

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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### **An Ecocritical Reading of Albert Camus' *The Outsider***

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#### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to analyze Albert Camus's novel *The Outsider* from an ecocritical perspective. With an ecocritical lens, the paper argues that nature influences the protagonist Meursault's physical and emotional state as well as acts as an active agent in the novel. It also brings the connection between ecocriticism and two other prevalent themes of the novel: existentialism and absurdism. From an ecocritical perspective, the paper argues that freedom, an intrinsic theme of existential philosophy, conflicts and coincides with the ecocritical perspective as it shows how Meursault is bound to his physical needs indicating existential philosophy's connection to the ecological concept of "self-in-relation". Moreover, the paper also postulates that absurdist traits of humans can be better understood from an eco-conscious perspective. Therefore, it explains Meursault's actions as a result of his disjunctive and conjunctive response to nature. Thus, the paper encourages ecocritical reading of canonical texts to ensure synergy in literary criticism.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, existentialism, self-in-relation, absurdism, synergy

## Introduction

Ecocriticism, being practised since the mid-80s of the last century, is recognized as the interdisciplinary study that ties the relationship between literature and the physical environment by taking an eco-centric approach to literary studies (Glotfelty xviii). An ecocritical approach alters the anthropocentric worldview and comes up with the ideals of Deep Ecology focusing on the affective relation between culture and nature. This approach to literary studies is becoming more relevant in our contemporary as it conveys a common aim: the need for awareness of the environmental destruction occurring all over the world and the redirection of anthropocentric actions taken by human beings. Whereas other cultural theories applied to literature are mostly anthropocentric, ecocriticism bears the responsibility of learning and understanding literature from an eco-centric perspective. It is distinguished from other critical approaches in the sense that "in most literary theories "the world" is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere" (Glotfelty xix).

This paper has analyzed Albert Camus' novel *The Outsider* based on an ecocritical perspective while keeping other philosophical perspectives as minor motivators. It is a vastly read novel upon which numerous scholarly works have been conducted, unfortunately, an extensive study of this novel based on an ecocritical approach has not yet been done. For instance, the novel contains more than its existential and absurdist elements. The human relationship with nature and its influence on a human being is an aspect of ecocriticism that can be found in the novel *The Outsider*. Ecocriticism can vividly reflect upon the prevalent aspects of the influence of nature on humans; and thus, can explain the protagonist Meursault's physical and emotional inclination toward nature. Thus, ecocriticism can explain the way human actions and feelings work with their alignment with ecological implications. This paper attempts to provide an ecocritical understanding of *The Outsider* by evaluating Meursault's

existential and absurdist traits from an ecocritical perspective indicating his disjunctive and conjunctive response to nature.

Additionally, the motive behind writing this paper is to make the reader understand that it is necessary to study and interpret literature eco-critically in this era of global environmental crisis because this approach to reassessing literature can redirect humankind from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness. Moreover, an ecocritical reading of a text does not reduce it to a mere environmental discussion, it rather integrates other ideas with the environmental thinking of literature (Chisty 42).

### **Setting an Ecocritical Canon in Understanding *The Outsider***

Ecocriticism, as a literary theory and movement can be established as a canon in understanding Albert Camus's novel *The Outsider*. Although this novel is not generally perceived under the genre of *Green Literature* by the literary canons as its central theme is not concerned with nature or ecology, ecocritical elements are prevalent if we notice how the interaction and interrelation between nature and humans are described in the novel. Other critical perspectives such as psychoanalysis, existential philosophy, or Camus's theory of absurdism addressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* had been discussed by critics in the past to analyze this novel. However, a little contribution has been taken from ecocriticism to reflect upon the human-nature relationship. In the past studies, it is little noticed how the sun as a natural force influences Meursault's actions. It is vividly remarkable in the novel how Meursault perceives nature and how his physical and emotional beings become affected by the change in natural phenomena. His emotional alignment with nature is highlighted throughout the novel by Camus:

