Absurdity and The Significance of the Idea of Death in Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*

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ABSTRACT

L'Étranger written by Albert Camus shows the concept of absurdity states that to face absurdity, one must confront it with consciousness and live through the absurd life until death. This article aims to reveal how death, which consistently occurs in *L'Étranger,* is related to Camus' concept of absurdity. Through the analysis of focalization development apparent in the story, the recurring events of death as told through Meursault's narration become the key to show the connection between Camus' idea of absurdity and death. The storyline and narrative breakdowns show that the deaths in *L'Étranger* expose the main character to the steps towards becoming the Absurd Man. Despite being alienated, Meursault shows how being the stranger in a world of absurdity means accepting the inevitability of death by continuing to live the absurd life with consciousness.

Keywords: *Absurdity; death; literature; narratology; philosophy*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 20th century, two global-scale wars affected human lives all over the world. In France, the casualties from the two wars reached more than 5% of the population [1]. France's lost, which was followed by 4 years of German occupation, became a horrible memory for the people who were suffering and overwhelmed by fear, a historical fact which shaped the situation at the time and changed the future of the country [2].Over time, death and misery were considered common. This condition reflected the wartime life which caused lots of physical and mental destructions due to the unavailing human sacrifice. It forced everyone to only focus on themselves.

Although literature covers global conflicts, most literary works written during World War II focus on the bad conditions of individuals [3]. Papers became the media used by intellectuals to express their ideas to the public. Language became a weapon used by thinkers to face the destructions caused by war, and writing was something that could be done freely. Writers used literary works to express their feelings and emotions triggered by war, not to simply retell the facts of war. Although fictional, readers were interested to find and learn about the reality of war by reading the written stories [4]. War became an inspiration for the various topics that dominated French literature in the 20th century such as death, suffering, happiness, and hope. These topics reflected the actual condition of the society at the time, which was the absurd condition when humans were filled with questions but the world had no answer. One writer who had a big impact to the life of the French society that was confronted with the absurdity of life was Albert Camus.

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*L'Étranger*has become a valuable corpus for academicians and researchers. Verde [5] studies*L'Etranger* examining the relations among the criminal, his crime, and the society which punishes him. Raymond Lavoie [6] and Arthur Scherr[7] focus on the recurring deaths in Camus' works, including *L'Étranger*, and connecting them to Camus' values and views as a writer. Similarly, a book written by Alice Kaplan traces Camus'life to better understand *L'Étranger* through Camus' point of view [8].

The discussions of this novel had presented the absurdism implied by Meursault's personality and behaviour has too frequently been discussed without adequate attention being paid to the form and medium of its expression. This paper demonstrates the narrative technique in *L'Etranger* through the presence of death events that appear and form the logic of the story.

2. METHOD

This article will take a different approach in connecting the deaths in *L'Étranger*and Camus' concept of absurdity by looking from a reader's point of view. As such, it will display the meaning of death in the story by breaking down the text structure and the narrative strategy, showing the idea of absurdity in the story through focalization of the main character, then associating the idea of death in the story with Camus' idea of absurdity. By considering the use of the first person point of view in the narration or the utterances of the character, this article uses the theory of focalization by Gérard Genette[9]. Furthermore, Albert Camus' concept of absurdity will be used as the key concept. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the role of recurring death-related events in *L'Étranger*and reveal the value of death in absurdity's philosophy as displayed by the story.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Albert Camus' Concept of Absurdity

The concept of absurdity was first ignited by a Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1955) [10]. However, Camus refused the former's idea of committing suicide and leap of faith as forms of solution when facing the absurd. Camus believed that aside from the limitations of view and the absurdity of life, human could make a decision to get away from misery. Human's choice could reduce misery by accepting the reality that not everything can be fixed, finished, or explained [11]. According to Camus [12], to face the absurd was not by running away from life, but by living the absurd life with conscience. When human realized that life didn't have any meaning, his conscience would confront it by rebelling. The form of rebel mentioned by Camus was by undergoing the routines of the absurd life until the end. Camus put this idea in his first novel,*L'Étranger*, which was published in 1942.

Using the first person point of view, this novel tells the story of the main character, Meursault, who keeps on going through his life routines without stopping even though he has a lot of questions about the world around him. Through *L'Étranger*, Camus fulfills the society's necessity to know and develop the unthinkable possibilities that human may have. Human will never stop producing questions as long as the issues about humanity and death still occupy the daily life of the society.

