Meursault, an Absurd Happy Man

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Abstract: Though Albert Camus was more accredited in literature than in philosophy, his novel The Outsider has made the subject ‘absurdity of existence’ known to the people through the life of his protagonist, Meursault. This paper is a critical study of the concept of the absurd in The Outsider, which is mainly based on Camus’s philosophy of the absurd in The Myth of Sisyphus. In both works Camus pursues the problem of the absurd as the most fundamental question that could arise in a human’s mind in his/her confrontation to life. These two texts support each other because, in The Myth of Sisyphus, he attempts to define the concept of the absurd philosophically, whereas, in The Outsider, the concept is delineated through the characterization and viewpoint of Meursault, the protagonist. Meursault, a self absorbed man who irrationally kills an Arab narrates the story in two parts, is the representation of an absurd man who finally attains some essential recognitions in his life before his condemnation to death by the court. Meursault’s confrontation with the realities of the world, bravery and courage, without illusory hope but with awareness, could be the universal message which Camus gifted to his readers. The Outsider resonates Camus’s claim “Happiness and the Absurd are two sons of the same earth” and “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” as this paper investigates the happiness in Meursault to delineate how absurdity and happiness are linked in Meursault’s life and how he transforms into a hero like Sisyphus. Specifically, the process of recognition of the absurdity of life, triviality of death, and happiness are being examined in the characterization of the protagonist of The Outsider. The findings illustrate that Meursault’s achievement of happiness is neither transcendent nor sensual; it is, in reality, an affirmation of the dignity and value of life.

Key words: Absurdity, The Outsider, Albert Camus.

INTRODUCTION

Albert Camus’s The Outsider has found considerable popularity among people all over the world. For instance, among American students, The Outsider finds as many appreciative readings as the masterpieces of such accomplished writers as William Faulkner, James Joyce, Franz Kafka and Feodor Dostoevsky. These renowned writers ultimately raise more questions than answers when reviewing and analyzing their works, and only some of the many questions find answers in readers’ minds.

About The Outsider, critics and commentators have mostly focused on the protagonist of the novel, Meursault, and have critically analysed him from different perspectives. So far as Meursault is Albert Camus’s created absurd man, beyond the absurdity of existence which Meursault represents in the novel, his character has been noticed more by critics and commentators than the novel itself.

Meursault, the protagonist of the story, is a memorable character in literature. He is a simple clerk who greatly enjoys life’s physical pleasures, and does not care about societal norms, as Day notes: “He is remarkable precisely because he is outwardly so unremarkable” (84). In an introductory part of the translated version of l’Etranger, i.e. The Outsider, Cyril Connolly comments:

Meursault represents the neo-pagan … profoundly in love with life, whose least pleasures, from a bathe to a yawn, affirm him complete and silent gratification. He lives without anxiety in a continuous present and has no need to think or to express himself; there is no Nordic why-clause in his pact with nature. The misfortunes into which he is led by his lazy desire to please and by his stubborn truthfulness gradually force the felt but unspoken philosophy of his existence to emerge into the open, and finally to express itself in words. (8)

As Camus represented in his novel, Meursault’s life is divided into two parts: Meursault in society and Meursault in prison. It is obvious that Meursault of the story, in the first book, before being jailed for the act of murder, is driven by his own feelings, and is indifferent to the convention of society in a way that it is interpreted as a rebel against society’s norms. With regarding, the next section is devoted to the analysis of “Meursault in society”.

2. Meursault in Society:

The Outsider starts with few simple but influential sentences, such as: “Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure. The telegram from home says: Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy” (13). Camus used the word “Maman” in French, which is similar to the English word “Mum”, which is used by a child when he wants to call his mother. The first sentence, therefore, represents the closeness of...
Meursault to his mother. The second sentence suggests something different when Meursault is not sure whether it was today or yesterday that his mother passed away, and the following sentences draw the reader’s attention from Meursault’s grief over his mother’s death to the date of her death. Therefore, Meursault is not presented as a son mourning for his mum (Kamber 29). One finds this a decidedly peculiar way to speak of a mother’s death.

