



Meursault: The Modern Day Übermensch

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Abstract

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* presents Meursault as an emotionally detached and indifferent protagonist whose existential bewilderment challenges conventional morality. His rejection of societal norms and his confrontation with death mirror the philosophical struggle between nihilism and self-overcoming. Drawing on Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch, this paper examines how Meursault transcends his initial alienation and ultimately embraces life on his own terms. Using Murphy's model of character analysis, the study explores Meursault's transformation from a passive observer to a figure of self-affirmation. By analyzing his actions, thoughts, and interactions, this research highlights Meursault's evolution into a modern-day Übermensch, demonstrating how he constructs meaning beyond traditional morality. The findings reveal that Meursault's acceptance of absurdity is not a surrender but a form of empowerment, making him a contemporary embodiment of Nietzsche's ideal.

Keywords: Meursault; Character Analysis; Self-Overcoming; Übermensch

Introduction

The evolution of existential thought in the twentieth century has been deeply influenced by the philosophical inquiries of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* stands as one of the most radical philosophical responses to nihilism, advocating for self-overcoming in the absence of absolute moral or religious values. Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) presents a protagonist, Meursault, whose existential indifference and eventual confrontation with death make him an exemplary figure through which to explore Nietzsche's vision of human transcendence. While Meursault has often been read as an absurdist figure, this study contends that his transformation aligns with Nietzsche's conceptualization of the *Übermensch*. By analyzing Meursault's character through Murphy's model of character analysis, this paper examines how his existential bewilderment gradually evolves into self-overcoming, positioning him as a modern manifestation of Nietzsche's philosophical ideal.

Nietzsche outlines the *Übermensch* as a being who transcends conventional morality, constructs meaning in a world devoid of inherent purpose, and affirms life in its most absurd and tragic dimensions. Central to this transformation is the rejection of external structures be it religious dogma, societal expectations, and the illusion of universal morality. Meursault's journey follows a similar trajectory: his initial detachment from social conventions, his trial as an existential confrontation, and his final acceptance of death without remorse or hope for salvation. Through Murphy's analytical framework, which considers a character's actions, thoughts, and interactions, this study investigates the stages of Meursault's transformation and his ultimate self-affirmation.

Problem Statement

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* presents Meursault as a detached, indifferent protagonist whose existential crisis challenges conventional moral and philosophical frameworks. While his apparent nihilism and rejection of societal norms suggest existential bewilderment, his eventual embrace of life and death aligns with Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*. Existing scholarship often interprets Meursault's transformation as passive acceptance rather than self-overcoming. This research addresses this gap by analyzing Meursault's psychological and behavioral evolution through Murphy's character analysis model. By demonstrating how Meursault transcends his initial alienation to achieve self-affirmation, this study repositions him as a modern embodiment of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, offering a novel perspective on existential resilience and self-determination.

Significance of this study

The significance of this study lies in its reconceptualization of Meursault not merely as an absurdist figure but as a character who embodies Nietzschean self-overcoming. While Camus' absurdism and Nietzschean philosophy are often viewed as distinct, this paper argues that Meursault's ultimate state of existence aligns with Nietzsche's vision of human potential. His

rejection of imposed meaning, his indifference to conventional morality, and his final affirmation of existence suggest that he transcends nihilism rather than succumbing to it. By bridging existentialist and Nietzschean interpretations, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Meursault's philosophical significance.

Research Objective

To examine how Meursault's existential transformation in *The Stranger* reflects his emergence as a modern-day Übermensch.

Research Question

How does Meursault's existential transformation in *The Stranger* reflect his emergence as a modern-day Übermensch?

Literature Review

Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, with interpretations ranging from existentialism and absurdism to ethical indifference and Nietzschean self-overcoming. The critical literature reflects a nuanced debate over his philosophical stance, emotional detachment, and moral positioning within the framework of modern existential thought.

Several scholars have situated Meursault within the broader existentialist discourse, highlighting his resistance to societal norms and his confrontation with the absurd. Akyol (2019) argues that Meursault embodies Camus' philosophy of the absurd, which rejects the search for inherent meaning in life and instead embraces the absurdity of human existence. His emotional detachment and passive acceptance of his fate exemplify the absurd hero, one who does not seek external justification for existence but rather acknowledges its lack of inherent meaning (Akyol, 2019). Similarly, Perry (2020) emphasizes that Meursault's rejection of religious consolation and his willingness to face death without appeal to metaphysical structures place him in direct opposition to traditional moral frameworks, reinforcing Camus' absurdist ethics.

