

# Innovations

## On Textuality and Structure: Psychoanalyzing Meursault as a Signified Otherness in Albert Camus the Stranger

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### Abstract

*Delving into the intricacies of textual dynamics, this study engages Albert Camus The Stranger as a text that revolves around Meursault's perceived existential detachment and signified otherness. Through a psychoanalytic lens, Meursault is dissected as a manifestation of the signified otherness, representing a paradigm of existential otherness and societal estrangement. In other words, the central concern of this paper is to investigate the behaviour of meaning in a literary work, in terms of how meaning takes place in the text, using Albert Camus's The Stranger. Camus presents an enigmatic structure of Meursault the protagonist of the text, which seamlessly aids the analysis of structure as the process through which meaning disseminates within the boundary of the prose fiction. By this view of structure, is a re-conception of a traditional view to uncover deeper insights into the relationships between signifiers and signifieds across distances in the text. This paper delves into the psychoanalytic exploration of Meursault, by applying Lacanian theoretical framework for a thorough elucidation of the study.*

**Keywords:** *Albert Camus, Literary Structure, Psychoanalysis, Signified Otherness, Societal Estrangement, Textuality.*

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### Introduction

Albert Camus's The Stranger stands as a quintessential work of existential literature, featuring Meursault as an enigmatic character whose actions and emotions challenge societal norms. This discourse seeks to employ psychoanalytic tools to scrutinize Meursault's character, unraveling the psychological complexities underlying his

seemingly indifferent demeanor. Camus's *The Stranger* invites readers to explore the intricate interplay between textuality and structure. As we delve into the depths of this enigmatic novel, we encounter the perplexing character of Meursault, a man whose emotional detachment and indifference serve as a profound signified otherness. In this analytical article, we will dissect the textuality and structure of *The Stranger* to unravel the complexities of Meursault's signified otherness and its existential implications. The interpretation and analysis of the literary text in terms of structure has foundation and background in Plato and Aristotle. Implicit in Plato's attitude to the text is that the text is an allegory, which implies that the text is analyzable into two levels: literal and figurative, the latter being the level at which the text communicates an intention and the former, the level of enunciation.

For Aristotle, structure is implied in his postulation about plot, being the arrangement of the incidents in the text. This viewpoint implicates the author as the one plotting, that is, arranging the incidents, and pressing his personal intention into the text, which is to say that the meaning of the text is recoverable from the author. With the postulations of Plato and Aristotle, the literary work has not achieved autonomy. In fact, following Plato and Aristotle, the literary work is a "transparent window on the real". (Sammels qtd. In Akwanya's book entitled: *Semantics and Discourse*).

In "The Introduction to the Structuralist Analysis of Narratives", Barthes conceives of structure in terms of functions and calibrates these functions in their order of relevance to text proliferation into "cardinal functions" and "subsidiary notations". (Akwanya, *Verbal Structures*, 259). In viewing structure, it is perhaps assessed from the limelight of the craftsmanship of the literary artist than with the text itself. This approach sees structure as stages of playmaking and these stages are in a graduated order of ascension---exposition, crisis, conflict, suspense, climax, anagnorisis, peripeteia and resolution. According to this school of thought, the text takes a gradient after the climax. In modernism, there is a change in the discursive structure, which resulted from a change in the structure of the sign, as accounted for in Foucault's articulation of the signs into three "periods of linguistic practice". (Akwanya, *Verbal Structures* 237). The consequence is that in modernist literature, the binary structure of the sign is bridged, so that the gap between the signifier and the signified collapses. The re-conception of structure is implicit in Julia Kristeva's (*Desire in Language*, 1992 ) explanation of the novel as productivity. We read:

The text is therefore a productivity, and this means: first, that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive-constructive), And hence can be better approached through logical categories of intertextuality. (Kristeva, p. 36)

The nature of the text as productivity is in the capabilities of its components to redistributive themselves within a closed circuit, hence “text” is a “weave of signifier” (etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric). Roland Barthes, (From Work to Text 1977, 159). This closed circuit (the text) comprises two aspects, which according to Kristeva are “Two modes of novelistic utterances: citation and narration” (p.52).