3.2. Text Structure and Narrative Strategy of *L'Étranger*

L'Étranger consists of two parts with three important events of death, i.e. the death of the mother, the murder of an Arab man by Meursault, and the death sentence of Meursault. The

first part of the book begins with the obituary of Meursault's mother and ends with the shooting of the Arab man. The event of shooting which ends the first part of the book takes the beginning to the second part as Meursault, who usually spends his daily routines at the office and at home, must spend his time in a prison cell and in a courtroom throughout the second part of the book. The trial, which dominates the second part of the book, ends up in Meursault's death sentence. This death sentence concludes the second part and ends the story. This structure shows how death frames the plot of the story. Looking at the order of the events, it can be clearly seen that the topic of death has an important position in the story, serving as the beginning, the turning point, and the ending. These three death-related events that assemble the story have several differences which can be seen in this table.

Table 1. Events related to death in *L'Étranger*

	Mother's Death	**The Shooting of the Arab**	**Meursault's Death Sentence**
Cause	Age (fate)	Reflection of the sun on the gun (unintentional)	The result of the trial (intentional)
Doer	Time	Meursault	Judge
Place	Nursing home, cemetery	Beach	Courtroom

As shown in the table, the cause, the doer, and the place of the three important death-related events vary. The death of the mother happens because of her age, which means this death occurs because of fate. As such, time is the factor that inflicts the death. The settings of the first death include the nursing home and cemetery. Nursing home, as a place to accommodate the elderly, emphasizes how humans will age and cannot fight against time. The cemetery is also a setting that is equally related to death, further entrapping the first death as something that is absolute and highlighting it as something that cannot be controlled by human. This justifies Meursault's passive attitude towards the death of his mother. The first death in the story reveals his avoidance in viewing death as something important, for death is a common thing that is inevitable to human.

The shooting of the Arab man that becomes the turning point of the story is caused by the reflection of the sun on the gun that hurt Meursault's eye. Moreover, Meursault continues to shoot his gun after the first shot and reasons it as his response to the sound of the gun from the first shot. This implies that the shooting occurs unintentionally. The setting, which is an open beach with all of its natural factors present, also supports the situation. In this setting, nature dominates the scene and overpowers the presence of humans. Faced with these natural and physical factors, Meursault is confronted with his surroundings. This situation makes him feel that he does not kill the Arab, since the cause is a natural factor. With this set of mind, Meursault continues to avoid the topic of death as a thing to be valued, not even once considering death as a thing that is close to him aside from the murder accusation. The second death is also arguably the most absurd out of them all, with the involvement of a revolver that was supposed to be used as a defensive tool instead of offensive. The Arab's shooting shapes the absurd condition that Meursault lives in and becomes a turning point that changes his life from the mundane routines at home and work to the life of prison and court.

The third death-related event is caused by the trial and the decision of the judge. As with the aforementioned deaths, Meursault's death sentence is a death that is out of his control. This is enhanced by the indoor setting in the form of a courtroom that prevents Meursault from avoiding the values adopted by society. Meursault is set up on an impending death with the presence of characters who were not related to the shooting of the Arab. The trial does not

judge Meursault's criminal action, but his different views of life. This setting, too, blocks him from avoiding death in the form of death sentence verdict, a decision which cannot be questioned. By this death sentence, Meursault is forced to face death. When facing his own death, Meursault does not have any choice except to value death. This point completes the absurdity in *L'Étranger*, as Meursault becomes the Absurd Man.

The different factors in the three main deaths could be seen more clearly from the plot which positioned the three events as an important point in the development of the story. Greimas' Canonical Narrative schema [13] could show the changes when the story move from one stage (the beginning) to another (the ending).

Table 2.Greimas' Schemafor*L'Étranger*

Initial State	Transformation			Final State
	Qualifying Test	Decisive Test	Glorifying Test	
Meursault's indifference after hearing his mother's obituary	Meursault going through his routines	Meursault realizes the meaninglessness of human life and shoot the Arab man	Death sentence verdict towards Meursault	Meursault's realization of the meaning of death when he is about to be executed

According to Greimas' plot structure, Meursault's view of death has gone through changes triggered by the three important events related to death. Through the plot of *L'Étranger*, the logic of the story points out that the significant development shows how the final goal of the character is to value death. This puts Meursault as a subject whose role is to figure the value of death. His attempt is mostly highlighted by the tests in which Meursault must face the absurdity of life and death.