When I went outside, it was broad daylight. Above the hills which separates Marengo from the sea, the sky was full of red streaks. And the breeze coming up over the hills had a salty tang to it. It was going to be a beautiful day. It was

a long time since I'd been out in the country and I knew how much I'd have enjoyed going for a walk if it hadn't been for mother. (11)

At that moment, his emotional alignment with nature makes him a person who wants to cherish the beautiful moment in nature. Therefore, it is noticeable how his emotional response changed when the previously beautiful nature in the countryside altered into a disturbing nature when the sun was rising high and began "to weigh down heavily on the earth" and the atmosphere "was rapidly getting hotter". The scorching sun and the monotonous nature irritated him so severely that it soon became unbearable for him.

Although there were other factors as well, 'the cymbals of the sun' and the tiring nature contributed mainly to distorting his feelings on his mother's funeral in Marengo. From his description, it is clearly understood that natural influences change his emotions. Several recent scientific studies have found a link between hot weather and humans' emotional condition upon it:

Some argue that the physiological reactions to heat are responsible. Raised temperatures cause an increase in heart rate, testosterone, and other metabolic reactions that trigger the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for the fight-or-flight response, so people are more inclined to fight. (*Burnett*)

Hence, scientifically, it is no surprise in the case of Meursault when he becomes irritated by the dazzling, burning sun when he went to the beach, the same sun which he witnessed during his mother's funeral in Marengo. He himself states that "by nature, my physical needs often distorted my feelings" (Camus 59) and from his description, it is perceived that his feelings get influenced by the nature surrounding him. When Meursault shot the Arab for the first time it was nature that influenced him to do so. "... here amid the sand, the sun and the sea, in a dual silence of the flute and the water, everything was at a standstill. I realized at that point that you

could either shoot or not shoot”(Camus 51). Although he thinks that he had a choice of either shooting or not shooting the Arab, he had no control over his emotional being:

All I could feel were the cymbals the sun was clashing against my forehead and, indistinctly, the dazzling spear still leaping up off the knife in front of me. It was like a red-hot blade gnawing at my eyelashes and gouging out my stinging eyes. That was when everything shook. The sea swept ashore a great breath of fire. The sky seemed to be splitting from end to end and raining down sheets of flame. My whole being went tense and I tightened my grip on the gun. *The trigger gave.* (Camus 53)

Here, the passivity of his physical action is observable as he stated that he did not give a push to the trigger instead the trigger gave the push. At that moment, he had no choice but to shoot because his emotional being was not under his control. This incident refers to the scientific finding of interrelating criminal activity and weather change. A recent statistical article published by *The Guardian* shows that “violent crimes increase in occurrence during the summer, especially if it’s hotter than average” (Burnett). This finding explains that Meursault’s action of shooting the Arab is a consequence of his physicality and emotion being vexed by the sun.

Ecological studies also explain that nature, body, and emotion are all interconnected. Even though our body is familiar to us, Snyder asserts that our bodies are wild, highlighting ‘universal responses of this mammal body’, such as ‘the heart-in-the-throat in a moment of danger, the catch of the breath (176). From this ecocritical perspective, it can be said that Meursault’s physical responses were influenced by nature. Moreover, the accusation made by the judge towards him of lacking emotions during his mother's funeral which labeled him as a psycho-criminal is nothing but their inability to comprehend his distorted feelings being controlled by the nature. Nature in this case is the mover and Meursault is the moved.

This perception implies Colleen Clements' concept of the "fairy tale ideal of an ecosystem of achieved and unchanging harmony" (215), that "stasis is unusual in natural systems" (Garrard 57). Nature became unpredictable and thus, contributed to the murder. Although Meursault realized after shooting the Arab that he had "destroyed the balance of the day" (Camus 54), at that point, it needs to be noted that his emotional inclination derives from the unusual nature surrounding him. Therefore, in terms of ecology, the sun or nature in *The Outsider* which became irritating with the passage of time breaks the notion of nature being a constant phenomenon. Daniel Botkin stresses that "nature undisturbed is not constant in form, structure, or proportion, but changes at every scale of time and space..." (62). It does change without being disturbed and does influence the subject it is interconnected with. Meursault's enigmatic emotional responses and his killing of the Arab can be said to have resulted from his physical and emotional inclination toward nature.