The text unfolds in these two directions: as actor-author’s enunciation and as ideologeme (citation); hence according to Kristeva, “The novel is thus structured as a dual space: it is both phonetic utterance and scriptural level, overwhelmingly dominated by discursive phonetic order”. ( Kristeva, p.54).With the activated background so far, our investigation of structure centres on attention on the processes through which meaning disseminates in this closed circuit called text.Camus choice of a first-person narrative through Meursault's perspective adds another layer to the exploration of existential alienation. The textuality of The Stranger is marked by Meursault's keen attention to concrete details and sensory experiences. His narration focuses on the immediate, the tangible, and the observable, emphasizing the absence of emotional depth. This textual approach not only mirrors Meursault's detachment from societal norms but also invites readers to witness the world through the lens of his existential apathy. As we navigate the novel's textuality, we become immersed in Meursault's stark reality, where emotions are muted, and connections are elusive.

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positions him as a symbol of existential isolation. His actions and responses to the world around him create a stark commentary on the human condition, challenging readers to confront the profound sense of alienation that permeates his existence.

Jean-Paul Sartre's (*Literary and Philosophical Essays* 1995), his analysis of Camus's *The Stranger* is in terms of an experimental text that resists taxonomy. According to him, *The Stranger*:

Cannot be called a story, for a story explains and coordinates as it narrates. It substitutes the order of causality for chronological sequence of Mersault, the author calls it a novel! The novel, in essence requires incessant interval, progress, and the apparent incidence of irrevocability of time. The term novel for the sequence of unmotivated current instants which allow one, from beneath, the power-driven budget of something intentionally played. (p.41)

In spite of this seeming absence of genre, Sartre still considers the text is meticulously sets the gaze of a conscious attention. For Akwanya (*Verbal Structures*, 1997), 'the analysis of Albert Camus novel, entitled; *The Stranger* is as a reflection on both the hero, and the language of a tragic novel. As a reflection on the hero, Akwanya's view is in consonance with that of Bree and Guiton, that Mersault is not a member of the social because he is abnormal. Thus we read about Mersault, especially his reaction during the legal proceedings that,

He is unable to see the connection between the first and the second questions precisely because he is abnormal. It appears that events are apprehended by him as random. The only kind of logic he understands is the logic of the temporal chain, one thing, then another, etc. (p.136).

It is obvious from the above submissions that Akwanya reflects on the language of *The Stranger* as language that is purely literary, which is to say language that is not posited in the function of communication, but one that coils back on itself in a process of self-medication, perhaps because the text is in a diary form in which 'nothing is at issue, only record keeping'. (*Verbal Structures*, p.135)

Therefore, our analysis of structure in Albert Camus's selected novel, follows from the position of (Cohan and Shines, 1988), that a "a prose text consists of multiple, often conflicting, relations of similarity, contiguity and difference arranged paradigmatically and syntagmatically". (p.44) In other words, using the lacanian psychoanalytical theory, to analyze structure in the text, justifies the assessment of structure in the text in terms of relations of existential alienation, contiguity, idiosyncrasy and emotional conflict as are characterized and evident in Albert Camus's protagonist Meursault.

### **Understanding Meursault as a Signified Other: A Theoretical Approach**

Despite the already existing claim and knowledge about the 'classical' notion of the Freudian psychoanalysis which was ethical and more clinically inclined, the Lacanian psychoanalysis is the notion or school that regards psychoanalysis as a body of thought(theories) that engages the mental processing of the human mind, (Zizek, Slavoj, 2006) holds that, 'confronts individuals with the most radical dimension of human existence' (p.3). It has been established as a type of psychoanalysis that is directed towards depth-analysis and the interrogation of text especially the unconscious of a text. It draws strongly from the disciplines of Philosophy, Psychology and Linguistics especially Claude Levi-Strauss's Structural Anthropology from which Lacan makes his most distinguished comment about the unconscious being structured like a language (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 149). This is why Lacan defines psychoanalysis as the science of the unconscious. This type of science he refers to here is 'the science that scholars are caught up, which forms the context of the action of all of us in the time that could be reconciled with our living, and which the psychoanalyst himself cannot escape, because it forms part of his conditions too, is Science itself.