As the main character that drives the story towards the goal, Meursault is a focalisator who shows the change of views towards death. According to Genette's focalization theory (1972) which divides focalization into *focalization zéro, focalization interne*, and *focalization externe*, the story shows a development from *focalization externe* into *focalization interne*. This narrative development technique emphasizes the presence of the story development based on death-related events. Looking at the text structure which indicates the differences among those events, the presence of the discourse of death supports the movement of the story narrated by the focalisator as the main character who drives the story. This shows how death becomes an important factor in the development of the story. The shift in Meursault's narration supports the indication that death is a factor that leads him towards his consciousness and, along with it, his freedom. This can be seen by the way Meursault voiced out his subjective thoughts towards the end of the story as compared to the beginning of the story where he tended to merely describe what he observed. The transformation tests Meursault went through that placed him in confrontation with death gradually made him voice out his exploration of absurdity as he reflects on life and death.

3.3. The Absurd Condition in *L'Étranger*

In Camus' concept of absurdity, human must face absurdity in order to go through life because human minds cannot explain the meanings of life objectively. When confronted with the world that provides no answer, human feels alienated. The only way to face this condition is to undergo the routines. According to Camus, it is a form of rebel from the world's absurdity which restrains human. In *L'Étranger*, the story development does not only indicate the differences in the death-related events but also Camus' idea of absurdity that is built from the stages in facing the absurd condition. Throughout the story, Meursault shows how he

routinely undergoes his daily activities without stopping. How he is restrained by the routines can be seen from how he loses his perception of time.

3.3.1. Meursault's Attachment to the Routines

Meursault is a character who cannot be separated from routines throughout the story. As someone who keeps doing the same things over and over again, those activities slowly lose their meanings and serve only as habits that Meursault feels he must do. Through his narration, Meursault shows how time slips away from his consciousness as he is being restrained by the routines. Human slowly loses their perception of time when they get used to routine. As a narrator, Meursault repeatedly limits the information of time. This indicates that Meursault is a man trapped in the routines of life. The restraints of life routines demanded him to do the same activities over and over again. When something is done repeatedly, the purpose of doing that thing will vanish. Meursault's daily activities, bounded by the routines, make his life have no purpose and devoid from thoughts and emotions. This shows the close relationship between routine activities and the meaninglessness of life. For Meursault, their presence to save him is meaningless because his life is already meaningless and there is no use to run from the consequences of his action. Meursault's attitude, when faced with the meaninglessness of life, is a form of human confrontation against the world that disregards human conditions. This positions Meursault as an alienated man.

3.3.2. Meursault's Alienation

Previously, Meursault's narration which differentiates him from the priest has shown a self-isolation from his surroundings. His self-differentiation is in fact clearly shown from the beginning, i.e. when he reacts to the news about his mother's death. Death should be a significant event that is memorable for those involved, but Meursault's indifference towards his mother's death indicates that his view of death is not the same as people's view of death in common. Meursault's response towards death becomes an indicator which shows the contrast between him and the other characters. This difference is shown throughout the trial, when Meursault's lawyer tries to justify the potential of Meursault's criminal character. Through his narration, Meursault informed about the response of the public attending the trial and showed how they view his passive attitude towards his mother's death as disrespectful. Meursault's passive response is repeatedly used as a reason to say that he has a criminal nature. There is an indication that the public judge him a criminal not for the murder of the Arab man, but for his passive attitude towards his mother's death. Considering that morality is something of positive value that is collectively agreed upon by a society, the public response in the trial becomes an indication that Meursault's moral is asymmetrical with the society. This makes Meursault an alienated character from his community.

Meursault's alienation is not only about the relationship between him and the others, but also with the surrounding world. This is shown in his response towards the nature around him when he is at the beach and shoots the Arab. Conventionally, people kill with certain motives. However, Meursault does not have any internal reason of his action. His explanation places natural elements as important factors that he remembers regarding the shooting. This indicates that Meursault lives on physical impulses. Without the presence of emotion or social meaning in his life, every physical matter affects Meursault and defines what he feels and does. From that consideration, it can be said that natural elements have created the absurd condition that leads Meursault to his death. Meursault's alienated condition shapes a consciousness that brings him to face the absurdity by rebelling against it.

