



# The Inside Outsiders in *The Stranger* and *Day*

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### ABSTRACT

*The Stranger* by Albert Camus and *Day (The Accident)* by Elie Wiesel are two of masterpieces in the twentieth century. Camus is acknowledged as an existentialist, whose works propose and elucidate the notion of the “absurd” of that generation, while Wiesel is typically identified as a Holocaust writer who has attempted in varying ways to find a voice with which to articulate the experience of the final solution (Estess, 1976). In fact, critics argued that Camus’ absurd philosophy has impacted greatly on Wiesel for whom Auschwitz signifies the absurdity of human and divine behaviour and the breakdown of the Covenant and the Jewish spirit. Instead of interpreting the image of the absurd as indifferent outsiders in classical criticism, this article argues that the two protagonists Meursault and Eliezer are inside outsiders from the perspective of the “absurd” and the text itself; and further explores the shared theme “death” involved in these two works.

**Keywords:** the absurd, death, existentialism, *The Strange*, *Day*

Since its publication in 1942, *L'Étranger* has been appreciated by numerous distinguished writers and critics. Primarily, confronted with the suspect of its aesthetic value and Camus’ negative and destructive theory, the contemporary French Existentialist Jean-Paul Satre (1960) explains the theoretical significance of the protagonist Meursault about the absurd in his *Explication de l'Étranger* by reference to *Mythe de Sisyphe*, which Camus wrote after the publication of *The Stranger*, in which he mentions that “man feels like himself a stranger” (p. 59) when he lives in a universe “deprived of illusions and benightment” (ibid), and “the exile is without remedy” because of the deprivation of “memories of a lost country” or “of hope for a promised land” (ibid). Satre (1960) regards *The Mythe de Sisyphe* as the “notion” of the absurd, and *The Stranger* as the “feeling” of it, defining Meursault as “one of those terrible innocents who shock society by not accepting the rules of its game” (p. 60). Victor Brombert further concludes Satre’s notion of the absurd, and criticizes the weaknesses in his evaluation on Camus and *The Stranger*: neither man nor the universe is absurd but the relationship between man and the universe. According to him, although Camus “succeeds in suggesting this divorce” between the physical and the spiritual nature of man proposed by Satre by suppressing all experience without reaction, his explanation fails to answer its value “as a work of art” (Brombert, 1948, p. 121).

Besides, there are varieties of comments on the protagonist Meursault’s character, behaviour and psychology related to these events including his mother’s funeral and his enigmatic shooting of the Arab, and Camus’ philosophy. Similar to Satre, Monique Wagner (1979) claims that Meursault’s determination to not “play the game” derives from his ineptness since his motif of death is the mapping of his lack of desire to live in a world whose “meaning eludes him” (p. 332). For Wagner, Meursault is a man who is “constantly dazed, drowsy, sleep, hot, sweaty, or uncomfortable” (ibid). When it comes to the judge, critics tend to side one stand between Meursault and the accusers. Louis Hudon (1960) sees the murder of Arab as an Accident, whereas Girard explores the inner meaning of the shooting, proposing that the murder is “a *deus ex machina*, or rather a *crimen ex machina*” in a novel “otherwise rational and realistic” *L'Étranger* (p. 61). Beyond its role as a dramatic conflict, some critics tend to unfold the relation to Greek tragedy. Despite the rational interpretations, Carl Viggiani concludes it as the “same *Fatum*” that “presides over the lives of tragic heroes in ancient literatures” (p. 62). Julian L. Stamm puts forward that this event is driven by Meursault’s “irrational

homosexual forces within him” (p. 62).

While critics have frequently commented on the relevance of Meursault’s mother’s funeral and the shooting, Terry Otten discusses the “maman” in the novel, claiming that the trial of Meursault is an extension of the funeral due to the sacrifice of his identity for the social order of things (Otten, 1975). From the perspective of stylistic features, John Cruickshank has observed that the story is predominantly a reflection of the past through the exploration of the time and space in Camus. According to him, the *le passé indéfini* provides a description of the past action with its original sense of presentness. As a re-experience of the past as a telling, the emphasis the narrator gives to certain events suggests that he must view them from a distant perspective in time (Cruickshank, 1956). In a nutshell, the present research on Camus’ philosophy and *The Stranger* has been unfolded from different perspectives with controversial conclusions.