Meursault’s senselessness and indifference to everything except physical sensations are noticeable. Philip Thody finds a “schizophrenic tendency” in Meursault, when he is engaged by some quite trivial physical sensation and is indifferent to how people judge him (1989, 19). He refuses, for example, to see his dead mother’s face for the last time, something that is usually done by children before burial. He smokes during the funeral. When his mother’s friends decide to keep vigil for her, he cannot stay awake, and falls asleep. Meursault’s behaviour is considered inappropriate by his mother’s friends, and he looks like a stranger to them. Then, he soon returns to Algiers to take a long nap. Thody points out that “sleep plays what seems a disproportionately large part in his life” (1989, 20).

The next morning, he goes to the beach and meets Marie Cardona, a former typist at his office. They go boating and swimming; Meursault touches her breast and puts his arm around her waist, when he sees that she does not mind. Even his mother’s death cannot lessen his strong physical sensations. Meursault seems strange to Marie, too, when she sees his black tie and asks about it, and gets to know that his mother died the day before. It does not matter to him, so he even invites Marie to go to a movie, a comic one, a day after his mother’s death, and right after that he invites her to his flat and sleeps with her.

He even accepts an invitation to dinner from Raymond, his next-door neighbour, who is reputed to be a pimp. He does not care what people say about Raymond, and what they will say about him if they know that he has accepted his invitation. He accepts Raymond’s invitation for a simple reason: it saves him having to cook dinner. That is all. Raymond speaks about his Arab girlfriend who lived with him in the same flat, free of charge. Moreover, Raymond paid for her food and other expenses, but she let him down. Raymond reveals his plan to Meursault, about how he will punish her by sending her a letter and persuade her to come back, and then, “go to bed with her and, just when she was ‘properly primed up’, he’d spit in her face and throw her out of the room” (The Outsider, 39-40). He asks Meursault to write the letter, and Meursault easily accepts it, because “I wanted to satisfy Raymond, as I’d no reason not to satisfy him” (ibid., 40).

Meursault does not show any excitement at his boss’s offer to transfer him to Paris. He says, “I didn’t care much one way or the other” (ibid., 48). His reaction to the job promotion is peculiar for the boss, so his boss tells him that he “lacked ambition”, whereupon Meursault justifies his hesitation over job promotion by saying, “one never changed one’s real life; anyhow, one life was as good another and my present one suited me quite well” (48). Meursault believes that the choice one makes in one’s life is unimportant. He continues, “As a student I’d had plenty of ambition of the kind he meant. But, when I had to drop my studies, I very soon realized all that was pretty futile” (48). However, Feuerlicht believes that the purport of Meursault’s indifference is not “congenital”, but that it is “a drastic experience of an undisclosed nature”. After Meursault quit his studies and abandoned his ambitions, he realized that nothing was important, and then he tried to apply his “slogan of indifference” to all situations (609-610). Feuerlicht also points out that, “Meursaut never complains about the tediousness, emptiness, or difficulty of his work. On the contrary, one of the reasons why he dislikes Sundays is probably that he is not doing his routine job” (610). Accordingly, although this everyday routine is dull and superficial, it gives many people a sense of security so they can avoid posing difficult questions about the meaning of life, their loneliness and despair. Yet, based on what is comprehended from The Myth of Sisyphus, this everyday monotony is the source of feeling the meaninglessness of one’s existence, not an issue to protect one from suffering from loneliness (The Myth of Sisyphus, 19-20). If we consider The Myth of Sisyphus as a theoretical explanation of the absurd and The Outsider as the application of this philosophy in real life then, by looking at Feuerlicht’s assertion again, we realize that the second one does not support the first. Such a paradox seems far fetched in Camus’s writing. It is noticeable that The Outsider was completed nine months before The Myth of Sisyphus, and so such a deep change in attitude should not occur in Camus’s mind if the writing of the two works was somehow simultaneous.

