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Carnival as Self-Help: Discussing a Rebellious Spirit in Camus' L'Étranger

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Abstract. This paper challenges the dominant interpretation of Meursault in L'Étranger as a passive absurdist, arguing instead that he performs a nonverbal, carnivalesque form of existential rebellion. Drawing on Albert Camus' theory of the absurd and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival and grotesque realism, the study proposes a three-stage model of Meursault's defiance: his initial refusal of symbolic norms, his construction of a second world rooted in bodily sensation, and his final affirmation of death as a meaningful end. The grotesque and sensory elements in Meursault's perception displace abstract morality, revealing a rebellion enacted not through rhetoric, but through embodied experience. The courtroom, far from subjugating him, becomes a stage for non-cooperation and existential autonomy. Ultimately, Meursault emerges as a carnival figure who says both "no" to imposed meaning and "yes" to the material rhythms of life. His revolt is not rhetorical but visceral—a grotesque affirmation of life under the shadow of death.

Keywords: L'Étranger, Meursault, Absurdity, Carnival, Rebellion

1. Introduction

Albert Camus' L'Étranger (The Stranger) is a classic work of existential literature, long regarded as a portrayal of absurdist passivity. For decades, scholars have regarded the protagonist Meursault as a resigned figure, caught between alienation and fatalism. For instance, Gerald Morreale famously views the killing of the Arab as a passive, irrational act provoked by environmental pressure [1]. However, this paper argues that Meursault is not a victim of absurdity but a subtle rebel with sensory-based defiance against imposed meaning.

Camus' concept of the absurd, clearly expressed in The Myth of Sisyphus, forms the philosophical foundation of all his work [2]. The absurd arises from the confrontation between the human need for meaning and the universe's refusal to provide it. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that Camus' absurdism does not preclude rebellion; instead, it establishes the conceptual groundwork for it. Some scholars have outlined Camus' philosophical evolution from resigning to absurdity to rebelling against it, often positioning L'Étranger as belonging to the early, pre-revolt phase [3]. Among them, Caraway stands out for offering a more flexible ethical framework. While he does not explicitly frame L'Étranger as a work of rebellion, he conceptualizes revolt within Camus' thought as a dialectical process that articulates a "no" to absurdity, while concomitantly affirming the value of life and human dignity [4]. Based on Caraway's model, this

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paper argues that Meursault's rebellion is not a radical break from absurdity but an awakening or self-rescue that begins in silence, solitude, and sensation. His so-called passivity can be reinterpreted as a carnivalesque form of existential defiance.

This paper draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival and grotesque realism to explore this rebellion mode. Though Bakhtin's ideas have rarely been applied to Camus, Zepp is an exception who has identified some similarities, particularly the shared emphasis on materiality and inversion [5]. While Zepp comprehensively applies Bakhtin's theory to Camus' literary aesthetics, she stops short of emphasizing the foundational role of absurdity in Camus' thought.

Therefore, this paper argues that grotesque realism serves as the aesthetic embodiment of Meursault's rebellion: a bodily, non-ideological response that dismantles abstraction and restores presence. In doing so, it seeks to bridge Camus' absurd with Bakhtin's carnival, revealing the rebellious, sensuous undercurrent of L'Étranger.

2. The crisis of meaning and sensing: say "no" to the world

In the absurd world Camus outlines, meaning is no longer a given. The confrontation between the human need for clarity and the universe's silence creates a rupture that renders language, morality, and social rituals fundamentally hollow. In L'Étranger, this break is not theorized but lived. Meursault, who does not cry at his mother's funeral, does not declare love to Marie, nor seek justification after killing a man, nor does he pretend that conventional values hold. However, this is not apathy, but a refusal grounded in sensory presence. The first stage of Meursault's rebellion lies in his refusal to conform to the social, ethical, and linguistic orders that seek to impose abstract meaning onto his world.

The funeral of Meursault's mother signals the first major rupture between him and the symbolic world. As he declares at the beginning of the book, the ceremony is what makes her death feel real: "For now, it's almost as if Maman weren't dead. After the funeral, though, the case will be closed, and everything will have a more official feel to it (p. 3) [6]." In other words, it is the society around Meursault, not Meursault himself, that needs the ritual to confirm death. Death is transformed into a socially acceptable meaning through a network of abstract symbols, mourning clothes, funeral rites, solemn silence, and tears.

Meursault's attitude toward these rituals is not reverent, but indifferent. "I was a little distracted because I still had to go up to Emmanuel's place to borrow a black tie and an arm band [5]." Nevertheless, his indifference soon gives way to discomfort. The imagery surrounding the ceremony is saturated with oppressive blackness: "the sticky black of the tar, the dull black of all the clothes, and the shiny black of the hearse (p. 17) [6]." This blackness does not represent grief to Meursault; rather, it clashes with the "blue and white of the sky," causing sensory dissonance. His recollection of the funeral centers not on mourning, but on somatic disturbance: "the sun, the smell of leather and horse dung from the hearse, the smell of varnish and incense… was making it hard for me to see or think straight." Even the landscape becomes hostile— "inhuman and oppressive" under the blinding sun [6].