### **Existentialism in *The Outsider* from Ecocritical Perspective**

Ecocriticism being an interdisciplinary approach can both collide and coincide with existential philosophy. The protagonist Meursault in *The Outsider* exudes existential traits as he has a subjective notion of truth, and he chooses his decisions consciously. To define existentialism, it needs to be said that it is a philosophical and literary tendency that rejects abstract theories which try to deny the mundane aspects of human life and emphasizes the subjective reality of the individual by prioritizing individual freedom, existence, and choice. Jonathan Webber argues that "as originally defined by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism is the ethical theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values" (2).

This existential idea of freedom can collide with the inescapable natural law that human beings cannot avoid. Humans are part of nature, part of the ecology's web that is governed by

the law of "Everything is connected to everything else" (Rueckert 108). Hence, human existence cannot be understood apart from the environment it dwells in. The laws of nature are certainly applicable in the case of human beings as a species, which collides with the existential idea of freedom, because of "the body of inescapable natural laws", the "important principles" which are beyond our ability to alter or escape, the remorseless inevitableness of things, the laws of nature which are "decrees of fate" (Rueckert 113). It also conflicts with one of ecology's basic maxims: "We are not free to violate the laws of nature" (Rueckert 113). That is why Meursault, despite being an existential hero, who values freedom the most, and who exercises the subjective notion of truth, cannot deny his physical desires. Without being able to resist his physical needs, he engages in a sexual relationship even when his mother has died the day before. He is a man who "self-interprets" his life, as in terms of existentialism "human beings are self-interpreting animals where the interpretation is constitutive of the interpreter" (Taylor 45), yet cannot control his natural physical desires as he mentions to the lawyer that "by nature, my physical needs often distorted my feelings." (Camus 59).

It is an existential perspective that human beings are born free. However, this existential idea of freedom does not indicate that human beings have the authority to be immoral and superior to all other species. According to Sartre, existential freedom is freedom with responsibility (Stumph 477). This subjective world of an individual has a simple law: if a man is what he makes of himself, he has no one to blame for what he *is* except himself. Meursault might have thought of the scorching sun when he was being interrogated about the murder but he took responsibility for his actions like a true existentialist. Neither Camus nor I want to put the burden on anyone or anything's shoulder. The killing of the Arab is not justified and that is why Meursault himself regards his case to be very simple. Meursault's failure to deal with the disturbing side of nature rather indicates our perceived and expected response to nature which is meek, beautiful, and something that is meant to please us. But nature being an active

agent, can have diverse responses, and humans need to learn to cope with it just in the same way they manage to adjust to society.

Moreover, Fackenheim stated that existence is “self-making-in-a-situation” (37). In this sense, human beings make themselves in situations: what I am cannot be separated from what I *take* myself to be (Fackenheim 37). However, confusion may arise in understanding what “self” and its accountability means in terms of ecocritical perspective. According to Plumwood’s point of view, there can be three different versions of the self: the indistinguishable self, the expanded self, and the transcendent self. Among the three versions, the indistinguishability of the self may seem appropriate if one tries to abolish the discontinuity between nature and humans for “The indistinguishability account rejects boundaries between self and nature” (Plumwood 12). But this aspect is problematic because it cannot be denied that humans and nature are two different entities, therefore, the boundary between humans and nature is necessary in order to recognize their accountability in the world. Hence, Plumwood, with a further explanation, remarks that “we need to recognize not only our human continuity with the natural world but also its distinctness and independence from us and the distinctness of the needs of things in nature from ours” (13). This “identification” approach to nature and the human self is problematic because identification creates collision. This problem can be avoided if “self” is considered as a “self-in-relation” similar to the existential idea of “self-making-in-a-situation”. And what is this notion of “self-in-relation”? Wendy Donner explains:

This notion is non-holistic; that is, it focuses on individual selves...Furthermore, these are distinct selves, so they are not fused with or merged with the other: the individual other, the community, the cosmic whole, and so on...They are autonomous selves, and so can't to rationally scrutinize their different aspects as well as their relations and connections and to endorse, commit to, or reject and repudiate those aspects and relations. (382)



Therefore, if the existential idea of “self-making-in-a-situation” is a concept of taking the accountability for one’s self, then it is also connected with the ecological idea of self-in-relation which is connected with other individuals, communities, and nature. In terms of Doner’s argument, the “self”, whether viewed from existential philosophy or the perspective of ecocriticism, is “logically, axiologically, and metaphysic before or to its relations, those properties of itself that connect it to others” (382). This idea is synergistic with Sartre’s idea that “existence precedes its essence” (Webber 14). However, it cannot be denied that the self is “fundamentally affected by and shaped by their relational properties” (Doner 382), or from an existential perspective, human existence is affected by its essence.

The existential idea of freedom collides with one of the ecological maxims of connectedness, while the existential concept of self-making-in-a-situation coincides with the ecocritical perspective of self-in-relation. These contrary and similar ideas are noticeable in *The Outsider* if analyzed how Meursault cannot escape the laws of nature although he values subjectivity and freedom the most, as well as he being responsible for his actions and taking accountability for killing the Arab depicts him as a person whose characteristics reflect the ecocritical aspect of a self-in-relation. Thus, ecocriticism sets a different perspective in understanding the existential elements portrayed through the character of Meursault.

### **Meursault’s Absurdity from Ecocritical Perspective: Perception of a Familiar and Strange Environment**

Although *The Outsider* is remarked as an existential novel, it is also perceived as an absurdist novel. Meursault is considered to be an absurdist who is seen as an outsider in society. Albert Camus in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* explained what it means to be in an absurd world and how one perceives this absurd existence:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (6)

Therefore, according to Camus, the experience of an absurd world results from a person feeling alienated and exiled from an unfamiliar world, just like Meursault in *The Outsider* encounters this difficulty in establishing any meaningful inclination toward the world. This prevalent feeling makes a person the stranger who is divorced from the outside world. This feeling of strangeness is not merely related to other people but considered as well with the whole world including nature and the environment. Robb-Grillet explained with specifications about Camus's perception of absurdity in her essay "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy":

Albert Camus, as we know, has named absurdity the impassable gulf which exists between man and the world, between the aspirations of the human mind and the world's incapacity to satisfy them. Absurdity is in neither man nor things but in the impossibility of establishing between them any relation other than *strangeness*. (62)

This relation of "strangeness" between man and the world is noticeable in Camus' novel *The Outsider* if the characteristics of Meursault is seen from both absurd and ecocritical perspective. The protagonist of the novel, Meursault, has absurd characteristics as well as a love-hate relationship with nature. From the very beginning of the novel, Meursault's inclination toward the natural world is quite ambiguous. He spends his entire Sunday evening sitting on his balcony, observing people rather than going out. He likes to spend Sunday holidays in his bedroom; however, it is also seen that he sometimes goes out to the beach. His

ambiguous relationship with nature is vividly remarkable when he enjoyed the pleasing nature in Marengo when he had gone there for attending his mother's funeral. He vividly picturizes the landscape: "It was going to be a beautiful day. It was a long time since I'd been out in the country and I knew how much I 'd have enjoyed going for a walk if it hadn't been for mother" (Camus 11). Here, nature is merely a landscape that is enjoyable to him. But the familiar nature soon gets unfamiliar as he no longer feels overwhelmed by nature but rather feels irritated by the uprising hot summer sun. "I was surprised how rapidly the sun was climbing in the sky...I noticed that for quite some time now the countryside had been alive with the humming of insects and the crackling of grass. The sweat was running down my cheeks" (Camus 14).