The research on *The Stranger* and Camus in China has increasingly expanded in scope and depth after the publication of the translated version of *L’Étranger* in China in 1961, which further broadens the connotations of the work. Scholars put emphasis on the issue of Camus’ philosophy of the absurd, his valorization of resistance as a way to combat absurdity, Camus’ passion and celebration of classful moments. Feng Hanjin views *The Plague* and *The Stranger* as manifestations of the absurd in literature, and these works should be taken as literature in exposure to the philosophical principle of “the absurd” in *The Mythe de Sisyphe*, which Feng concludes as the world is absurd, and the life is disillusion. Yi Dan sums up the character of Meursault as indifference, which originates from his belief, that is, the “obstinate and profound passion” being used as the psychology of rebellion. As an outsider of that society, Meursault’s indifference is his revolt, and it is his revolt (“lack of love for truth”) that he “lets himself die” (Yi, 1989). Zhang Rong explores the theme of “death” throughout the story, pointing out that Camus reveals the absurd through the pervading death, and Meursault as the skeptic who realized the absurdity represents the despair and hopelessness of the young generation towards the alienated world in that era (Zhang, 1989). Zhang explores the normal narration adopted by *The Stranger* at the same time, proposing that there is a gap between the subject and object, the thought and act, and the protagonist and the society within its objective narration, which further strengthens Meursault’s indifference as an outsider and the theme of the absurd. However, when the absurd has become the core of Camus’ philosophy, critics represented by Qiu Shangsong argue that it is improper to simply attribute Meursault’s character to indifference and loneliness for the ambivalent mentality he exposed instead of pure ignorance and impassiveness (Qiu, 1990). To sum up, the domestic study of *The Stranger* is principally based on death, the absurd, and Camus’s existentialist philosophy.

Elie Wiesel was typically acknowledged as a writer dealing with the Holocaust. However, his writings are not contributing to the factors and process of the holocaust but to the question of divine justice or the morality of God (Thomas, 2004). Compared to works including *Night*, *Dawn*, *The Oath*, and *Twilight* with more salient features of the Holocaust or Auschwitz, *Day* as the “grande finale” in the trilogy has received less attention. To begin with, silence as a typical Wieselian symbol has become a significant concept. For instance, Thomas A. Idinopulos explores how *Day*’s narrative employs silence in constructing its overarching framework. According to him, the textual silences portray the inability of the protagonist to escape his past at the camps. Compared to the silence in *Night* and *Dawn*, which focus on the experience of living within silence, *Day* explores the process of overcoming silence and examines the struggle of transforming silence into speech (Thomas, 1972). Coincidentally, Rhoda Sirlin (1996) probes into silence in the novels of Elie Wiesel as well, indicating

that silence is the only appropriate response since language has no power to capture the truth of the Holocaust and Auschwitz. Besides, John K. Roth suggests that the process from night into dawn and day is the portrait of “the destruction of a supportive universe” into “a post-Holocaust world of ambiguity and nothingness” in which life almost “succeeds in fulfilling a desire a cancel itself” (Roth, 1992, p. 63). Cathy Caruth explores the trauma and the haunting past that the protagonist experienced, proposing the possibility that the traumatic history can be accessed through individual suffering. However, detailed analysis of *Day* is relatively few in domestic research.

Based on the previous research findings, this essay will focus on the absurdity involved in Camus' *The Stranger* and Elie Wiesel's *Day*, exploring their probe into the relationship among man, the world, and the religion conveyed in their works respectively. It will investigate their philosophy of death and suicide as well.

As the pioneer of French Existentialism, Camus elucidates the concept of the “absurd”, questions the meaning of life concurrently and the relationship between humans and the world, and the life based on *Pensées* written by Blaise Pascal in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. According to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the existence of humans is as absurd and meaningless as the stone of Sisyphus forever pushing uphill. As the most urgent of questions, Camus claims that the meaning of life “eludes the human being” (*the Myth* 4), and individuals with irrationality “feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason” when man “stands face to face” within the unreasonable world, where the absurd is born, that is, the “confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (21). In *The Stranger* Camus presents the “absurd” sensibility by constructing the character Meursault who makes none of the normal assumptions about life, a man without social ambition and belief in religious meaning in the universe as the manifestation of his philosophy presents the “feeling” of the absurd throughout a series of events: his mother's funeral, the shooting and the commitment of the murder, and the sentence to death.

