

“A Smile on a Tormented Face”: Absurdist Consciousness and Post-Reflective Identity in Camus’ *L’Étranger*

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Excerpt

Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger* is a work of absurd contradictions. It is the story of a man who makes love but cannot experience love; who kills in a fit of apparent passion yet conceives of his act only in the numbest of terms; who is bothered by the ennui of social convention but indifferent to the death of his own mother; who fixates simultaneously on life’s most mundane trivialities and most profound quandaries. The novel narrates the tale of Meursault, a detached and seemingly unreflective man whose murder of an Arab divides the book into two parts and leads paradoxically to both his philosophical awakening and physical demise. The attendant juxtaposition between Meursault’s various displays of broad estrangement coupled with superficial engagement, as well as the listless candor with which he relates his tale, calls for greater examination of Meursault’s consciousness as it relates to the twinned notions of honesty and identity. This task has been undertaken by many scholars, with mixed success.

One common interpretation of *L’Étranger*, endorsed by critics such as Patrick Henry and Germaine Brée, contends that Meursault is ultimately an unsparingly honest man whose detached nature stems from his unwillingness to compromise truth in a society predicated on deception, or at least tactful exaggeration and omission (Henry 362; Brée 12). In a sharp break from the traditional reading of *L’Étranger*, however, scholar Robert Solomon contends that the notion of an entirely truthful Meursault is “unconvincing, not just in detail, but in essence” as Meursault “never reaches that (meta-) level of consciousness where truth and falsity can be articulated” (143-144). Solomon uses a Sartrean “distinction between reflection and pre-reflective ‘lived experience’”—wherein “pre-reflection” consists of a sort of primitive consciousness that merely engages with the world on a sensory level, and “reflection” is

manifested as relational or social self-consciousness in which the individual is aware of his actions in the context of his societal position—to posit that in Part I of the novel, Meursault is in a *pre-reflective* state and thus lacks the reflective capacity that is prerequisite for honesty (144). In Part II, Meursault’s emerging *reflective* self-consciousness prompts him to begin lying, thus refuting the predominant critical interpretation of Meursault as a radically honest character.

Solomon’s exegesis of *L’Étranger* is constructive, compelling—and incomplete. To be sure, Solomon’s synthesis of existentialist philosophy, as encapsulated by Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea that “existence precedes essence,” is interesting and serves as a productive starting point to explicate *L’Étranger* and its philosophical underpinnings (Sartre “Being” 20). However, Solomon’s analysis of Part II and ensuing conclusion that Meursault is fundamentally dishonest in his embrace of absurdity and impending death is largely unsubstantiated, and appears problematic in light of Camus’ stated beliefs on revolt. To understand where Solomon errs, then, we find that the deficiency in his analysis stems from the incomplete philosophical foundations upon which he constructs his thesis. In particular, Solomon fails to adequately harmonize Sartre’s existentialism, as manifested in a pre-reflective/reflective dichotomy, with the philosophy that actually undergirds Camus’ work: absurdism, which is “characterized by consciousness searching for meaning in a universe that refuses to provide any” (Sherman 64). In reconciling these two subtly but importantly distinct philosophies, we find that as the novel progresses, Meursault transcends his state of pure pre-reflective consciousness by pondering the universe as a whole. I deem this new stage of meta-consciousness “*post-reflective*” consciousness, as revealed by the idea of “revolt”—Camus’ answer to life and freedom in an absurd world. Meursault thus exhibits both pre- and post-reflective consciousness but lacks proper reflective consciousness; he sees the world through microscopic and telescopic lenses but never at a human scale. By skipping the reflective stage, and embracing absurdity through post-reflectivity, Meursault manages to transcend temporality and become a metaphysically liberated and honest character, but at the expense of his fundamental humanity.