In what may be further development in Lacan's psychoanalysis, what Freud described as Ideal ego, ego-Ideal and superego in the unconscious, Lacan replaces with the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real with the superego straddling between the symbolic and the real. The bulk of the activities and transmissions in the unconscious of the symbolic order which will make our discussions here in their symbolic sense. With the mention of the above three psychoanalytic levels by Freud, Slavoj Zizek notes the fourth one which Lacan refers to as 'the law of desire'—this fourth one is of particular importance to this study and the direction this research pursues. Because from Freud to Lacan and to other psychoanalysts, their concepts of psychoanalysis have dwelled more on the unconscious, therefore the discussion expand more on the unconscious with brief mention of how the other three concepts function within the unconscious. In the Lacanian psychoanalysis, the unconscious which Lacan likens to a 'cave' or the 'bladder' with a little light inside it, he says, cannot be known. This suggests difficult for one to completely account for all that occurs, unconscious. Yet, in his works, he leaves us with elaborated descriptions about the position, constitution and the structure of the unconscious. So when he described the unconscious as a 'gap' or 'cut,' it is the position at which the subject and the 'capital Other' interface. As for its constitution, both the subject and the signifier are constituted in the unconscious, precisely in the Other with the Other as the locus from which the signifier interacts with the subject. For the signifier, it is constituted in the Other by the effects of speech which is interpreted in the unconscious in metonymies and metaphors. Lacan's famous idea about the unconscious from the above statement is summarily realised in the signifier. And the entire idea about it, traces

back to Ferdinand de Saussure's postulation of language as a sign system where he marks the distinction between the signifier and the signified in his *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure's conception of language as a total sign system provided the model for Levi-Strauss's concept of structuralism and in turn Lacan's notion of the unconscious. So the whole idea about the unconscious being structured like a language is encapsulated in the perception of the signifier such that the separation between the "signifier and the signified", is a difficult task if not impossible because what a signifier refers to, is not usually the signified, but yet another signifier. This is to say that a signifier refers us to another signifier, which in turn refers us to another signifier in an almost endless chain of signification (Sean Homer 42).

At its earliest formation, Lacan explains how the "signifier" materialises and enables efficient human relations, thus: before strictly human relations are established, certain relations have already been determined. They are occupied from whatever nature can bid as supports, that are organized in themes of antagonism. Nature provides ...signifiers and these signifiers organise human relationship in a original technique, providing them with structures and shaping them.' (20)

This reveals the unconscious as an organised structure of sign system that determines people's social position and regulates their relationships without their being aware of it. So, the signifier here is the provision of nature and how it constitutes to the structure which is constituted in the Other. In other words, it is the speech trappings in the unconscious that constitute the signifier.

Lacan clarifies that, 'psychoanalysis is governed by a particular aim which is historically defined by the elaboration of the notion of the subject' (77). So even when we can overtly regard the unconscious as the Other, because the idiosyncratic and ambivalence is the treatise of the Other, the two major elements that are constructed and constituted in the idiosyncratic which is the treatise and the subject of the signifier.

In consequent elaboration of the relation between the signifier and the subject, Lacan sums it up thus: the signifier producing itself in the field of the Other makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it occupies the place of a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function to speak, as subject... Once the birth of the subject is apprehended in the field of the Other, the characteristics of the subject of the unconscious is that of being, beneath the signifier that develops its networks, its chain and its history, at an indeterminate place. (207-208)

This means that in the development of signification, as the signifier constitutes the subject, it brings it under its control to produce another signifier. This chain or network of representation is what is called signification of the idiosyncratic being.