It seems that Meursault is indifferent to his mother's death, Mary's propitiatory love, position, shooting, and even to the imprisonment and the sentence to death, which is typically taken by critics as the generation's revolt and rebellion against the absurdity of that society and era. According to scholars represented by Yi Dan in China, Meursault is a character of decomposition, uncertainty and indifference, and it was not until he was impatient by the priest who claimed to be “his father” that the indifferent outsider was sort of “excited” or “infuriated” before being hanged. However, it is improper to define Meursault as an “outsider” due to his subjective existence within the society, and his behaviour is the interzone between care and carelessness instead of complete indifference, if not more so. As a social being, Meursault relates to his surroundings incessantly, and he presents a conflicting mind towards those events rather than emotionlessness and impassivity. To begin with, being informed of mother's death and her funeral, Meursault “want[s] to see Maman right away” when the home is still “two kilometers from the village”, whereas he later refuses to pay his last respects to his mother through stopping the movement of the cover by the caretaker. Soon he is “embarrassed” for he feels that he “shouldn't have said that” (6). When friends in the nursing home came to keep vigil as customary, “one of the women started crying”, mumbled something then “went on crying as much as before” (10). In turn, Meursault confronts her but realizes the inappropriateness. The impact of his mother's death even extends and hides in his unconsciousness after the funeral. On the second day when he goes to the public beach with Marie, he is still “wearing a black tie” (20) which was borrowed from Emmanuel. Meursault's lament on his mother's preciousness is pervasive henceforth in his life accompanied by ambivalent thoughts: he prepares lunch instead of going to Céleste's as a

routine on Sunday, which becomes a particular time that bothered him; he reminds his mother when he receives Raymond's plea of writing a letter and when old Salamano lost his dog; faced with the accuse of being "shown insensitivity" the day of funeral during the investigation, he states that he "probably did love Maman", which indicates that he is also a member of "all normal people" who "have wished their loved ones were dead" (65); after being imprisoned for a few months, he still comforts himself with mother's words that "after a while, you could get used to anything" (77). In a word, Meursault is considering his mother from mourning to falling in love, cooking, imprisonment, even to the moment before execution, which is by no means indifferent and emotionless as critics have analyzed. Coincidentally, Meursault's reaction to trial and death is nostalgia for life rather than being indifferent. On the day of sentencing, he imagines himself on the tram in the face of the guarded court and a row of jurors watching him, whereas he cares about the way of "escaping the machinery of justice" and "out of the inevitable" (108) before the execution, imagining himself "make up new laws" and "reform the penal code" (111), and wondering the instances of men "escaping the relentless machinery", "disappearing before the execution", or "breaking through the cordon of police" (108); and even searching for instances in books that "the wheel had stopped", which indicates his expectancy of the "possibility" to "change something" (109). Notably, the time of its publication coincides with the rampant fascist forces, and there are plots about Czechoslovakia within the text. To sum up, living in Algeria, Meursault as the epitome of the absurd represents the whole generation who envisaged the disillusion of the triumph of defeating fascists, and the discontentment and reluctance with the reality, which is an echo of the emotion of the Sisyphus.

Compared to Camus' exploration of the relationship between man and the world, Wiesel's notion of absurdity, if any, is unfolded in the breakdown of the Covenant and the Jewish spirit based on his identity as a Jewish writer and a survivor of the Holocaust. In *Day*, Wiesel examines the problems of adjustment to the post-Holocaust world and brings the protagonist to a measure of acceptance of life. Meursault is an individual with no past whereas Eliezer confesses that he "had searched for God" because he "imagined him great and powerful, immense and infinite" (*Day* 38). He describes his grandmother as a "simple, pious woman" (28) who sees God everywhere, and whose answer about God by young Eliezer does comfort his queries. With Kathleen, he has faith in the meaning of life that "love is the very proof of God's existence" (69).

However, as a witness of the Holocaust and Auschwitz, Eliezer's belief in God and religion collapsed, which results in his suspicion and denial of the belief and even the attempt to suicide. In the relationship with Kathleen, he frequently questioned the tie between humans and God: he admits an individual's conviction of God that "you can love God" but repudiate God's redemption to humans that man couldn't "contemplate the face of God" (9). God has become a tool for discussion to bring the conversation back to themselves; after being rescued by the doctor who addresses gratitude to God probably as mere pleasantries, Eliezer queries the connection between man and God by "how and why does one thank God" (19), which hints his inability of understanding the worth of God to deserve man. Eliezer's collapse and disillusion with God are conveyed in his monologue about the dream during the first operation, in which he sees that God "was presiding over an assembly of angels", and He even "motioned to" him and "talked to" him (64). However, as a man "carrying an important answer" (65), he forgets His words and realizes to his horror, that God does not appear in his later slumber. The appearance of the disappearance of God in Eliezer's dream is the collective unconsciousness of the process of his, even that generation's vanishment of beliefs and God.