Meursault reveals his sense of indifference and dispassion many times as the story develops:

Marie came that evening and asked me if I’d marry her. I said I didn’t mind; if she was keen on it, we’d get married. Then she asked me again if I loved her. I replaced, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing but I supposed I didn’t. ‘If that’s how you feel,’ she said, ‘why marry me?’ I explained that it had no importance really but, if it would give her pleasure we could get married right away. I pointed out that anyhow the suggestion came from her; as for me, I merely said ‘yes.’ Then she remarked that marriage was a serious matter. To which I answered: ‘No.’ She kept silent after that, staring at me in a curious way. Then she asked: ‘suppose another girl asked you to marry her – I mean, a girl you like in the same way as you like me – would you have said “yes” to her, too?’

‘Naturally.’

Then she said she wondered if she really loved me or not. (The Outsider, 48)
Meursault talks to her frankly. He is not pretentious, and he refuses to say something that he does not believe and feel, though he knows that his honesty in revealing his true feelings to Marie may hurt her and cause him to lose her eventually. He says to Marie that he likes her and is happy with her, yet he is not emotionally attached to her. In this regard, a person like him, with his unconventional ideas about love, marriage and job promotion, is seen as an outsider by society. He antagonises society, according to Feuerlicht, by choosing Raymond as a friend and, above all, by not shedding tears at his mother’s funeral (608). If he is called “bizarre” by Marie, it does not apply to how he lives, yet it applies to his unconventional views on love and marriage. According to Sergei Hackel, Meursault is a hedonist who is “on the surface by life’s currents, unconcerned by the question of what, if anything, is to be found in depth” (193).

3. Meursault in Prison:

In book one, Meursault represents an indifferent, nonjudgemental person. In book two, Meursault is being judged and questioned, based on what he did in his life, since he was jailed in charge of killing an Arab. His lawyer tells him that an investigation about his life has been made, and that it is clear that he showed “great callousness” at his mother’s funeral. Then, the lawyer asks him whether he felt grief when losing his mother. He is displeased when Meursault explains about the influence of his physical condition at a particular moment in which he was “fagged out and only half awake” (69) during the funeral. His lawyer wants him to avoid saying things like this to the magistrate and at the trial session. Solomon believes that Meursault’s feelings, senses and enjoyment should not be considered “great callousness”. Because, according to Solomon, what Meursault feels and enjoys is real and the rest is reflection (248-249). Meursault’s indifference during the funeral is an enigma for the magistrate too. The magistrate is curious about whether Meursault was able to love someone in his life, when he had not shown any pity on the day of his mother’s funeral.

Philip Thody takes Meursault’s side and justifies his indifference by taking some critical points from two other critics, Cyril Connolly and H.A. Mason, who considered Meursault a “positive character” who represented some valid attitudes towards life. Thody believed that the Algerian Mediterranean weather, the sea and the sun were key factors in Meursault’s physicality. For Thody, Meursault’s detachment at his mother’s funeral is not a sign of “great callousness”, because his mother was quite old and her death was not an unexpected fact (1989, 23).

The reason that why he fired four more times into the Arab’s inert body was also another crux for the magistrate. He gets angry when he asks his question and is faced with Meursault’s silence and passivity in defending and justifying himself. Therefore, he changes the issue from what Meursault did to what he believes. Gradually, he distances himself from the main point. It is a shock for the magistrate when Meursault tells him that he simply does not believe in God. The magistrate has no mercy for someone whose thoughts and beliefs break with society’s norms. He expects Meursault to cry and ask for divine remission like other criminals. At the end of the interview, he questions Meursault about whether he regretted what he had done. Meursault answers, “…what I felt as less regret than a kind of vexation – I couldn’t find a better word for it. But he didn’t seem to understand” (74). That is why magistrate labels him “Mr Anarchist”. Concerning this, Richard Kamber points out that inasmuch as Meursault’s ideas and behaviour are not understandable to respectable Christians, he is labelled an anarchist and considered an incarnation of evil by believers (33).