Instead of submitting to symbolic grief, Meursault's body becomes his only mode of knowing. The most vivid memory of the burial is not the moment itself, but the physiological toll it takes—fatigue, heat, sweat, blurred perception. As he confesses, "everything seemed to happen so fast… that I don't remember any of it anymore [6]." His refusal to internalize narrative grief marks the first stage of his rebellion: he resists meaning by retreating into pure sensation. In this world, truth is not in what is said, but in what is felt.

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Similarly, for Meursault, intimate relationships hold no intrinsic meaning, so he treats them with quiet indifference. He refuses to make promises or articulate heart-based feelings. He cannot even tell whether he wants to form attachments with others. Marie, the person who builds the closest relationship with Meursault, fails to lead him to understand love as an abstract emotion. Marie often verbalizes her love, whereas Meursault cannot even grasp what it means to "love" someone. "A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so" (p. 35) [6]. His answer reveals not emotional coldness, but a fundamental disconnect between language and experience. Love, to him, is just another hollow word.

While Meursault openly dismisses abstract concepts such as love, he is not emotionally numb; rather, he is attuned to the material and sensory aspects of human connection. His relationship with Marie is not founded on emotional intimacy, but on immediate physical desire. He notices her smile, tan, and the feel of her body, which are only fleeting sensory impressions. In his view, the body speaks truth more clearly than words. Thus, when Marie asks if he wants to marry her, he replies "it didn't make any difference to me," and when pressed about love, he says, "it didn't mean anything…" (p. 41) [6]. Marriage, as for Meursault, is another ritual, like a funeral. Paradoxically, in a later scene, Meursault does briefly consider marriage, as a momentary impulse triggered by the atmosphere. Surrounded by warmth, sunlight, and laughter, he admits: "For the first time maybe, I really thought I was going to get married." (p. 50) [6] It is the sensory image of a ready-made domestic scene that moves him. In this way, even abstract ideals like love and marriage are, for Meursault, experienced only as ambient material effects. They arise not from meaning, but from embodied presence. His rebellion lies in rejecting the prescribed meanings society assigns to such ideals, while remaining open to their fleeting sensual manifestations.

The pivotal moment in L'Étranger — Meursault's killing of the Arab — marks the culmination of his journey in debasing the abstract to the material. The act is not prompted by logic, moral reasoning, or even self-defense. It is driven entirely by sensory overload, the heat, the light, the sweat, the glare of the sun on the Arab's knife — all of these converge into a moment where Meursault's physical discomfort overrides any awareness of social consequence. He can think only of escape: "I wanted to hear the murmur of its water again, to escape the sun and the strain and the women's tears, and to find shade and rest again at last [6]."

Such oppressive weather links the killing directly to the funeral: "The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman, and like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin (pp. 58-59) [6]." At this juncture, memory dissolves into sensory perception, and Meursault's response is not triggered by a perceived threat, but rather by the intolerable immediacy of the world's presence. The body reacts before the mind can reason, and the act of violence becomes a pure physiological discharge. "The trigger gave [6]." His alienation reaches its extreme: in a world emptied of meaning, the sun becomes more determinative than law and sweat outweighs guilt.

Meursault's rebellion unfolds as a gradual rejection of abstract constructs in favor of immediate sensory experience. From the oppressive ritual of his mother's funeral to the sun-drenched moment of killing the Arab, his responses are purely bodily, attuned to heat, sweat, light, and discomfort, not meaning or morality. The murder, driven by sensory overload, is perceived as personal downfall. "Then I fired four more times…knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness (p. 59) [6]." Yet this moment marks a threshold: from an absurd world stripped of sense, Meursault begins to construct a second reality—one grounded in confinement and the irreducible presence of the material world.

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3. Constructing a second reality: say "yes" to the carnival world

The second stage of his rebellion involves constructing an alternative reality based on sensory perception and bodily awareness; the killing of the Arab marks not the end, but the turning point of Meursault's rebellion. Camus defines the rebel as "a man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation…Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that… one is right [7]." This illuminates Meursault's transformation: he rejects symbolic norms—not to collapse into nihilism, but to affirm a bodily existence. Meursault begins to say "yes" to a world governed by the body, by sensation, and by the present. This transition marks the moment he ceases to seek justification and begins to affirm the raw material of existence.

Meursault becomes aware of his distinct nature and accepts it: "my nature was such that my physical needs often got in the way of my feelings (p. 65) [6]." Meursault finds no fault in this difference. Instead, he treats it as a truth that anchors him. When Meursault recounts the murder, he offers only a list of fragmented sensory impressions: "Raymond, the beach, the swim, the quarrel, then back to the beach, the little spring, the sun, and the five shots from the revolver [6]." This flat enumeration sharply contrasts with his memory of his mother's funeral, revealing how he begins to affirm a world shaped by sensation.