The disillusionment externalized itself as one aspect of aphasia in the cultural sense in Eliezer's

life after his traumatic experience, that is, “the similarity disorder” in Jakobson’s terms. According to Jakobson (1996), context is the indispensable and decisive factor in this type of aphasics, and patients’ speech “is merely reactive” in that they easily carry on a conversation but have difficulties in starting a dialogue (p. 121). It could be predicted that under such traumatic experience Eliezer’s “any semantic grouping would be guided by spatial or temporal contiguity rather than by similarity” (124). In the conversation with Kathleen, he fails to start new topics but is caught in the present context as mentioned before: it is God who brings the conversation back to themselves within the context of God, or he just responds with mere silence. After the car accident, he seems stuck in Doctor’s presupposed context including his will to survive, which he rejects to continue, however, he fails precisely at the starting point, or “the cornerstone of the sentence pattern” (ibid) only with repeating calm. Therefore, God and the meaning of life evolve into homonyms, because in the Jewish view, it is not for man to judge “whether life is or not worth living” but only the God of Israel. In the changed context of disillusion of belief, Eliezer views the tie between God and humans as unidirectional, which results in his aphasia in a traumatic and cultural sense.

What cannot be ignored is the plot of Meursault’s rejection of the priest in Camus’ *The Stranger*, which seems to be the evidence of the breakdown of God and religion in Camus’ absurd. In fact, his philosophy of the absurd by no means contains such content for Camus himself is an atheist, and his explorations on the relationship between man and the world are under the context of “God is dead” by Nietzsche. Meursault’s rejection is the rebellion against the absurd that he completely gives up the illusion of ascending to heaven after death. No matter how patiently the priest persuades him to convert to Christ, repent, and live a new life, the anti-Christ refuses to obey and firmly believes that he “was sure about” himself, “about everything”, “surer that he could ever be, sure of his life and sure of the death he had waiting for him” (*The Stranger* 120). Therefore, Meursault is Jesus Christ on earth in Camus’ prelude in *The Stranger*.

In addition, *The Stranger* and *Day* deal with the same theme of death whereas the authors unfold it differently. Camus regards death and suicide as “one truly serious” and “the fundamental” philosophical problem in the universe and the standard of “judging whether life is or is not worth living” (*the Myth* 3). According to Satre, Meursault as the most humane and enlightened “stranger”, “not accepting the rule of its game” is a potential threat to the existing world. The death of Meursault is not the aftermath of his crime and behaviour but the resistance of the absurd society and its social norms, the inability to take the “non-rational” or “irrational” leap of faith involved in accepting the validity of an explanation of the world provided by a grand religious, philosophical or political idea. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states that suicide is not the proper response to the problem of absurdity that “revolt gives life its value”, and “spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life” (*the Myth*, 11). Therefore, destruction is the common destiny of that generation to revolt against absurdity instead of their attempt to suicide. However, death and suicide in Wiesel’s work should be interpreted as a rebellion against the God of Judaism. In the Jewish view man is not the subject to judge the value of his life; only the God of Israel, as Creator and Giver of Life, is to determine when life is to end. Eliezer confesses that it is not merely an accident but he “had seen it coming” and he “could have avoided it” (117), although he carries passivity in the accident, his attempt of self-destruction and the torture to explain his desire to die indicates Wiesel’s philosophy of the absurd. Therefore, the attempt of suicide is the ultimate defiance of God for an individual’s life and sacrifice is involved.

In conclusion, both Albert Camus and Elie Wiesel explore the philosophy of the absurd in their

works. Instead of being characterized as an outsider from society, Meursault is obsessed with these events he encountered even though with seemingly indifference and emotionlessness. However, the statement above is not to suspect or subvert the notion of absurd Camus but to precisely prove that the absurdity is conveyed through Meursault's carelessness about his care for society, and his helplessness and resignation in the predicament, which is where the absurd produced, in Camus' words, the relationship between human and the world. Camus also puts that suicide is not dictated by the recognition of the absurdity of existence yet many of his literary protagonists either commit suicide or are self-destructive in various ways. In view of Wiesel and *Day*, the absurdity lies in the tie between humans and God, and suicide is the ultimate rebellion against God. Eliezer's disillusion and vanishment of his religious belief result in his traumatic aphasia. Wiesel intertwines the question of God, the traumatic memory and the past in his works to explore the meaning of existence.

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