

The Essence of the Outsider: Understanding Absurdity and Authenticity in *The Stranger*

Gong Jiamin

School of Chinese Studies, Zhejiang International Studies University, Zhejiang, China

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14557382>

Published Date: 26-December-2024

Abstract: *The Stranger* is a representative work by Albert Camus, a key figure in French existentialist and absurdist literature. The novel emphasizes the protagonist Meursault's alienation and maladaptation to human society—illustrated through his mother's funeral, Marie's proposal, the court trial, and his journey toward death. The narrative constructs Meursault as a quintessential "outsider". This paper analyzes the factors contributing to the creation of the outsider, focusing on the legal themes revealed in the novel and the essential characteristics of the "outsider". Through analogical reasoning based on the fate of similar characters, the paper explores Meursault's tragic ending and reflects on the survival strategies of "outsiders" in modern society.

Keywords: *The Stranger*, Camus, Law, Indifference, Authenticity, Absurdity, Fate, Survival Strategies.

I. WHAT MAKES AN OUTSIDER? DEVIANCE AND SELF-JUSTIFICATION OF THE "OUTSIDER"

Why do "outsiders" fail to avoid deviant behavior despite the influence of societal norms, institutions, and conventional wisdom? Becker identifies two contributing factors: first, individuals who have had limited opportunities to engage with social customs during their formative years may become indifferent to societal norms, freely acting on their impulses; second, unstable employment leads to a diminished sense of reputation, which, in turn, fosters a gradual descent into degradation due to a lack of personal dignity, as maintaining one's reputation becomes unnecessary. However, in most real-life scenarios, individuals are generally aware of the actions required to conform to societal norms. Thus, before the release of deviant impulses, individuals must first suppress their awareness of existing norms (Becker, 1963).

Sociologists Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza offer an explanation through the concept of "techniques of neutralization", which refers to "not justifying deviant acts based on legal systems or general societal norms but on the deviant's own rationale" (Sykes, 1957). These individuals often perceive themselves as "billiard balls", passively propelled into new circumstances where they redefine themselves as victims rather than perpetrators. Through this learned self-definition, deviants avoid direct confrontation with norms and instead prepare to deviate from dominant normative systems. In *The Stranger*, for example, Meursault redefines his actions using this approach. When he explains that he killed the Arab because of the sun, he effectively absolves himself of personal responsibility, attributing causality to the uncontrollable natural environment. This reaction exemplifies the application of "techniques of neutralization". Crucially, Meursault does not directly challenge legal or societal rules but circumvents them indirectly. While the legal system demands clarity of motive, Meursault's justification remains ambiguous and coincidental. This seemingly "irrational" defense illustrates the deep psychological impact of neutralization techniques and further reinforces the absurdist themes of *The Stranger*. Additionally, Sykes and Matza assert that the "victim mentality" inherent in neutralization techniques often reduces an individual's sense of guilt. However, in Meursault's case, this mentality takes on a more complex dimension. Rather than attempting to evoke sympathy through emotional displays or recantations, Meursault calmly embraces his self-identified "truth". This paradoxical behavior deepens his characterization, presenting him as both contradictory and profound. It follows that deviants, whether consciously or unconsciously avoiding responsibility, often erase their agency and adapt to a passive context, shifting the focus away from themselves and onto external factors. This tendency is vividly manifested in *The Stranger* and *No Longer Human*. In Meursault's self-perception, the killing of the

Arab, which appears bizarre to the average person, is internalized as rational through the lens of "techniques of neutralization". For him, over-explaining his actions would seem unnatural. This cognitive framework not only underscores the legal themes in *The Stranger* but also reflects the profound influence of absurdist philosophy on the recognition of individual behavior and responsibility.