In a Lacanian framework, Meursault's sense of self is explored through the mirror stage. His disconnection from societal norms becomes a reflection of the fragmented self, struggling to align with external expectations. Lacan's perception of the "Other" is manifested in Meursault's societal alienation, positioning him as the Signified Otherness in the narrative. Lacanian psychoanalysis, a philosophical movement that emerged in the 20th century, serves as a fitting theoretical lens for analyzing Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. This novel encapsulates the signifier and the Other themes of unconsciousness, alienation, and the search for meaning in an indifferent universe. The protagonist, Meursault, embodies the existential notion of living in a world devoid of inherent meaning, as he grapples with the other of existence and confronts societal expectations. Camus, often associated with the 'signifier and the other', thereby rejects the detection of transcendent truths or inherent values. Meursault's detached and indifferent manner towards life mirrors this philosophy, illustrating the perception of signified otherness that pervades his existence. Moreover, his refusal to conform to societal norms and expectations aligns with the otherness emphasis on individual freedom and authenticity. The novel's exploration of signifier and otherness further aligns with Lacanian psychoanalysis principles. Meursault's inability to connect with others, coupled with his detachment, mirrors the signifier concept of the "other." This theme emphasizes the inherent isolation of individuals and their struggle to find meaning in a world that often feels indifferent and incomprehensible. Hence, Lacan insists that every drive is an incomplete drive. So, the communications that are exchanged in transference, in repetition and the drive, they are conducted between 'the signifier and the other', which is the (protagonist) that are all constituted in the unconscious, like we observe in Camus' protagonist, Meursault.

### **Existential Metonymy and Otherness**

Akwanya in his book titled *(Verbal Structures, 1997)*, asserts that, "Metonymy involves the substitution of one thing for another on the foundation of contiguity or nearness". (p. 35).

Evidently, it is a rhetorical device that depends on the placement, and as such it stimulates a likeness between two signifiers through the development of combination and additions. Meursault's existential detachment and nonconformity to societal custom render him an embodiment of existential otherness. The character's indifference to societal expectations, notably during his trial, exemplifies an existential rebellion against a predetermined narrative. This rebellion, viewed

through a psychoanalytic lens, signifies an unconscious rejection of societal constraints.

In Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, for instance, Mersault is an odd personality in the fictional society if not a non-conformist. His idiosyncratic disposition places him in the limelight of metonymical otherness. The result of his idiosyncratic characters pass judgment on him several occasions in the text, sometimes this judgment is implied, at other times it is explicit, all circulating in the text in a network of metonymical relations. It is observed that during the vigil conducted at the home for the Stranger's mother, we read: On sitting down, they looked at me and wagged their wagged their heads awkwardly, their lips sucked in between their toothless gums. I couldn't decide if they were greeting me and trying to say something or if it was due to some infirmity of age. I inclined to think that they were greeting me, after their fashion, but it had a queer effect, seeing all these old fellows grouped round the keeper, solemnly eyeing me and dandling their heads from side to side. For a moment I had an absurd impression that they had come to sit in judgment on me (*The Stranger*, p.11).

On contradiction, on another occasion, the Stranger turns down the doorkeeper's offer to unscrew the coffin so that he can see the mother's body and Mersault relates his reaction thus: "After eyeing me for some moments, he asked: Why not? But he didn't sound reproachful, he simply wanted to know" (*The Stranger*, p.6). It will be evident from the unfolding events that the doorkeeper is reproachful. And this contributes to the part of reason why the Stranger arrives at this conclusion and insists that he is "like everyone else". (Akwanya, *Verbal Structures*, p.7).

The literary text is an amalgam of signifiers, a linguistic act and such 'other', repeatedly pervades and circulate through Camus text, we realize differential field of meaning provided by linguistic possession. For example, on the occasion of the killing of the Arab by the stranger in Camus text, the text organizes metonymical relation between the sun and the knife the Arab is totting in a manner that depicts an existing gap between the sun, nature and knife, a man-made steel object seems to close. Thus we read: The light seemed thudding in my head and I couldn't face the effort needed to go up the steps and make myself amiable to the women... Whenever a blade of light shot upward from a bit of shell or broken glass lying on the sand, my jaws set hard. I wasn't going to be beaten and I walked steadily on... But the light hadn't changed; it was pounding as fiercely as ever on the long stretch of sand that ended at the rock. For two hours the sun seemed to have no progress; becalmed in a sea of molten steel... A shaft of light shot upward from the steel, and I felt as if a long, thin blade transfixed my forehead. At the same moment all the sweat that had



accumulated in my eyebrows splashed down on my eyelids, covering them with a warm film of Moisture. Beneath a veil of brine and tears my eyes were blinded: I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and less distinctly, of the keen blade of the light flashing up from the knife, scaring my eyelashes, and gonging into my eyeballs ( *The Stranger*, p. 72-75)

