

Emotional Detachment in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*: A Happy Man Drawn into Misery

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Abstract:

Emotional detachment is positive when it is done intentionally for the sake of achieving happiness. Meursault, the protagonist in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, is fully aware that his emotional detachment brings him happiness and peace of mind, that is why it is considered a positive type of detachment, but he loses that peace of mind the day this detachment turns into emotional involvement. He holds the belief that emotions are no source of pleasure, but rather a source of trouble. He also regards all emotional expressions as absurd and meaningless. He chooses to be emotionally detached of his own free will, but he is unconsciously enforced to get emotionally involved with people. His emotional aloofness has made him tend to satisfy his physical needs. Thus, he sharpens his physical senses through focusing on their satisfaction. The article discusses how Meursault deliberately detaches himself emotionally from people to gain happiness, but this happiness turns into utter misery when, unaware, he is drawn into emotional involvement with others.

Keywords: Camus, *The Stranger*, Meursault, emotional detachment

In *The Stranger*, Albert Camus depicts the novel's protagonist, Meursault, as being emotionally detached, apathetic, cold and unfeeling equally in both good and hard times. This has become the topic that provoked a widespread controversy among critics of the novel. Many of them have discussed this behavior in the light of Camus' philosophy of the Absurd, supporting their arguments with excerpts from 'The Myth of Sisyphus' which Camus had published shortly after *The Stranger*. However, in the world of psychology, Meursault's apathetic behavior can be recognized as emotional detachment, which is an effective conduct that permits people to react frivolously to distinctly emotional occasions. It is a resolution to avoid making emotional connections to overcome an inability or problem in doing so, mainly for private, social or different purposes. This experience has the ability to permit humans to preserve barriers, psychic integrity and avoid undesired effect by or upon others, associated with emotional demands. It may lead to emotional numbing or blunting which is a disconnection from emotion (Williams, 2011), this side of unintentional emotional detachment that

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usually comes as a result of a childhood trauma is regarded as a negative unconscious behavior. However, Meursault's childhood is only touched upon in the novel. His mother is only mentioned in her death scene and the father is mentioned only once. Like in a bokeh effect, Camus defocuses Meursault's childhood and familial relations and focuses on Meursault, the person which makes childhood trauma the only reason behind Meursault's emotional detachment highly unlikely. However, emotional detachment may also have a positive side when it is deliberately exhibited to avoid getting involved with the emotions of others in order to find inner peace and keep away from troubles (Sasson, n.d.). In Camus' *The Stranger*, Meursault; the protagonist of the novel, deliberately uses emotional detachment as a way to lead a better life until he unconsciously connects with his surrounding and unknowingly releases natural emotions as reaction which leads to his fatal denouement.

The Stranger of the famous French novelist Albert Camus is published in 1942. The novel received the highest compliments from both readers and critics. Jean-Paul Sartre (2001) refers to it as, 'the best book since the end of the war' (p. 3). The style of the novel is distinctive in that it combines both simplicity and complexity altogether, Viggiani (1959) states, 'on the surface, *The Stranger* can be considered an example of Camus' philosophy of the absurd which has preceded the full explanation of the philosophy in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Payne, 1992). Sisyphus' 'scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life,' (Camus & O'Brien, 1979: 108) reminds us of Meursault. *L'Étranger* gives the appearance of being an extremely simple though carefully planned and written book. In reality, it is a dense and rich creation, full of undiscovered meanings and formal qualities' (p. 865). Its eccentricity lies in its protagonist, Meursault. Meursault is not less "odd" to readers than he seems to Marie, the girl he is interested in. His unconventional behaviour makes it hard to fathom his character or give an apt description of it. Nevertheless, to fail to understand the character of Meursault well is something plausible, because the writer has made him look as if devoid of all emotions. However, as Bronner (2001) puts it, Meursault 'initially appears disinterested in anything other than immediate physical sensations and honesty' (p. 148). He refuses to emotionally interact, for he is ready to attend his mother's funeral, but not to show any sad feelings, he is ready to be loved by Marie but not to love Marie, he is also ready to be considered a friend by Raymond but not to consider Raymond as a friend. He is not emotionally numb, although he keeps saying 'I didn't care' (Camus, 1942: 28), but he is aware of the futility of sadness, love and all other emotions.

Meursault believes in the meaninglessness of life and he acts accordingly, a thing that makes him feel a 'stranger' among his people.

Hence, he rejects their moral values and prefers to have moral values of his own. Being different to his people, he appeared to them as having no values at all. This has led many critics to analyze Meursault's character in the light of anomie; "a condition of instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values or from a lack of purpose or ideals" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017), which was first brought in by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Yet, Meursault's social deviation from his people and his nonconformity to their prevailing ideas, practices, and views is part of his being an absurd man. He prefers to be 'the master of his days' (Camus & O'Brien, 1979: 110) and have 'his fate belong to him'. And as in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states that happiness and the absurd are 'inseparable'. Meursault finds happiness through the absurd.