In the prison, during his first and only visit with Marie, there is a young prisoner who is utterly depressed and never says a word to an old woman who has come to meet him and who gazes at him all the time. Meursault moves his look away from them, when Marie shouts at him that they should not lose hope. This hope is a key concept for an absurd man like Meursault and should be revised conceptually. Like Sisyphus, whose fate is grim as long as he hopes for something better, Meursault too cannot be happy if he hopes for an alternative. He must learn to accept his current situation in order to overcome his deep despair. Meursault, who symbolizes an absurd man, is able to find happiness, even in his cell, and to be stronger than his fate. According to AviSagi, Meursault, unlike alienated characters who suffer deeply, is at peace with himself (22). However, living like a prisoner and trying to adapt to a new life is “irksome” for him, especially during the early days, while his mind still thinks like a free man. Thinking about going to the beach swimming, the sound of ripples at his feet, and the pleasure of feeling water on his body are all sensual matters of which he has been deprived in prison. He feels that he must be free, so prison is deprivation, a punishment. He is kept away from where he belongs. It takes a few months for him to think like a prisoner: “I’ve often thought that had I been compelled to live in the trunk of a dead tree, with nothing to do but gaze up at the patch of the sky just overhead, I’d have got used to it by degrees … There were others in the world worse off than I was” (79).

In the first part of the book, Meursault is a person who is indifferent towards societal values. His indifference is mentioned over and over again. He is a man without any rational judgement. Yet, in the second part, deprivation of what he likes becomes an imposition on him so he makes himself busy by reviewing his memories and thinking about his life philosophically, which never happened before his confinement in prison. Therefore, a change gradually appears in a man who has got used to living in the present. Meursault begins to be reminded of the past and to think about it. He remembers what his mother told him long time ago, that “in the
long run one gets used to anything)” (80), which means the ability of adaptability and to carve one’s essence. At the beginning of his imprisonment, he is also obsessed by a desire for women. This desire is not just limited to Marie, but to all the ones he has had and made love to. Like Don Juan, an absurd seducer character in The Myth of Sisyphus, Meursault seeks diverse women and sees in each one a unique face. Like Don Juan, Meursault tries to satisfy himself with memories of and passion for them, rather than seeking ideal love. However, all the faces of the women he imagines serve merely to kill the time and overcome his deep boredom. He gradually learns to live without any physical stimulation. He is changing and is no longer captured by sensational factors. In this way, lack of freedom is no longer a problem for him. He admits that he is not unhappy.

…this privation, too, was part of my punishment. But, by the time I understood, I’d lost the craving, so it had ceased to be a punishment.

So I learned that even after a single day’s experience of the outside world a man could easily live a hundred years in prison. He’d have laid up enough memories never to be bored. Obviously, in one way, this was compensation. (The Outsider, 81)

Like Don Juan, eventually, Meursault is not so melancholy, because he is aware and does not hope. People are melancholy, because they are not aware, or they hope.

On the day of his trial, Meursault finds himself in the world of people who look at him as a stranger, and want to judge him; however, he has never questioned and judged them. It is hardly believable for him, when he faces the number of people who come only to see him. He is mostly known and treated as a stranger rather than a criminal. The entire trial is managed so as to conclude that Meursault is a man who is a danger to society. It is clear from the beginning that the trial is not just for the act of murder, but is for someone who has ignored the masses’ values. Perez, Celeste, Marie, Masson, Raymond and the warden of the Home are the people who are asked to appear at the trial to answer some questions. All the questions are about Meursault’s comportment during and after his mother’s funeral, rather than focusing on the crime in order to determine what actually happened. The entire trial is conducted as if no crime had occurred, as if Meursault is there to be judged on his life. The prosecutor’s questions are meticulously planned to convince the jury that Meursault is a threat to society, and causes Meursault to have a strange feeling that he has never had before in his life: “For the first time I’d realized how all these people loathed me” (The Outsider, 91). This marks a serious change in Meursault’s state of mind. In this regard, Thomas W. Neal posits:

To realize, to understand, to want, to learn are all new experiences for Meursault. The gradual change that takes place in his way of thinking brings him closer to his understanding of his life and to his eventual revolt against it. The alternation of character is brought about by his contact with the world of unauthentic values. (38)

