freedom lies not in control, but in clarity, and whether peace comes not from meaning, but from acceptance. In the end, Camus leaves us not with despair, but with a strange hope: that even in a world without reason, one can live (and die) with eyes open.

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