Meursault fully acknowledges physical sensations, but rejects emotions. He believes in the fruitfulness of the former over the pointlessness of the latter, that's why he has not delayed his physical interaction with Marie for the sake of mourning his dead mother. He celebrates every sense of his five senses as harbingers of pleasure in life, and he suppresses his emotions to enjoy sensory pleasure. He enjoys the *smell* of brine and earth, the *taste* of coffee, cigarettes, and Céleste's meals at the time of mourning, the *touch* of Marie's body a day after his mother's funeral, the *sight* of the countryside when,

the sun was up and the sky mottled red above the hills between Marengo and the sea. A morning breeze was blowing and it had a pleasant salty tang. There was the promise of a very fine day. I hadn't been in the country for ages, and I caught myself thinking what an agreeable walk I could have had, if it hadn't been for Mother. (p. 9)

He enjoys *hearing*,

The shouts of newspaper boys in the already languid air, the last calls of birds in the public garden, the cries of sandwich vendors, the screech of streetcars at the steep corners of the upper town, and that faint rustling overhead as darkness sifted down upon the harbor. (p. 60)

And he even enjoys quietness and the slightest sound amid quietness even if it is the sound of his blood throbbing in his ears (p. 23). Thereby, by focusing on his physical life, Meursault escapes his emotional as well as his social life.

Meursault meets Marie Cardona the day after his mother's funeral, and he shows his readiness for physical intimacy. His emotional detachment from Marie is met by her emotional attachment. Meursault is only interested in the physical pleasure he gains from being with Marie, but although he refuses any emotional involvement with her; 'she asked me if I loved her. I said that sort of question had no meaning,

really; but I supposed I didn't' (p. 24), he does not mind giving her pleasure even if this pleasure comes as a result of marriage; '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'd merely said, "Yes."' (p. 28).

'Emotion pours out directly or indirectly each time people engage themselves in the process of genuine interaction,' (Quoted in Goodreads, n.d.). Hence, in order to avoid emotion, Meursault avoids interaction until he meets Raymond, who gradually draws him to the world of interaction. Meursault may have deliberately detached himself emotionally for happiness sake, but he has unconsciously been drawn into interaction. Raymond Sintès is Meursault's neighbour, who lives on the same floor. He is rumored to be a pimp, which proves to be somehow true of him later in the novel. Meursault does not seem to mind being close to Raymond as long as he is having a good time, although he would not consider him a friend;

he [Raymond] slapped me on the shoulder and said, "So now we're pals, ain't we?" I kept silence and he said it again. I didn't care one way or the other, but as he seemed so set on it, I nodded and said, "Yes.'" (p. 22)

Raymond drags Meursault gradually into his personal life and then to his personal problems when he asks him to write the letter he intends to send to his Arab girlfriend to trick her, and when he convinces Meursault to be his witness and *lie* saying to the police that the Arab girl cheated on Raymond, something which Meursault refuses to do later even when it is the only thing that would have saved him from the guillotine; when he and his lawyer have a conversation about his affectlessness during his mother's funeral. The lawyer asks Meursault to lie about his true feelings that day, but Meursault disagrees:

"You must understand", the lawyer said, "that I don't relish having to question you about such a matter. But it has much importance, and, unless I find some way of answering the charge of 'callousness,' I shall be handicapped in conducting your defense. And that is where you, and only you, can help me".

He went on to ask if I had felt grief on that "sad occasion". The question struck me as an odd one; I'd have been much embarrassed if I'd had to ask anyone a thing like that.

I answered that, of recent years, I'd rather lost the habit of noting my feelings, and hardly knew what to answer. I could truthfully say I'd been quite fond of Mother – but really that didn't mean much. All normal people, I added as on afterthought, had more or less desired the death of those they loved, at some time or another.

Here the lawyer interrupted me, looking greatly perturbed.

"You must promise me not to say anything of that sort at the trial, or to the examining magistrate."

I promised, to satisfy him, but I explained that my physical condition at any given moment often influenced my feelings. For instance, on the day I attended Mother's funeral, I was fagged out and only half awake. So, really, I hardly took

stock of what was happening. Anyhow, I could assure him of one thing: that I'd rather Mother hadn't died.

The lawyer, however, looked displeased. "That's not enough", he said curtly.

After considering for a bit, he asked me if he could say that on that day I had kept my feelings under control.

"No", I said. "That wouldn't be true." (p. 41)

Yet, he does it for the sake of Raymond twice: once when he refuses to fetch a policeman when Marie asks him to do so, saying that he does not like policemen, and second, when he goes to the police station as a witness as previously mentioned.