By using witnesses’ declarations, the prosecutor eventually concludes that Meursault is “an inhuman monster wholly without moral sense” (ibid.,97). Meursault’s lawyer tries to deviate from the trial’s focus on Meursault’s comportment during and after the funeral and says, “Is my client on trial for having buried his mother, or for killing a man?” (ibid.). Despite that, the prosecutor turns it back by declaring: “I accuse the prisoner of behaving at his mother’s funeral in a way that showed he was already a criminal at heart” (ibid.). Meursault, in fact, is not on trial for killing the Arab, but for his amoral character and his defence could offer no redeeming testimony. In this regard, Richard Kamber says:

…he is an incarnation of the absurd hero. What is ‘monstrous’ about this man is not his propensity to commit crimes or do evil; it is, rather, his indifference to the hopes, faith, and ideals by which most people live. By not caring about God, his own future, or what respectable people think about him, Meursault has become a dangerous man, a rebel. (35)

Kamber goes on further by concluding that Meursault’s threat to society is philosophical rather than criminal. The survival of a man who has no faith in God or societal norms is unacceptable to society.

The prosecutor arranges his evidence in such a way as to come to his own prearranged conclusion. Firstly, he questions Meursault’s comportment during the funeral. Secondly, he focuses upon Meursault’s relationship with Raymond, a pimp. Finally, he draws a conclusion about how the crime occurred from his own judgmental point of view, that Meursault went to the beach intentionally to kill the Arab. Meursault shot the Arab and, to make sure he did his job well, he fired four more times into the Arab’s inert body.

The prosecutor tries to convince the jury that, at the time of the crime, Meursault was fully aware of what he was doing. However, Patrick Day thinks totally differently: “We may judge Meursault in any way that we choose – as cold, impersonal, emotionally stunted – but this judgment does not prove that he killed the Arab with malice aforethought” (86). Even a positive factor like Meursault’s education is used against him by the prosecutor to show that he was well aware of what he was doing.

Finally, the prosecutor concludes that Meursault is empty of soul, and that there is no humanity or moral substance in him; therefore, he is a “menace to society” (The Outsider, 101). He depicts a monstrous picture of Meursault who will have evil intentions for the future and must be stopped soon by the court.

René Girard considers Meursault’s condemnation to be unrelated to his crime based on a purely phenomenological level. He points out that the whole machinery of the court was set up to judge the murderer
not for what he did but for what he was (521). Moreover, Jean-Paul Sartre considered it “an absurd justice” which is “incapable of ever understanding or even of making contact with the deeds it intends to punish” (Camus, Collection of critical essays, 115). We think that Meursault is neither a monster nor an innocent man. Although Meursault had no intention to commit the crime, the prosecutor attempts to convince the jury that he had. Physical elements were influential in his pulling the trigger, but it is difficult for Meursault to explain it, and it is not a justifiable defence of his innocence. In fact, Camus created a murderer without any justification and wants to show how he is treated by society. To determine whether Meursault is a murderer or not, René Girard states:

The murderer may be a pretext, but it is the only one available, and upon this unfortunate event, the whole structure of meaning erected by Camus comes to rest. It is very important therefore, to understand how the murder comes to pass. How can a man commit a murder and not be responsible for it? The obvious answer is that this murder must be an accident and many critics have taken up that answer. (521)

The last chapter of the book is unquestionably the most salient one. Meursault’s personality develops through looking at the meaning of both life and death philosophically. He turns his attention from his execution and the guillotine to somewhere else; however, he is aware of the inevitability of the machinery of his execution and there being no way out of it. Whenever he tries to divert his mind from his fear of death, he is generally unsuccessful. He says, “I was caught in the rat-trap irrevocably” (The Outsider, 108). The inevitability of his persecution is the most powerful evidence of the absurd. It is deeply sad for him that he is going to die soon.