From the above submission, we could see through a network of metonymical relations, the gap between the sun, nature and knife, a man-made object collapses as to become almost indistinguishable, one from another. The sun is described in terms of traditional associated with the blade: 'my temples swelling under the impact of the light'. The consciousness is produced as a scenario of struggle and the sun, as sharp object piercing the consciousness of the individual. The relation of contiguity indicates that the glaring difference between the sun and the knife is suppressed is sustained on the other axis where the blade produces such profuse sweat that floods and blinds the individual. Most importantly here, the sun signified as a blade instigates metonymical relations that crisscross the length and breadth of the entire narrative. More so, in the detailed initial pages of the text, we observe that "A shimmer of heat played over it and one's feet squelched at each step, leaving bright black gashes". (*The Stranger*, p. 20). The gashes made on the landscape are an impact of the glaring sun. Also, the gashes already invoke the knife, especially the occasion of the stabbing of Raymond by the Arab. Again on another occasion, we observe: "The light was almost vertical and the glare from the water seared one's eyes". (*The Stranger*, p.66). All these piercing metaphors arrange a chain of relations which collapses the distance between the sun and the knife, calling "attention to a similarity of seeming opposites". According to (Cohan and Shires, 1988), we note that, "metaphor and metonymy attempt to resolve the terms of differentiation, to close upon a final signified". (p.28).

In consonance with Cohan and Shires, claim, it is noted that when the Stranger reveals to Marie that the mother had passed away the day before, he also observes that "she shrank away a little" (*The Stranger*, p. 24). We observe that the same reaction that he elicits from people when he concedes that he does not know the mother's age. Further, when the magistrate asks him whether he loves the mother, he replies "like everybody else" and then he observes, "The clerk behind me, who had been typing away at a steady pace, must just then have hit the wrong keys, as I heard him pushing the carrier back and crossing something" (*The Stranger*, p. 83). Obviously, the community has already discovered something anarchic in him even before he kills the Arab. The formal judgment in which Mersault is condemned to be decapitated in public, and these instances of judgments that have preceded it, and

the judgment on the patricide that will succeed Mersault are all in contiguous relations insofar as we are looking at a process of combinations and additions.

Evidently, what is indicated and deduced from Mersault's anarchic instincts of the character are inscribed in the person. As such, and himself concedes, the judgment is sealed elsewhere and the human characters are sheer instruments of bringing the sentence to pass. Apparently, all these characters, who pass judgments on Mersault in different situations are in contiguous relations sine each takes over from the other, thereby prolonging the text.

### **Metaphors of Struggle and Otherness in Camus's *The Stranger***

The path of metaphor establishes relations on the base of similarity, and as such the sequence does not elongate; rather it intensifies hence Camus's *The Stranger*, shows a predominance of metaphor at different meanings and levels. The pattern of metaphor presents incidents and even characters "related as parallel structures co-existing on the same level of significance" (Akwanya, 1997, p. 35). Thus in Camus's *The Stranger*, nature and man are metaphorically equated to two combatants, with one buffering the other with blows, while the other struggles helplessly to party them. And we note: The light seemed thudding in my head and I couldn't face the effort needed to go up the steps and make myself amiable to the women, But the heat was so great that it was just bad staying where I was, under the flood of blinding light falling from the sky. To say, or to make a move –it came to much at same. After a moment I returned to the beach and started walking. There was a red glare as far as eye could reach, and small waves were lapping the hot sand in little, flurried gasps. As I slowly walked toward the boulders at the end of the beach I could feel my temples swelling under the impact of the light. It pressed itself on me, trying to gritted my teeth, I clenched my fists in my trouser pockets and keyed every nerve to fend the sun and the dark befuddlement it was pouring into me. Whenever a blade of vivid light shot upward from a bit of shell on broken glass lying on the sand, my jaws set hard. I wasn't going to be beaten, and I walked on steadily (*The Stranger*, p.73).