The question of why Meursault killed the Arab has been controversial to most literary critics. However, in order to carefully examine the question, one has to reflect on the whole situation that has led to the problem apart from the unreliable point of view of the protagonist; Meursault, the controversial character. The incident of the killing is as follows; Raymond invites Meursault to spend Sunday with him at his friend's seaside bungalow and Meursault accepts the invitation. On Saturday, the day before the incident, Meursault has given a false testimony against the Arab's sister at the police station. At the beach, Meursault spends a happy time with Marie, Raymond, Masson; an old friend whom Raymond used to live with, and the former's wife. The three men are stalked by two Arab men. One of these men is the brother of Raymond's Arab girlfriend. A fight breaks out between Raymond and the Arab and leads to the Arab slashing Raymond's arm and mouth with a knife. Meursault and Masson take Raymond to the doctor. Bandaged, Raymond returns back to the scene, but this time he has a gun in his pocket which he intends to use against the Arab. Meursault tries to convince him not to shoot unless the Arab pulls out his knife, 'Only, if he [the Arab] doesn't get out his knife you've no business to fire' (p. 37), which is rational. This line shows how the knife has become a threat to Meursault. What Meursault does later shows that he starts to fear for Raymond's safety when he persuades him to hand him the gun. After they leave the scene, Meursault decides to go back alone to the spring, the place where the fight has broken out, to cool off, with Raymond's gun in his pocket. He sees the Arab again and the Arab puts his hand in his pocket, which makes Meursault put his hand on the gun. The description Meursault provides for his physical restlessness along the incident as well as at the moment of shooting clearly shows the very reason behind the killing:

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 light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs. Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. (p. 38–39)



From a psychological point of view, Meursault is perhaps suppressing the emotions he is experiencing at the moment and it is ultimately the feeling of fear which is the only feeling he admits of having, when he has a conversation with the chaplain. It is the same feeling he has experienced at his mother's funeral. He may have succeeded in suppressing this feeling at his mother's funeral, but he couldn't do the same with the Arab. He has seen the knife as a threat to him, and the Arab as a threat to his happiness. His interaction with Raymond has led him to release these emotions in the form of a volley of bullets. Yet, he insists on the sun and heat being the main reason behind his violent act. However, his justification may scientifically be reasonable according to Emily Roberts (2018):

avoiding a deep understanding of our emotions and what's causing them can lead us to getting stuck in a fight-or-flight response. Something triggers an emotional response, and suddenly we might start to obsess about all the things that are negative and convince ourselves that the most terrible consequences that could happen definitely *will* happen. It's all FEAR, FEAR, FEAR. This triggers your body's stress response and pushes you into a state of high arousal. That's when the cortisol spikes, a chemical called norepinephrine is triggered that ups your heart rate and blood pressure, and you can get so keyed up on fear that you don't take the time to fully understand the thing that pushed you into this response.

Meursault may have misunderstood emotional detachment in that he showed no interest in anything; both 'yes' and 'no' are no opposite expressions for him as their consequences are the same in being meaningless. Yet, the pleasure he gets from being with Marie and Raymond has made him choose the word 'yes' to both of their requests ending up as a lover and a good pal, though he regards himself none of these. Those bullets he fires against the Arab are like the 'yes' he used to answer Raymond and Marie's requests, except that this 'yes' has taught him the difference between saying 'yes' and 'no' when each bullet turns into a loud, fateful rap on the door of his undoing (p. 39).

Conclusion:

Meursault arouses reader's pity, because it is not his fault that living the absurd condition has conflicted with his embrace of emotional detachment. He has a simple answer to the highly controversial question, 'To be or not to be' which is that both mean nothing. Therefore, showing emotions is useless, as it leads to nothing. Hence, he

detached himself emotionally from people to feel happy, satisfied and calm. On the other hand, he holds the opinion that the only source of enjoyment in life which may provide him with mental freedom and happiness is satisfying his physical senses. He prefers to enjoy spending time near the sea, having food at Céleste's, and engage in physical activity with Marie than mourn his mother's death which he deems meaningless. He also enjoys his time with Raymond, that is why he does not mind accepting his requests, as refusing them would mean the same to him, but he chooses accepting them in order not to lose the pleasure he is having in Raymond's company, ignorant, that he is getting emotionally involved with Raymond which eventually leads him to killing the Arab, a foe of Raymond, and end up in prison waiting for his death. Thus, Camus has perhaps indirectly proved that Meursault is right when he thinks that involving emotionally with others brings no happiness and that showing no emotion at all leads to contentment and peace of mind, but Meursault has not succeeded in shaping this thought properly.

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