In contrast, some scholars have interpreted Meursault through a Nietzschean lens, arguing that his character resonates with the concept of the Übermensch. Anderson (2018) contends that Meursault's evolution, particularly in the second half of the novel, mirrors Nietzsche's call for self-overcoming. His rejection of imposed values and his embrace of life's contingency reflect the existential strength of the Übermensch, who creates his own meaning in the absence of divine authority. Similarly, Zhang (2021) identifies elements of Nietzschean perspectivism in Meursault's refusal to conform to conventional morality, asserting that his character serves as a critique of societal hypocrisy and the arbitrariness of moral judgment.

Another critical perspective explores Meursault's psychological complexity, particularly regarding his apparent emotional detachment. Wheeler (2017) challenges the common interpretation of Meursault as purely indifferent, arguing instead that his alienation stems from a

profound authenticity that resists performative emotionality. Drawing from Sartrean existentialism, Wheeler (2017) suggests that Meursault's behavior represents an existential refusal to engage in "bad faith," as he refuses to feign emotions he does not genuinely feel. This perspective aligns with the argument made by Fernández (2020), who posits that Meursault's passivity and refusal to adhere to social expectations signal a radical honesty that exposes the constructed nature of societal norms.

Moreover, recent scholarship has considered the ethical implications of Meursault's detachment, particularly regarding his moral responsibility. Wilson (2022) critiques the tendency to romanticize Meursault's existential stance, arguing that his passivity raises ethical questions about complicity and disengagement. From a postcolonial perspective, his indifference to the murder of the Arab character reflects a broader critique of colonial violence and racialized dehumanization (Wilson, 2022). This argument is further developed by Hassan (2023), who examines the historical and political dimensions of *The Stranger*, asserting that Meursault's existential awakening cannot be entirely disentangled from the colonial context in which he operates. The novel's refusal to name the Arab victim and Meursault's lack of remorse, Hassan (2023) argues, reveal the limitations of Camus' humanism when examined through a decolonial lens.

The critical discourse surrounding Meursault underscores the complexity of his character, oscillating between existentialist hero, Nietzschean Übermensch, and ethically ambivalent figure. While some scholars emphasize his philosophical authenticity and rejection of societal illusions, others critique his moral disengagement and the implicit colonial underpinnings of his actions. This scholarly debate reflects the enduring significance of Meursault as a literary and philosophical figure, whose ambiguity invites continued interpretation across multiple disciplinary frameworks.

Research Design and Methodology

Analytical Framework

The main character presented in *The Stranger* is analyzed through Murphy's analytical model of 'Character Analysis' which she has proposed in her masterpiece work, *Understanding Unseen: An Introduction to English Poetry and the English Novel for Overseas Students* (1972). Although Murphy in this model talked about the contribution of both major and minor characters in the development of the narrative. The current research solely focuses on the portrayal and development of the main characters, also known as the protagonists, in the respective selected literary texts.

Murphy illustrates several dimensions for the in-depth analysis of the characters in a particular text. These dimensions include the character's physical description, perception held by other characters, their dialogues, past experiences, interaction with others, emotional responses, cognitive processes, mannerism, and the author's narrative commentary. Thus, the current

research inquiry focuses mainly on the protagonists (Meursault) the interpersonal dynamics, perception held by others, his inner dialogues, past lives, reactions and responses in the respective selected literary piece under Nietzsche's theoretical prism of Übermensch.

Theoretical Framework

Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch, introduced in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is a foundational idea in existential philosophy. The Übermensch represents an individual who transcends societal norms, rejects traditional morality, and creates personal values in response to nihilism. Nietzsche's concept of Übermensch emerges as a response to the "death of God," a metaphor for the collapse of religious and metaphysical foundations of meaning. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche proclaims, "God is dead," arguing that humanity must now create its own values. The Übermensch is the ideal figure who overcomes nihilism by affirming life and constructing meaning independently.

Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* describes the Übermensch as the highest stage of human development. He presents three metamorphoses of the spirit: the Camel, which bears the weight of societal values; the Lion, which rebels against these values; and the Child, which creates new meaning as he writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

"Three metamorphoses of the spirit I name for you: how the spirit becomes a camel, and the camel a lion, and finally the lion a child " (Nietzsche, 2006, p.16).

This process of transformation is central to Nietzsche's ethical and existential vision.

A central aspect of the Übermensch is self-overcoming, the process by which individuals transcend limiting beliefs and attain personal autonomy as Nietzsche states in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

"I teach you the Übermensch. Human being is something that must be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?...Behold, I teach you the Übermensch! The Übermensch is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the Übermensch shall be the meaning of the earth!" (Nietzsche, 1883, p.6).