‘But’, I reminded myself, ‘it’s common knowledge that life isn’t worth living anyhow’. And, on a wide view, I could see that it makes little difference whether one dies at the age of thirty or three-score-and-ten since, in either case, other men and women will continue living, the world will go on as before. Also, whether I died now or forty years hence, this business of dying had to be got through, inevitably. (The Outsider, 112)

This part reminds us of The Myth of Sisyphus, in which Camus mentions the absurdity of life by explaining how the world is indifferent to us.

Meursault is reminded of the past more than ever. He remembers that his mother once talked about his father, whom he never met. It is the story of his father facing execution and the times he wished he could fill the shoes of his father walking. Meursault welcomes both the past and future and, as an absurd man, he begins to appreciate moments in life. His hope is futile; it only forces him to question his own notions of death. Although he knows that it makes little difference when and how one dies, since all people must die, he could not help it, and he feels delighted when he thinks his death will be delayed. Meursault feels calm as long as he makes himself busy with his dreams. By dreaming, he opens up a valve of emotional response and expectation.

One of the most controversial parts of the story is the time when the chaplain gets into Meursault’s cell unannounced to visit him on the eve of his execution. The chaplain’s aim is to turn Meursault’s attention from “human justice to divine justice, from legal guilt to moral sin” (Kamber 36). Here, Meursault lets us know truly what he thinks and believes and what his philosophy of life is. Immediately, Meursault tells him that he does not believe in God, and that was the reason he refused to let him visit him. Meursault attacks the backbone of the chaplain’s beliefs by rejecting the very existence of God. In so doing, he closes the windows of his heart to the chaplain’s preaching. Meursault’s nihilism makes the chaplain’s plans to rely on the supernatural world and divinity almost abort. When the chaplain says that every man on earth is under sentence of death, Meursault immediately interrupts him by pointing out that there should then be no consolation for something which will happen to everyone.

Camus explains in The Myth of Sisyphus how a sense of absurdity arouses in a man when he looks for clarity, but the world is unable to give him the clarity he expects. Although religion, something that the chaplain leans on, offers the totality and clarity that man looks for, it is a false solution. It just arouses hope. Hope for the unreal is philosophical suicide, which Camus explains in The Myth of Sisyphus. According to Thomas W. Neal, Camus wanted to say that the offerings and supernatural aspects of religion are as inadequate as the rationality of laws (41-2). Meursault’s viewpoint appears strange to the chaplain, so he asks Meursault, “Have you no hope at all? Do you really think when you die you die outright, and nothing remains?” (The Outsider, 115). He also feels sorry for Meursault when he discovers that Meursault does not believe in life after death. The chaplain says, “it must make life unbearable for a man, to think as I did” (ibid.). Meursault truly does not believe in an afterlife. Whatever he believes is limited to this world with its sensational pleasures such as the sun, the sea and women’s attractions.

Then, the chaplain tries to convince Meursault that there is another life after death. Yet for an absurd man like Meursault, only human experience is real, and anything beyond human experience, like faith in an afterlife or divinity is false and unreliable. Meursault represents an absurd man who emphasizes existence, and disregards abstract ideas. An absurd man must live in a way based solely on what is known and must discard anything that is not certain. Meursault replies, “A life in which I can remember this life on earth. That’s all I want of it” (ibid.). In the eyes of the chaplain, Meursault’s heart is hardened, but the truth is that Meursault’s worldview is quite different to his. At the end of the argument, Meursault says:

Camus, Collection of critical essays, 115. We think that Meursault is neither a monster nor an innocent man. Although Meursault had no intention to commit the crime, the prosecutor attempts to convince the jury that...
And yet none of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman’s hair. Living as he did, like a corpse, he couldn’t even be sure of being alive. It might look as if my hands were empty. Actually, I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he; sure of my present life and of the death that was coming. That, no doubt, was all I had; but at least that certainty was something I could get my teeth into – just as it had got its teeth into me. (118)

He shouts his beliefs as loud as he can, that only the sensations of the world matter for him, and the inevitability of death made the world meaningless. According to Neal, Meursault is not tormented by hope any more, since he realizes that life is devoid of hope. He accepts the inevitability of death and denies the world of false values, such as the rationality of the offerings of religions. Therefore, in his quest for the meaning of life, he becomes an introvert (Neal 42). Philosophically, Meursault concludes that life is absurd; therefore, the only way to arrive at any meaning is to make it by himself.

