
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Judging Indifference: Social Norms, Emotional Discipline, and Cultural Violence in Camus's *The Stranger*

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| ABSTRACT

Albert Camus's *The Stranger* has long been read as a paradigmatic text of absurdist philosophy, with critical attention primarily directed toward Meursault's emotional indifference and existential detachment. Such interpretations, however, tend to approach indifference as an individual psychological or philosophical condition, thereby overlooking the cultural mechanisms through which it is rendered socially intolerable. Drawing on perspectives from cultural studies, this article re-examines *The Stranger* as a narrative of cultural judgment in which emotional norms function as instruments of social regulation. The article argues that Meursault is condemned not for the act of murder itself but for his failure to conform to culturally sanctioned modes of emotional expression. Through a close reading of key episodes—including the funeral, the courtroom proceedings, and Meursault's narrative restraint—the study demonstrates how emotional discipline operates as a form of cultural power that distinguishes the "normal" subject from the deviant one. The courtroom is thus interpreted not merely as a legal space but as a cultural theater in which moral legitimacy is publicly constructed and enforced. By foregrounding emotional normativity as a mechanism of exclusion, this study reframes Meursault's indifference as a site where cultural authority, social conformity, and symbolic violence intersect, thereby offering a culturally grounded reinterpretation of Camus's canonical text.

| KEYWORDS

Camus; *The Stranger*; cultural normativity; emotional discipline; cultural violence; judgment

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1. Introduction: From Absurdity to Cultural Judgment

Since its publication in 1942, Albert Camus's *The Stranger* has occupied a central position in twentieth-century literary and philosophical discourse. Frequently cited as a foundational text of absurdist thought, the novel has been widely interpreted through the lens of existential philosophy, with critical emphasis placed on Meursault's emotional detachment, his indifference toward social conventions, and his apparent rejection of metaphysical meaning. Within this interpretive tradition, Meursault is often understood as an embodiment of the absurd condition: a figure whose emotional opacity reflects the fundamental irrationality of the world and the collapse of traditional moral frameworks.

While such readings have significantly shaped the novel's critical reception, they also risk narrowing the scope of interpretation by locating indifference primarily within the individual subject. Meursault's emotional restraint is thus frequently approached as a philosophical attitude or a psychological anomaly, rather than as a culturally mediated phenomenon. This emphasis on individual consciousness, although philosophically productive, tends to obscure the social and cultural processes through which certain emotional expressions are rendered acceptable, meaningful, or deviant. As a result, the mechanisms by which Meursault's indifference becomes the object of collective judgment remain insufficiently examined.

This article proposes a cultural studies approach to *The Stranger*, shifting the focus from existential meaninglessness to cultural normativity. Rather than asking what Meursault's indifference signifies in philosophical terms, this study asks how indifference

functions within a social order that demands emotional legibility and conformity. In doing so, it treats emotion not as a purely internal state but as a culturally regulated practice—one that is subject to evaluation, discipline, and sanction. From this perspective, Meursault's failure lies not in moral deficiency but in his refusal or inability to perform socially sanctioned emotions at key moments of communal significance.

Building on and diverging from these approaches, the present study argues that emotional indifference in *The Stranger* should be understood primarily as a cultural phenomenon rather than a philosophical or psychological one. By foregrounding emotional normativity and examining how affective nonconformity is transformed into institutional judgment, this article seeks to bridge cultural studies and Camus scholarship, thereby offering a more comprehensive account of the novel's mechanisms of exclusion. Central to this argument is the observation that Meursault's trial does not revolve primarily around the material facts of the murder he commits. Instead, the courtroom discourse repeatedly returns to his emotional conduct, particularly his behavior at his mother's funeral. The legal process thus becomes a site where emotional norms are publicly articulated and enforced, transforming personal affect into evidence of moral worth. In this sense, the novel dramatizes a form of cultural judgment in which emotional conformity serves as a criterion for social legitimacy.

Moreover, this cultural judgment operates within the specific historical context of French colonial Algeria, where systems of legal and cultural authority intersect with racialized hierarchies. The anonymity of the Arab victim and the marginalization of colonial subjects within the narrative foreground the uneven distribution of visibility and voice. By situating emotional normativity within this colonial framework, the novel exposes a form of cultural violence that exceeds the boundaries of individual guilt and legal responsibility. By re-reading *The Stranger* through the lens of cultural studies, this article seeks to demonstrate that Meursault's indifference constitutes a form of cultural transgression rather than an existential posture alone. His execution, accordingly, reflects the punitive consequences of failing to conform to dominant emotional regimes. This approach not only broadens the interpretive possibilities of Camus's text but also underscores its relevance to contemporary discussions of social conformity, emotional regulation, and symbolic violence.

2. Literature Review

Existing scholarship on *The Stranger* has largely developed along three critical trajectories. The first, and most influential, situates the novel within the framework of absurdist and existential philosophy, interpreting Meursault as a figure who embodies the irrationality of the human condition and the collapse of transcendent meaning (Camus; Sprintzen). From this perspective, emotional indifference is commonly understood as an existential response to an indifferent universe.

A second body of criticism approaches the novel from a psychological or ethical standpoint, focusing on Meursault's affective detachment, moral responsibility, and the problem of empathy. These studies tend to evaluate indifference as an individual trait, often framing Meursault either as morally deficient or as a provocatively honest subject who refuses conventional hypocrisy. While illuminating, such readings remain largely centered on the individual psyche and ethical intention.