II. REFLECTIONS ON REAL LEGAL ISSUES AND THE LEGAL THEMES IN *THE STRANGER*

Law professor Luo Xiang once asked, "If a murderer suffered more harm from their victim, would the act of murder then be legal?" This rhetorical question highlights a critical divergence between the narrative logics of literature and law. While literature can accommodate the accidental and absurd logic of philosophy, such logic finds no place within the legal domain. Legal reasoning, whether through deduction, induction, or analogy, relies solely on rational causal logic. The legal system presumes that every individual is rational; only the irrational are exempt from responsibility. However, the irrationality of an individual's worldview or external factors leading to a loss of rationality cannot be precisely delineated using causal logic. *The Stranger* exposes the absurdity within the realm of criminal acts: a person who kills purely due to chance. It is deemed accidental because it cannot be comprehended within the language and logic of the legal system. In the legal framework, all mentally competent individuals who commit murder must be punished, and the punishment must be justified through strict and rational argumentation. The narrative of the crime must be polished to remove all irregularities, creating a logically consistent, clear, and comprehensible story that resonates with the average observer. Even in cases of impulsive killings during fights, the legal narrative can rationalize the crime as a consequence of a series of preconditions: the murderer's aggressive temperament, childhood trauma, domestic abuse, racial discrimination, religious bias, or even an unreasonable boss. Such narratives often portray the crime in greater clarity than the perpetrator themselves could articulate.

However, in Meursault's case, legal rationalism loses its authority. Meursault insists on telling the truth, and at the end of his trial, he reveals the true reason for the murder: the sun. How can the sun serve as a justification for murder? How can an act of killing be rationalized by an impersonal factor? The prosecutor, defense lawyer, jury, judge, and audience may not entirely disbelieve his explanation, but the law offers no framework to accept such reasoning or debate it in court (Ke, 2011).

The rigid, procedural operations of the legal system are fundamentally at odds with the fluidity of human nature and the diversity of society. Consequently, the law is inherently unable to fully realize human dignity or social justice. As stated in *The Crowd*, "The masses have never thirsted for truth. They turn away from evidence that is not to their taste". What is truth, then? For many, truth is only what aligns with their personal beliefs. Increasingly, people proclaim "truth" under the guise of justice, yet their judgments are often rooted in prejudice—keyboard warriors on the internet being a prime example. Undoubtedly, this represents another form of absurdity.

III. INTRINSIC PASSION + UNFILTERED AUTHENTICITY + DIVERGENT EXPRESSION = APPARENT INDIFFERENCE + EXTERNAL DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION

"A truly unrestrained soul does not dwell on trivialities because, deep within, it holds a kingly pride". In essence, Meursault is not genuinely an indifferent person. He experiences the full range of human emotions—joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness—and most of his actions align with societal norms. However, when confronted with the formalism of social procedures, the superficiality of interpersonal relationships, and the flaws in societal ideologies, his reactions are excessively genuine. In the preface to the American edition of *The Stranger*, Camus explains Meursault's character in a way that highlights the novel's thematic significance: "The protagonist of the novel is condemned because he does not play the game... He refuses to lie. Lying is not only saying what isn't true. It is also, in terms of what concerns the human heart, saying more than one feels. This is what we all do, every day, to simplify life. Meursault, on the other hand, does not want to simplify life: he says what he is, he refuses to veil his feelings, and so society feels threatened... If one interprets *The Stranger* as the story of a man who, without any heroism, agrees to die for the truth, one would not be far wrong."

From this perspective, Meursault is a martyr to authenticity. He never lies: he neither cries at his mother's funeral nor pretends to cry; he does not love Marie and would never falsely profess love to her. He also exercises precision and restraint in his language. If Meursault had complied with the expectations of his lawyer or the judge by uttering insincere words that contradicted the truth, he could have earned their sympathy, gained societal forgiveness, and avoided

execution. Yet he refused to do so. Instead, he faced death alone with his unyielding commitment to truth. This behavior stems from his impulsive temperament, pragmatic tendencies, and the cumulative effects of his life experiences. However, when his core beliefs and principles are challenged—when the pride he holds like a king is affronted—Meursault cannot help but express an intense, genuine emotional response. In fact, his emotional expression is often more abundant, fervent, and vivid than that of ordinary people. As long as we possess the same emotional capacity and understanding as others, we are capable of responding rationally to events. However, how those emotions and responses are expressed and perceived by others is a process beyond our control.