This feeling of strangeness or unfamiliarity with nature is something Meursault experiences because of being an absurdist. As an absurdist, his unawareness of the surrounding nature derives from his perception of a certain probable environment just like Dillard, in her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* encounters natural occasions "expecting to see one thing and then encountering another" (Slovic 358). It has to be noted that, this feeling of strangeness occurs because human beings perceive nature from probable and definite points of view. In order to explain, how humans perceive an uncertain environment, Stephen Kaplan in his essay "Perception of an Uncertain Environment" cites William James's definition of perception that it "is of probable and definite things" and by 'probable', "[James] meant that we tend to perceive what is likely, what is familiar, even when the stimulus is in fact not familiar. By 'definite' he meant that we tend to perceive clearly, even when the stimulus is vague, blurred, or otherwise ambiguous" (32). The very familiar Nature, thus, in the case of Meursault, appears as an unpredictable entity when it influenced his physical actions. Moreover, there are some similarities between Meursault and Dillard in the way they perceive nature, as Scott Slovic remarks, that their perception of the environment is a representation of "Thoreau's two opposing modes of response to nature: *disjunction* and *conjunction*" (355). These altering

modes of response derive from the psychological experimentation of perceiving nature, while conjunction indicates the “closeness to”, disjunction indicates the “estrangement from nature” (Slovic 357).

Therefore, Meursault’s previously conjunctive response to nature suddenly becomes disjunctive as he says, “The glare from the sky was unbearable...I felt a bit lost, with the blue and white sky overhead and these monotonous colors all around me—the sticky black tar, the dull black clothes, and the shiny clack hearse” (Camus 15). His dual experience of an uncertain nature startles him just like Dillard experiences both “heightened and dulled awareness of nature” (Slovic 357). Slovic also addressed this issue of an unfamiliar nature that is tied with the absurdist view of the world: “What especially interests me, though, is the implication that even when we feel certain we know our natural environment, we probably do not—we may not even have really looked at it” (Slovic 356).

And that is why, Meursault’s experience of the environment, in which perception has not been probable and definite, surprises him. That is why when he shoots the Arab, he becomes unaware that it is the ‘unfamiliar’ nature that is contributing to controlling his mental and physical actions. He has lost control over his body and mind and he remembers that it was not him giving the trigger of the revolver a press but rather “the trigger gave” press because his entire being was in a passive mode. It was the “dazzling sun”, which was pouring heat like a “blinding rain”. It was the “cymbals of the sun” that reflected like “the sword of light”. That was when he encountered the ambiguity of the environment although it was “the same sun as on the mother’s funeral”. That is why Alain Robbe-Grillet mentions in the chapter of “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy” that:

It is no exaggeration to claim that it is things, quite specifically, which ultimately lead this man to crime: the sun, the sea, the brilliant sand, the

gleaming knife, the spring among the rocks, the revolver. . . As, of course, among these things, the leading role is taken by Nature. (63)

Therefore, Meursault's absurdist characteristics are interrelated with his eco-consciousness which contributes to his disjunctive and conjunctive perception of nature. The relationship between nature and humans, which is of both familiarity and strangeness, leads Meursault toward his crime. For this reason, Robbe-Grillet defines this relationship as a "lover's quarrel" (64). Meursault is a man who is in love with nature but only when it is pleasing and not violent.

### **Conclusion**

Camus's most celebrated novel *The Outsider* has been critically analyzed from both existential and absurdist viewpoints; thus, setting a literary canon of studying the novel eco-critically allows the reader to understand the novel from a different perspective. From the analysis, it can be remarked that an ecocritical perspective can explain how nature influences Meursault's physical as well as emotional being. Moreover, this new perspective of understanding Meursault and his actions develops a logical argument that although he is considered an existential hero and tries to exercise his freedom, his very physical needs dominate his emotional thoughts and feelings because he cannot deny his natural desires that are bound to happen because of his ecological inclination as a human being. And it also can be vividly understood that his absurdist traits derive from his conjunctive and disjunctive response toward perceiving nature. The same nature that is both familiar and strange to him controls his consciousness in the crucial moment of shooting the Arab. Thence, from the argument, readers can perceive how Ecocriticism, Existentialism, and Absurdism have both similarities and dissimilarities among them, and in order to understand human behaviour and action, environmental theory and environmental psychology can assist.

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