Although prison is Meursault’s last home, a dead end, his eyes are still looking for the beauty in life, especially when he says, “Sounds of the countryside came faintly in, and the cool night air, veined with smells of earth and salt, fanned my cheeks” (The Outsider, 119). On the last night of his life, Meursault admits that he is ready to relive everything. He does not only appreciate life in the face of death, but the notion that death could free him is appreciated, as well. However, Abdurrahman, a university lecturer and critic, interprets Meursault’s feelings at the point of death quite differently:

For the first time, he is discovering beauty and meaning in life and the reality of his existence instead of the alienation and absurdity of the existential philosophy of his past. Contrary to his existential principle of being an eternal rebel and atheist, Meursault realizes the value of life and [the] sense in believing in God and the world. (31)

Abdurrahman claims that Meursault eventually reaches religious recognition, and that he finally believes in the meaningfulness of the world, through believing in the existence of God. Based on what I have found in the text, through Meursault’s feelings and suggestions, which are all reflected clearly, nothing divine or absolute exists. Meursault believes that life is absurd, and is not controlled, monitored or rewarded. Camus has created an absurd man, Meursault, who must live his life and create meaning in it without the pretext of God or the absolute. In fact, the only responsible being is man, and his life is worth no more than any others. Camus, as a brilliant writer who represented the absurdity of life in some of his work, never tried to insert religious themes into it. Interpretation of the sort that Abdurrahman claims is in total opposition to the backbone of Camus’s thoughts and beliefs. To support why we disagree with Abdurrahman’s perception in the case of Meursault’s enlightenment, we turn to AviSagi’s perception of the situation:

Meursault rejects the consolations of the investigating judge and the priest. He will not repent before God. He refuses to accept solace from the transcendent world and reaffirms his life as it is. Like the absurd hero, he rejects divine consolation and opts for the fullness of concrete existence in all its angst. (96)

Moreover, looking at the excerpt below from The Outsider will help us obtain a clearer perception:

Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why. He, too, knew why. From the dark horizon of my future a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing towards me, all my life long, from the years that were to come. And on its way that breeze had leveled out all the ideas that people tried to foist on me in the equally unreal years I was then living through. What difference could they make to me, the death of others, or a mother’s love, or his God; or the way one decides to live, the fate one thinks one chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to choose not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people, who like him, called themselves my brothers. (The Outsider, 118-9)

4. Meursault is Another Sisyphus:

In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus compared Sisyphus with Oedipus and concluded that both of them are happy so far as they “conclude that all is well” (The Myth, 110). In There, Camus claims that Sisyphus’s fate is awful only if he hopes. As long as Sisyphus accepts his fate and becomes aware that there is no alternative, then his fate will not appear fatal anymore; “…likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silence all the idols” (ibid.). In this regard, life is fully appreciated, because it is the only chance and there are no alternatives. In The Outsider, same recognition happened to another Camus’s absurd created man, Meursault. The prose at the end of the novel shows Meursault eagerness for living “but [he must] reconcile with death” (Kamber 37). Meursault transforms into a hero, like Sisyphus. Meursault learns to value the last hours of his life. Like Sisyphus, he is not so unhappy either.

When I woke, the stars where shining down on my face. Sounds of the countryside came faintly in, and the cool night air, veined with smells of earth and salt, fanned my cheeks. The marvelous peace of the sleep bound summer night flooded through me like a tide … And I, too, felt ready to start life over again, it was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, made me realize that I’d been happy, and that I was happy still. (The Outside, 119-120)
With regarding, Plock claims that this is heroism for modern humanity in the way that “our heroism lies in the lucidity of the absurd struggle” (18). This is actually a modern view of heroism, which Plock has interpreted optimistically in that we change our attitude toward the absurdity of life by accepting it, by appreciating every single moment of our life, because that is all we have and there is no after life (Shobier: 2010, 11).