This transformation is driven by the will to power, a fundamental force compelling individuals to assert themselves creatively and existentially (Reginster, 2006). Nietzsche's concept of amor fati, the love of fate, requires embracing life's uncertainties without despair (Nietzsche, 1974). Walter Kaufmann (1974) highlights Nietzsche's emphasis on joyful acceptance rather than mere resignation. Nietzsche's Übermensch fully embraces the chaos and unpredictability of existence, refusing to succumb to nihilism but instead transforming it into a creative force.

The Übermensch transcends conventional morality, rejecting externally imposed values in favor of self-created principles (Nietzsche, 1967). Brian Leiter (2015) notes that Nietzsche distinguishes between slave morality, based on guilt and passivity, and master morality, which values strength and self-affirmation. The Übermensch does not adhere to the traditional

dichotomy of good and evil but instead establishes new values based on personal authenticity and existential courage. Robert Solomon (2003) argues that Nietzsche's critique of herd mentality is a key aspect of his moral philosophy, emphasizing the importance of individual authenticity over social conformity. Rüdiger Safranski (2002) explains that Nietzsche's Übermensch is often condemned by the masses for challenging traditional values, a reflection of Nietzsche's broader critique of societal mediocrity and resentment.

Gilles Deleuze (1983) asserts that Nietzsche's Übermensch does not succumb to nihilism but transforms it into creative self-affirmation. Rather than despairing in the absence of absolute truths, the Übermensch joyfully embraces the inherent meaninglessness of life and actively constructs a new way of being. Nietzsche's philosophy, therefore, is not one of despair but of profound existential empowerment. Through the Übermensch, Nietzsche presents a vision of human potential that is dynamic, self-determined, and radically free from the constraints of imposed morality and metaphysical illusions.

Analysis and Discussion

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* introduces Meursault as a character whose detachment and passivity mark him as an anomaly within the structured moral and social world of his time. From the very outset, his emotional indifference is evident, as seen in the novel's opening line: "*Maman died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know*" (Camus, 1942, p. 3). This unsettling detachment signals not only his apparent apathy but also his rejection of conventional emotional responses. Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch, which envisions an individual who transcends imposed morality and constructs meaning independently, provides a critical lens through which to examine Meursault's existential transformation. Utilizing Murphy's (1972) model of character analysis, which assesses a character through their speech, actions, thoughts, and external judgments, this analysis demonstrates how Meursault evolves from an indifferent, bewildered individual to a figure of radical self-affirmation, ultimately embodying the essence of Nietzsche's Übermensch.

Meursault's alienation is most clearly illustrated through his interactions with others, particularly in moments that demand conventional emotional responses. At his mother's funeral, his behavior unsettles those around him. Rather than expressing visible grief, he remains fixated on sensory experiences, remarking on the oppressive heat and brightness: "*It was inhumane and oppressive. I could feel the sweat gathering in my eyebrows*" (Camus, 1942, p. 15). This preoccupation with the physical, rather than the emotional, distances him from the mourners, reinforcing his estrangement. Murphy's model of character analysis, which considers what others say about a character, is particularly useful here: the funeral director and Thomas Pérez, among others, implicitly judge Meursault's behavior as unnatural. Pérez, for instance, weeps openly, embodying the expected social script of mourning, while Meursault's impassivity is perceived as

disturbing. His failure to conform marks the beginning of his conflict with the world, positioning him as an outsider in a society that demands adherence to emotional norms.

Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, however, does not seek validation through societal expectations; rather, he forges his own path by rejecting imposed values. Meursault's inability or refusal to perform conventional grief signals an early stage of his self-overcoming. His indifference is not merely passive but indicative of an individual who exists beyond the dictates of traditional morality. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche asserts that "*the Übermensch shall be the meaning of the earth*" (p. 125), suggesting that true meaning arises not from external structures but from within the individual. Meursault, in his rejection of emotional conformity, inadvertently aligns with this philosophy, even if he has not yet fully realized his transformation.

His relationship with Marie further exemplifies his existential detachment and resistance to normative emotional scripts. When Marie asks if he loves her, Meursault responds with characteristic indifference: "*I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so*" (Camus, 1942, p. 35). This rejection of conventional romantic ideals positions Meursault outside traditional structures of meaning, aligning him with the Nietzschean ideal of one who does not seek purpose in socially prescribed institutions. Murphy's model, which includes a character's inner thoughts as a key aspect of analysis, reveals that Meursault does not perceive love as a necessary or intrinsic truth but rather as an arbitrary construct. His refusal to ascribe inherent meaning to relationships reflects his growing detachment from the artificial values imposed by society.