Prison life allowed Meursault to actively reshape his perception of reality, from passive refusal to an affirmative act of adaptation. It is through this adaptation that Meursault builds a second reality where the body becomes the measure of truth. As he puts it plainly: "But by then I had gotten used to not smoking and it wasn't a punishment anymore [6]." Here, Meursault's response is not resistance or despair, but a sign of embracing the immediate present without expectation. Meursault reconstructs a full and livable reality out of the remembered textures of objects he once touched: "I would remember every piece of furniture… and of every object, all the details… a flake, a crack, or a chipped edge—the color and the texture… [6]" In this sense, Meursault continues to "live" a normal life by reactivating it through the material past. He realized that "a man who had lived only one day could easily live for a hundred years in prison… In a way, it was an advantage. (p. 79) [6]" A world built from what the senses can truly hold is enough.

In the courtroom, Meursault fully inhabits the second world he has constructed, a world dictated by bodily sensation and material immediacy. While society projects onto him the full force of moral abstraction, Meursault remains curiously immune. His attention is captured not by the prosecutor's speeches or the judge's verdicts, but by the rustling of newspapers, the heat filtering through the blinds, and the rhythmic waving of straw fans: "the sun filtered through in places and the air was already stifling (p. 83) [6]"; "the presiding judge gave a signal and the bailiff brought over three fans… which the three judges started waving immediately (p. 86–87) [6]". These details are not digressions but declarations: Meursault's reality is rooted in the body, while symbolic order collapses under the weight of the corporeal.

His rebellion, therefore, does not require speeches. It resides in non-cooperation. Unlike a typical defendant seeking clemency, Meursault does not offer justification or remorse. He refuses to perform grief, refuses to confess moral failure, refuses even to defend his own humanity. This is resistance through affirmation. As Camus would have it, Meursault has ceased to say "no" alone; he now says "yes" to his own mode of being, even when that mode defies the courtroom's ethical grammar. The trial becomes a spectacle of grotesque misunderstanding—he, who lives in sensation, is judged by those who demand abstract morality.

In this sense, the courtroom does not subjugate Meursault; it liberates him further. It proves to him that his world, the second world amid heat, light, sound, and exhaustion, is incommensurable with the symbolic one. As he leaves the courthouse, Meursault recalls: "I recognized for a brief

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moment the smell and color of the summer evening… all the familiar sounds of a town I loved… and that hum in the sky… It was the hour when, a long time ago, I was perfectly content [6].” It is this final sensory recognition that confirms for him the enduring presence of life. Thus, the courtroom becomes a site of emancipation. Meursault completes his shift from rejection to affirmation, preparing to meet death without illusion, on his own terms.

Finally, the third stage emerges as Meursault affirms this bodily, temporal world while facing death, culminating in a carnivalesque embrace of the absurd. In the final stretch of the novel, Meursault fixes his attention on tangible sensations and the movement of time: “Only the words 'yesterday’ and 'tomorrow’ still had any meaning to me [6].” What is striking, however, is how his mother reenters his consciousness. He recalls her words—“you can always find something to be happy about”—only when the dawn light slips into his cell: “I found out that she was right. (p. 113) [6]” Though he once dismissed her death, he now understands its meaning through the peace she may have found: “So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her. (p. 122) [6]” In this final moment, Meursault affirms a truth that is not abstract but bodily, not eternal but present: “The wondrous peace of that sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide [6].” His rebellion thus culminates paradoxically—by surrendering to the limits of his body, he finds the freedom to say yes to life.

4. Conclusion

Meursault’s rebellion in L’Étranger unfolds in three stages: first, he refuses abstract morality and imposed meaning; second, he constructs a second world grounded in bodily sensation; and finally, he embraces death as an affirmation of life’s absurd truth. His journey transforms alienation into a grotesque yet lucid defiance. In light of Bakhtin’s carnival theory, Meursault emerges as a rebel who subverts ethical hierarchies and affirms existence on his own terms.

Nevertheless, this study faces certain limitations. This inquiry focuses primarily on the textual and philosophical dimensions of Meursault’s rebellion, while setting aside historical or socio-political interpretations of Camus’ oeuvre. Moreover, while the analysis adopts Bakhtin’s carnival theory as a theoretical lens, it does not fully engage with potential tensions between Camus’ existentialism and Bakhtinian dialogism. Future research might explore how Meursault’s rebellion compares with other literary figures who confront absurdity through embodiment, especially in postcolonial or non-Western contexts. Alternatively, one could examine how Meursault’s sensory logic challenges legal or moral authority not just in literature, but in broader ethical or juridical discourse. Such directions may extend the significance of Meursault’s grotesque defiance beyond the page—toward an ethics grounded in lived, material experience.

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