3.3.3. Meursault's Rebellion

In Camus' idea of absurdity, rebellion means facing the absurd condition by going through it with consciousness. In the end of the story, Meursault's passive attitude about death is shown as a form of freedom. Meursault's narration exhibits death in a positive way and justifies his passive response in regard of his mother's death. This contemplation shows that Meursault's view about death is constructed by the thought that life has no meaning and the world has no contribution in giving meanings. Through Meursault's contemplation, death becomes the only certainty that frees human from the meaningless life. As the main character who narrates the story, Meursault shows that he realizes how the world will not be affected by someone's death, as he is never affected by death. Meursault's confession about his happiness proves that he is the absurd man (*l'homme absurd*), someone who faces the absurdity of life by going through the routines and feels happy. The focalisator displays rebellion from the absurd condition with dignity.

In the beginning of the story, Meursault is someone who only describes what he observes. However, when death draws near, he begins to show himself deeper than before through his contemplation about life and death while waiting for his execution. The narration at the beginning of the story shows how Meursault is trapped in the daily routines that lead him to the absurd condition. As the story goes, Meursault starts to realize his condition and accept the fact that life is meaningless so that he tries to rebel against its absurdity with consciousness. This rebellion is done by going through the absurd life. As the main character who is trapped in the absurd condition, Meursault reveals Camus' idea of absurdity in the form of routine activities, meaninglessness of life, passive attitude, and the significance of physical aspects, and shows how he, as the main character, rebels against the absurd condition.

3. 4. The Meaning of Death and Consciousness in *L'Étranger*

Through the development of the story, Meursault builds his consciousness about the absurd condition that he experiences. Meursault's passive attitude towards his mother's obituary shows that human actions do not have any significance in front of the world and death will not affect the world from continuing to spin. This fact places the world as the indifferent party towards human life. Meursault's understanding of this condition is reflected through his action of pulling the trigger and shooting the Arab. Meursault shooting more than once shows his consciousness of the meaninglessness of life. Additionally, Meursault is presented as an alienated human in his world, a stranger among his relatives, and a prisoner of death penalty. In Camus' absurdity, this is a metaphysical condition of human and causes human to be sentenced to death. In Camus' idea, to be sentenced to death means that human cannot avoid death.

The inevitable position of death places it as a key to keep the order of the world. In *L'Étranger*, the order of the world is represented by the law institution. The death sentence put upon Meursault is based on the things that are supposed to have no relevance with his case, but this injustice precisely becomes a picture of human condition that exploits death as a tool to keep the order. In Camus' idea, the nature of human that lives to finally die positions human as a creature sentenced to death. From this point of view, the death sentence put upon human is a natural event of the world. However, the death sentence that is based on the law is a different matter. Meursault's reaction towards his death sentence is filled with confusions about the facts that do not support the verdict. The law is supposed to fix human nature including the nature to kill, and not to imitate it. Without the death penalty from the law, human has been sentenced by the world to die so that the law has no need to sentence someone to die because everyone will die in the end. When faced with the death penalty,

Meursault who never valued death previously, either the death of his mother or the murder that he committed, starts to contemplate life and death.

Meursault becomes one of the many humans in the world who have no meaning, alienated from his own self and from the world. Meursault becomes the perfect example of a human who faces absurdity with consciousness as he goes through the absurd condition in his life. *L'Étranger*becomes a novel that had relevance in the life of the French society not only at the times of war, but even to this day. It has become a timeless classic and an essential read with topics that touch on the values of mortality and the absurdity of life.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the explanation of the text structure, the presence of death can be seen constantly throughout the story. The story is started and finished by events of death, and death is repeatedly shown in the plot. The text structure shows that mortality triggers the revealing of human life significance. This can be seen from how Meursault's view changes as the story goes. The main character's narration reveals the idea of absurdity contained in the story and the focalization development shows how the possibility of death affects someone's view of life. The meaning of death of others is different from the meaning of the death of oneself. The consciousness of one's own death in the presence of absolute meaninglessness triggers the focalisator to contemplate deeply about life and death without limiting the narration. With the recurring death-related events in *L'Étranger*, death itself holds a role as a framework to show the absurdity that surrounds Meursault as a main character.

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