Such metaphors (signifiers) announce a combatant situation are predominant in the text. For example, 'thudding' 'blinding' 'light', 'gasps', 'temples swelling under the impact', 'pressed itself on me', 'check my progress', 'felt a hot blast strike my forehead', 'I gritted my teeth', 'I clenched my fists', 'keyed up every nerve', 'fend off, jaws set hard', 'be beaten' and so on. In other words, the sun is metaphorised as an assailant and the human person as the victim, being at the receiving end of the buffets of nature. Indeed, nature metaphorised as an assailant against the individual and introduces a host of signifiers that circulates through the text. Meursault remarks elsewhere that in the 'full glare of the morning sun, with everything shimmering in

the haze, there was something inhuman, discouraging about the landscape' (*The Stranger*, p.18). Again 'my temples were throbbing and I could hardly drag myself along', and 'But the whole beach, pulsing with heat, was pressing on my back' (*The Stranger*, p.75). From our submissions on the text therefore, our interpretation of the passage as producing nature as a combatant pressing hard on the human person is not closed off to the rest of the novel, but interconnects with other parts of the text such that the text is woven together in what Ricour refers to a 'movement of meanings'.

In Camus's *The Stranger*, we see an instance of metaphorical relation in Salamano and his dog. The relationship between Salamano's spaniel and his deceased wife is metonymical in relation and the existence of the dog and the wife are in contiguous relations arranged paradigmatically since 'one element substitutes for another through association or position while simultaneously invoking it, so only one term appears in a segment.

In Camus's *The Stranger*, Meursault serves as a profound metaphor for Otherness, embodying a strong detachment of existential isolation. Meursault's indifference to societal custom and emotional detachment from the society around him, and it paints him as an outsider, challenging conventional expectations of human behavior. Meursault's apathy towards social conventions becomes a lens through which Camus explores the theme of Otherness. His apparent lack of empathy and emotional response to significant events, such as his mother's death or his involvement in a murder, sets him apart from the societal expectations of grief, remorse, and moral responsibility. The scorching Algerian sun, a recurrent motif in the novel, symbolizes the harsh judgment and scrutiny Meursault faces due to his nonconformity. The sun's relentless intensity mirrors the relentless gaze of society upon him. Meursault's inability to conform to societal custom makes him an outsider, highlighting the arbitrary nature of social expectations.

Furthermore, Meursault's communications with others emphasize his isolation. The characters around him, including his girlfriend Marie and neighbor Raymond, struggle to understand his emotional detachment. This inability to acclimatize with those around him deepens his sense of Otherness, underscoring the alienation that arises from deviating from societal norms. Camus also employs Meursault's existentialist philosophy to enhance his role as a metaphor for Otherness. Meursault's rejection of religious and moral frameworks aligns with existentialist principles, emphasizing the individual's responsibility to create their own meaning in an unresponsive space. This rejection of external moralities further ostracizes him from the collective consciousness, thereby reinforcing his status as an outsider. The trial scenes in the latter part of the novel, accentuate Meursault's status as the 'Other.' His refusal to conform to societal expectations, especially during the trial, underscores the arbitrary nature of societal judgments. Meursault's lack of remorse

becomes a cause of collective outrage, portraying him as an enigmatic figure who challenges established norms.

### **Conclusion**

This paper admissibly adopted Aristotle's postulations that literature is philosophical and in that extent, its universality remains a timeless statement about literary art. It is the nature of literature as philosophical and universal that has enabled us to read Camus's *The Stranger* in a thematic manner such that whatever feature we discover in one is also present in other, and cuts across and connects to other literary texts in the tradition. In order to understand the situation that surrounds the hero of Camus's *The Stranger*, being Meursault, one has to apprehend him as one fixed upon by external forces signified in nature as an assailant against the human victim, and also see how such signifiers circulate in the text.

By psychoanalyzing Meursault in *The Stranger*, it seamlessly unravels layers of complexity within his character. Lacanian frameworks provide valuable insights into his emotional detachment, societal alienation, and existential otherness. Meursault emerges as a Signified Otherness, challenging conventional norms and sets the gaze for the readers to assess the intricate interplay between psychology and existentialism in Camus's masterpiece. Meursault in *The Stranger* presents himself as a poignant signified Otherness, representing an existential outsider who defies societal norms. His emotional detachment, rejection of conventional morality, and ultimate isolation contribute to a profound exploration of the human state of mind and temperament, and the eventual repercussion of deviating from societal expectations. Through Meursault, Camus invites his readers to re-appraise the arbitrary nature of societal judgments and the convolutions of individual existence in an idiosyncratic world.

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