Analyzing Meursault's character in Part II in a post-reflective light serves to extend Sartre's conception of different modes of consciousness through harmonization with absurdist theory, as well as to nuance Solomon's understanding of Meursault's consciousness and commitment to honesty by re-evaluating the linked notions truth and meaning as they relate to absurdism. To fully understand the implications of Meursault's pre- and post-reflective dualism, though—a deeper contrast that recalls the series of stark juxtapositions which comprise Camus' novel—we must in turn delve deeper into the theoretical foundations at the core of *L'Étranger*, starting with an analysis of Sartre's notion of pre-reflective consciousness. Then, only after establishing the validity of a Sartrean lens to explicate *L'Étranger*, we will see how Solomon's failed application of Sartre's reflective consciousness in Part II necessitates the formulation of post-reflective consciousness to resolve the tension inherent in utilizing existentialist philosophy to explain a fundamentally absurdist book. Finally, in examining competing beliefs about truth in light of Camus' notion of revolt—the physical manifestation of post-reflective consciousness—we can consider how post-reflectivity renders Meursault a fundamentally honest and philosophically free person, but not an entirely human one.

Sartre delineates the various layers of awareness by proposing a progression from pre-reflective to reflective consciousness, with important implications to *L'Étranger*. In his essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" he writes, "man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself" (22). Accordingly, "man is nothing other than what he makes himself," his sense of individuality emerging by dint of his budding sense of awareness (22).

Works Cited

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Fellow Commentary
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Jonathan’s essay does many things well, not least of which is make a big claim accessible through a sophisticated but clear thesis. In this paper, he analyzed critical reviews of Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger*, investigated the philosophical terms on which some of those criticisms rested, and then posited his own new philosophical term -- post-reflective -- which, he argues is better suited to analyze *L’Étranger*. We chose to excerpt the first three pages from Jonathan’s introduction because it offers an example of a strong thesis and demonstrates a solid foundation for the rest of the paper.

Jonathan first orients the reader briefly to the text and critical body surrounding it, and motivates his argument by pointing out that current understandings of the text are incomplete. Then, Jonathan introduces his thesis:

“I deem this new state of meta-consciousness ‘*post-reflective*’ consciousness, as revealed by the idea of ‘revolt’ -- Camus’ answer to life and freedom in an absurd world. Meursault thus exhibits both pre- and post-reflective consciousness but lacks proper reflective consciousness; he sees the world through microscopic and telescopic lenses but never at a human scale. *By skipping the reflective stage, and embracing absurdity through post-reflectivity, Meursault manages to transcend temporality and become a metaphysically liberated and honest character, but at the expense of his fundamental humanity.*”

The arguable claims of his thesis are clear, despite the nuance and complexity: a) the state of post-reflective as a state of meta-consciousness is a category that should exist; b) it is revealed by a revolt, which is Camus’ answer to life and freedom in absurdist reality; c) Meursault skips the reflective stage and embraces absurdity through post-reflectivity, and finally, d) he transcends temporality and becomes liberated at the expense of his humanity. It also serves another useful function of the thesis: as a “road map.” A road map provides the reader with a brief overview of the claims that will be argued in the paper and, generally, the order in which they will be presented.

We are publishing Jonathan’s reflection on his writing process here in order to get an insider-look on something we can’t see in the final version of the paper; this thesis is the result of many thoughtful drafts, each with new refinements and revisions to develop a coherent and clear iteration of his ambitious thesis. In our Writing Center conferences, we encourage writers to think critically about the thesis and refine or re-write it, as necessary, as the argument the body paragraphs provide change course.

Jonathan’s essay is evidence of the benefit of writing, particularly the thesis, as a process; in his commentary he shares with us his thesis at different stages of its development. We encourage writers to remain open, as Jonathan was, to expanding and then refining his main claims. Without such a deftly articulated thesis, appropriately oriented and motivated, this ambitious paper could have left readers confused. Instead, Jonathan carefully balances the elements of his thesis *and* of the lexicon to offer his readers a strikingly clear and convincing re-reading of *L’Étranger*.