AviSagi links this section of The Outsider to The Myth of Sisyphus: “Happiness and the Absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable … The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (The Myth of Sisyphus, 110-11). Sagi points out that the acceptance of the absurd needs the experience of the happiness that accompanies it. He eventually concludes that, at the end of the book, by experiencing happiness, Meursault has a better understanding of the absurd (78). Camus believes that only human experience is real. Happiness is real and is gained through experience. Consequently, we should be able to find happiness without relying on hope, faith or anything else that goes beyond human experience.

According to Rhein, Meursault is aware that he should not deny the absurdity of life, as this absurdity is “in reality an invitation to happiness completely rooted in the knowledge that men and women live and they die. There is no other absolute truth” (21). Therefore, Meursault faces the absurdity of existence and the insignificance of death, and prepares to meet both equally and courageously.

Meursault’s last words before his execution need more consideration: “For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained was to hope that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execution” (The Outsider, 120). As Meursault believed that death equalizes all men and makes everything look unimportant, then his strange last wish reaffirms his indifference to what is going to happen. Thinking about death makes one aware about his mortality, and helps him to take life easy by undermining basic certainties. Therefore, the jeers of the crowd reveal their own fear of death, which is the surest possible thing. Human beings must create meaning from inside, and “he [an absurd man] seeks his way amidst these ruins” (The Myth of Sisyphus, 29).

Philip Todd considers the last few lines of the book to be Meursault’s expression of his “revolt against this society and a scorn for its conversation” (1957, 8). Thody also compares Meursault’s revolt with Sisyphus’s revolt and posits, “The fight towards the summit is in itself sufficient to satisfy the heart of man” (ibid.). Todd also points out Camus’s own comments about Sisyphus and Meursault as “proletarian[s] of the gods and proletarian[s] of modern society” who are happy, because they scorned the gods and society, respectively. Toddy eventually matched his conclusion with that of Camus in that the “absurdity of the world was, paradoxically, an invitation to happiness” (ibid.).

5. Conclusion:

To sum up, The Outsider is a novel of development. Meursault reaches some realizations and recognitions at the end of the novel that he was not aware of in the beginning. Meursault, in fact, rebels against the conventions of society. In the first part, he is not aware of his rebellion. He just lives his life, in a way he likes and enjoys. In the second part, especially in prison, he begins to think about his life philosophically, and he shifts to being an absurd hero when he becomes aware, like Sisyphus (Shobier: 2011, 101). His trial and his loneliness in the prison ask some philosophical questions about the proper state of his existence in his mind. In this regard, Philip Rhein’s explanations are notable:

He rejects the rational definition of men and women that is proffered by the legal system; he rejects suicide as an escape from life’s irrationality; he affirms the value of an individual life; and finally, as a consequence of his failure to accept any philosophic system that seeks to eradicate the finiteness of existence, he recognizes the absurdity of life. (21)

As concluding words, in a world where God does not exist and every man finally dies, man should not be unhappy. Awareness of the absurd must bring us happiness. This happiness is neither transcendent nor sensual, but is an affirmation of the dignity and value of life. In a world where man is conscious and has no hope for another life, then he counts on nothing except the present, the only given truth. That is why Meursault proclaims at the end, “I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, made me realize that I’d been happy, and that I was happy still” (“The Outsider, 120). These sentences from Meursault are proof of his developing character. His attitude towards an indifferent universe is “brotherly”, which is a sign of the spirituality within him. That is why Sartre simply posited, “The absurd man is a humanist; he knows only the good things of this world” (“A Collection of Critical Essays, 116).

Therefore, finally, Meursault embraces the world, though he refused it earlier. Meursault’s refusal, like that of Sisyphus, is not a renouncement. He refuses the world that men have created, not the world of nature. According to Serge Doubrovsky, happiness consists of the moments of identification and unity with nature (83). Meursault could gain such unity. Therefore, in the end, one must imagine Meursault is happy. Furthermore, at the end, he is neither a stranger to the world nor to himself, though he is a stranger to the world of those who have deluded themselves into believing in a transcendent spiritual union between people.
REFERENCES