In other words, differences in modes of expression, subjective ideologies, and the depth or intensity of expression—factors beyond individual control—lead to varying judgments on whether someone is considered an "outsider". Some anti-Japanese war heroes, for instance, might ordinarily be inarticulate. Yet, when faced with national peril, they might take to the streets with impassioned speeches to awaken and mobilize the masses against the enemy, driven solely by their unwavering faith in their country and nation. Similarly, scientific researchers, often isolated in laboratories and seemingly detached from society, may make extraordinary contributions. During a pandemic, they might dedicate themselves to developing vaccines and treatments, exchanging their youthful vitality for the health and well-being of the public. Can we label these war heroes or researchers as "outsiders"? The answer is, of course, no. Their emotions are often even more profound, passionate, and sincere than those of ordinary people, which enables them to endure solitary years unnoticed, firmly adhering to their beliefs and taking purposeful actions. It is precisely because of such individuals—unhindered by societal superficialities or systemic flaws—that society can progress more efficiently. If everyone approached minor tasks with performative exaggeration and sought recognition for every small accomplishment, social development would inevitably face significant hindrance, as surface-level glamor cannot withstand the emptiness of true substance.

Thus, as reflected in the dialectical materialism of Marxist philosophy, worldview determines methodology, and methodology reflects worldview. As long as our worldview aligns with reason and we possess the ability to empathize and understand, we should follow our inner voice, adapt to the natural flow, and navigate this multifaceted world through forms and expressions instinctively chosen and embraced by our authentic selves.

IV. PREDICTING THE FATE OF THE OUTSIDER THROUGH SIMILAR CHARACTERS

In Lu Xun's works, the solitary figure of Wei Lianshu mirrors the role of the outsider, much like Meursault. Regarded as an outcast and expelled by his family, Wei Lianshu's perilous circumstances force him to abandon his pride and seek opportunities for survival through others. Eventually, he compromises his principles, becoming an advisor to the warlord Commander Du. Despite achieving socially recognized "success" and "victory", Wei Lianshu feels neither pride nor joy. In his letters to Shen Fei, he repeatedly refers to himself as a failure, acknowledging that his achievements come at the cost of betraying his true self and violating his soul.

By examining the fates of similar "outsiders", we can extrapolate Meursault's ultimate trajectory. If Meursault had chosen to compromise, it might have led to a superficially better outcome, but only in the sense of postponing his physical demise. As Jia Pingwa once said, "In life, whether there is pain or joy, gain or loss, the most important thing is that the moonlight must remain in the heart's clear spring". Once the "moonlight in the heart" is lost, outsiders sacrifice their authentic selves, becoming entangled in the chains of worldly conventions and the mire of societal expectations. Even with external recognition and applause, outsiders often find themselves disillusioned by the disparity between their ideals and reality, inevitably leading them to a tragic end.

Thus, the representation of "outsiders" in literature extends beyond the depiction of individual traits or fated tragedies. Through its unique narrative style, it explores the tensions between the individual and the collective, authenticity and falsehood. The enduring influence of these "outsiders" stems from their embodiment of profound reflections on human complexity. By examining the fate of Wei Lianshu, it becomes evident that compromise under social pressure often results in self-betrayal. Meursault's predicament further demonstrates how steadfastly adhering to truth and rejecting compromise can provoke societal rejection, driving the individual toward isolation or destruction. However, as history evolves, the increasing pluralism of society suggests that modern attitudes toward nonconformists have shifted significantly compared to the eras of Meursault and Wei Lianshu. The contemporary acceptance of "outsiders" as valid participants in social diversity reflects a more inclusive worldview, offering possibilities for their integration without the need for existential compromise.