Furthermore, his casual agreement to marry Marie, despite his professed indifference, underscores his existential position. He does not reject companionship but refuses to imbue it with sentimental illusions. This perspective aligns with Nietzsche's rejection of metaphysical truths; the *Übermensch* does not cling to illusions but instead embraces life in its raw, unembellished form. Meursault's response to love and commitment exemplifies this principle, as he neither seeks fulfillment in external validation nor adheres to conventional expectations. His existential autonomy, though not yet fully realized, begins to take shape through these interactions.

A crucial turning point in Meursault's transformation occurs during his involvement in Raymond's conflict. Raymond, a character defined by violence and manipulation, seeks Meursault's complicity in his abusive relationship with an unnamed Arab woman. Meursault's passive acceptance of Raymond's request, agreeing to write a letter that will lure the woman back, appears morally ambiguous. He neither condones nor resists Raymond's actions, stating simply, "*I didn't have any reason not to please him*" (Camus, 1942, p. 41). This detachment is central to his existential development; he does not engage in moral judgment but rather operates from a position of radical indifference.

However, Nietzsche's Übermensch does not remain in a state of passive detachment; he actively constructs his own values. Meursault's passivity at this stage suggests he has not yet fully embraced self-overcoming. He exists in what Nietzsche might describe as the "lion" phase of transformation, the stage in which the individual rejects imposed values but has not yet created new ones (Nietzsche, 1883, p. 141). His willingness to engage in Raymond's conflict without moral deliberation reflects a transitional state, one in which he has abandoned conventional morality but has not yet forged his own existential path.

The pivotal moment of Meursault's existential crisis, and subsequent transformation, occurs with the murder of the Arab. The scene is saturated with sensory details, underscoring Meursault's preoccupation with the physical rather than the moral:

"The scorching blade slashed at my eyelashes and stabbed at my stinging eyes. That was when everything wavered. The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire" (Camus, 1942, p. 59).

This passage reveals that the act of killing is not driven by premeditated malice but by an almost mechanical response to external stimuli. His description of the sun as an oppressive force mirrors his earlier complaints at his mother's funeral, reinforcing the novel's existential motif: human actions are often dictated not by moral deliberation but by arbitrary forces beyond their control. Murphy's model of character analysis considers a character's thoughts and reactions as crucial indicators of development, and Meursault's response here is telling, he does not express remorse, nor does he rationalize his actions in moral terms. Instead, he acknowledges the act with the same detached clarity that defines his existence.

The trial scene serves as a crucible for Meursault's transformation. Rather than engaging in self-justification, he remains steadfast in his indifference. When asked if he regrets his actions, he states, *"I felt that I was very far from home, and that this courtroom was as meaningless as the rest of it"* (Camus, 1942, p. 98). This rejection of imposed meaning signifies his emergence as a true Nietzschean Übermensch; he does not seek absolution but embraces the absurdity of his existence.

By the time Meursault faces execution, his transformation is complete. In his final moments, he embraces death without fear, stating, *"For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate"* (Camus, 1942, p. 123). This ultimate acceptance mirrors Nietzsche's call for amor fati, the love of one's fate. Meursault does not seek redemption but fully affirms his existence, transcending nihilism and embodying the Übermensch. Thus, through Murphy's character analysis model, Meursault's transformation becomes evident, he progresses from existential bewilderment to self-overcoming, rejecting imposed morality and constructing

his own meaning. His final embrace of absurdity is not passive resignation but an assertion of radical autonomy, positioning him as a modern-day Übermensch in the Nietzschean sense.

Conclusion

Meursault's journey in *The Stranger* epitomizes the existential metamorphosis from bewilderment to self-overcoming, positioning him as a modern embodiment of Nietzsche's Übermensch. Through a systematic analysis using Nietzsche's Übermensch as a theoretical framework and Murphy's character analysis as an analytical framework, this study has demonstrated how Meursault's rejection of societal norms, his confrontation with the absurd, and his ultimate embrace of existence reflect Nietzschean self-affirmation. Unlike conventional tragic protagonists who succumb to existential despair, Meursault transcends his alienation by embracing life on his own terms, marking his final state as one of existential triumph rather than defeat. In the face of a world that demands conformity, he stands as an individual who affirms existence without seeking redemption. His final moment, welcoming death with indifference and even a sense of joy, mirrors the ultimate realization of the Übermensch: a being who, having discarded all illusions, finds meaning solely within the boundaries of his own existence.

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