V. THE SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF OUTSIDERS

In modern society, although the phenomenon of "outsiders" still exists, the increasing inclusivity of society offers such individuals greater opportunities for survival. From unconventional career choices in the workplace to personalized modes of self-expression, society's growing acceptance of diversity provides "outsiders" with a broader space to thrive. However, this does not mean that "outsiders" are entirely free from pressure or challenges. In navigating conflicts with mainstream culture, they must find a balance—one that allows them to remain true to themselves while also integrating into their surroundings. Exploring this dynamic not only sheds light on the inner world of "outsiders" but also provides insights for anyone who feels isolated in particular circumstances.

As times change, society continues to evolve toward greater diversity, enhancing its tolerance for extreme, deviant, or absurd individuals. These individuals may even find like-minded communities, softening the sharp contrasts that once made them seem glaringly out of place. For instance, independent entrepreneurs who once were seen as solitary and eccentric may now be celebrated in the fast-paced modern world, where those who avoid participating in the societal "rat race" are often viewed as out of touch with survival tactics. In reality, these so-called outsiders have adapted and found unique ways to navigate life while preserving their individuality.

Everyone has their own season of bloom, their own time zone. One should not discriminate against those perceived as outsiders, for in their world, you might very well be the absurd outsider. Whether Meursault's brand of authenticity would still be deemed a threat in today's world depends on societal inclusivity and how his truth is presented. As society becomes more diverse, some expressions of authenticity and individuality are now seen as unique values, even trends. However, if such authenticity is overly direct or exceeds mainstream acceptance, it can still face rejection. For instance, Meursault's refusal to compromise and his rejection of societal norms may be interpreted as an independent and autonomous spirit. Yet, in a group-oriented society that prioritizes collaboration and compromise, his stance may still be viewed as a threat. In other words, society's response to outsiders in the modern era varies based on specific environments and cultural contexts. Meursault's authenticity might find greater acceptance in inclusive settings, but in environments focused on order and conformity, it could still provoke conflict and exclusion. Thus, the survival strategies of outsiders require a delicate balance between staying true to themselves and adapting to their surroundings. In *The Stranger*, where no one appreciates or understands Meursault, he naturally becomes the surface-level representation of the "outsider" as indicated by the novel's title. Camus, however, portrays this character with near-reverence. When Celeste testifies in court, calling Meursault a "man" and a "no-nonsense person", this moment reflects Camus's positive view of the protagonist. In the preface to the English edition of *The Stranger*, Camus offers a series of affirmations about Meursault: "He doesn't cheat, and in this sense, he is an outsider in the society in which he lives". "He refuses to lie... He says what he is, and refuses to mask his feelings, so society feels threatened by him... He is poor, honest, and fond of clarity... a man who dies for the truth without any heroic posturing". Camus further defends Meursault from critics who label him "indifferent", suggesting instead that "gentle and kind" would be more accurate (Grenier, 1987). These affirmations highlight the positive and constructive aspects of the outsider figure.

For those deemed outsiders, there is no need to panic. Trust in the law of attraction, but be willing to set aside arrogance and impulsiveness when necessary. Offering appropriate explanations is key. Even those who share similar perspectives to yours are not identical to you; they cannot experience everything you have encountered or fully comprehend the lessons you have learned. If you choose silence, you may end up clashing with society unless you find someone who supports and believes in you unconditionally. Conversely, offering measured, factual explanations can help you identify like-minded individuals with shared values and perspectives. Some may wonder: Aren't outsiders supposed to disregard external environments? Aren't they supposed to follow their own path? The answer is that you don't need to change your personality or cater to others. Simply express what is in your heart without alteration, and those who resonate with you will naturally offer their support. You don't need to aim for exhaustive self-expression; those who understand you will intuitively follow your train of thought and connect with your vision.

REFERENCES

- [1] Becker, H. S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: The Free Press.
- [2] Grenier, R. (1987). *Shadows and light* (pp. 91–92). Paris: Gallimard.
- [3] Ke, L. (2011). The "outsider" in "law and literature". *Peking University Law Review*, 12(2), 501–527.
- [4] Sykes, G. M., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review*, 22(6). Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2089195>