More recently, scholars have begun to situate *The Stranger* within its historical and colonial context, drawing attention to the silencing of the Arab victim and the racialized structures of legal authority in French Algeria (Said). This line of inquiry has significantly expanded the political implications of the novel but often treats emotional indifference as a secondary concern rather than a central analytical category.

3. Emotional Normativity and the Cultural Construction of Deviance

This section examines how emotional normativity operates as a cultural mechanism through which Meursault is constructed as a deviant subject, focusing on both social expectations and narrative restraint.

3.1 Emotional Norms and the Social Regulation of Affect

Emotions are often assumed to belong to the private realm of individual experience, yet cultural theorists have long emphasized their social and political dimensions. Rather than existing independently of social structures, emotions are shaped, categorized, and evaluated within specific cultural contexts. What a subject is expected to feel—and how that feeling should be expressed—is governed by normative frameworks that define appropriate affective responses to particular situations. These emotional norms function as implicit rules that organize social life, distinguishing acceptable behavior from deviance.

In *The Stranger*, such emotional normativity is most clearly articulated through Meursault's interactions with social institutions and communal rituals. The novel opens with the death of Meursault's mother, an event that immediately situates him within a culturally prescribed emotional script. Mourning, in this context, is not merely a personal response to loss but a public

performance through which social bonds are affirmed and moral character is displayed. Meursault's refusal—or inability—to perform this script marks the first instance in which his indifference becomes socially legible as a problem.

Throughout the funeral episode, Meursault's narrative voice remains resolutely factual and unembellished. He notes physical sensations—the heat, the glare of the sun, his own fatigue—without providing the emotional commentary typically associated with bereavement. This narrative restraint has often been read as a stylistic reflection of existential detachment. From a cultural perspective, however, it can be understood as a disruption of the emotional expectations attached to mourning. Meursault does not simply feel differently; he fails to translate feeling into recognizable social signs.

The reaction of others to Meursault's behavior underscores the social stakes of emotional conformity. The silent scrutiny of the funeral attendees, the emphasis on his lack of tears, and the later invocation of these details during the trial all point to the evaluative function of emotion within the community. Emotional expression here operates as a form of moral evidence, allowing observers to infer inner character from outward behavior. By withholding such expression, Meursault renders himself opaque and, therefore, suspect. This suspicion reflects a broader cultural logic in which emotional transparency is equated with moral trustworthiness. Subjects are expected not only to feel but to demonstrate that feeling in socially intelligible ways. Emotional discipline, in this sense, constitutes a subtle but pervasive form of social regulation. It operates not through overt coercion but through normative expectations that render certain affective states obligatory. Failure to comply does not merely invite misunderstanding; it provokes judgment and exclusion.

Meursault's indifference thus exposes the fragility of a moral order grounded in emotional performance. His behavior challenges the assumption that ethical legitimacy requires visible affective alignment with communal values. Rather than actively resisting social norms, Meursault simply refuses to participate in their emotional economy. This refusal, however, is intolerable precisely because it threatens the cultural mechanisms through which moral order is maintained. Importantly, the novel does not present Meursault as a heroic rebel consciously opposing social expectations. His indifference lacks the intentionality typically associated with resistance. Yet it is this very absence of strategic opposition that renders his position so destabilizing. By neither affirming nor contesting emotional norms, Meursault exposes their constructed nature. His indifference reveals that what appears as moral necessity is, in fact, a culturally enforced convention.

In this way, *The Stranger* illustrates how emotional norms function as instruments of cultural power. They regulate behavior by defining the boundaries of acceptable affect and by attaching moral value to emotional expression. Meursault's failure to conform to these norms initiates a process of social alienation that ultimately culminates in legal punishment. His indifference, therefore, must be understood not as a private deficiency but as a public transgression within a system of emotional discipline.

3.2 Narrative Restraint and the Production of Deviance

The cultural significance of Meursault's indifference is inseparable from the novel's narrative form. Camus's use of a first-person narrator who offers minimal psychological introspection has often been discussed in stylistic or philosophical terms. From a cultural studies perspective, however, narrative restraint can be understood as a mechanism that produces deviance by withholding the emotional cues through which social intelligibility is established. Meursault's narrative voice is marked by a persistent emphasis on immediacy and sensory detail. Events are recorded as they occur, with little attempt to interpret or justify their significance. This narrative strategy denies readers access to the internal motivations and moral reflections that typically anchor first-person narration. As a result, Meursault's actions appear disconnected from recognizable ethical frameworks, reinforcing his position as an outsider within both the fictional society and the interpretive expectations of readers.

This narrative opacity plays a crucial role in the social construction of Meursault's deviance. Because he does not articulate remorse, grief, or moral reflection, others are compelled to supply meaning on his behalf. The absence of emotional explanation invites speculation, suspicion, and moral projection. In this sense, silence becomes a productive force, generating narratives of guilt that exceed the factual circumstances of the crime. The trial sequence exemplifies this dynamic. Meursault's sparse testimony contrasts sharply with the elaborate moral narratives constructed by the prosecution. His silence does not function as a defense but as a void that must be filled. The court thus transforms narrative absence into moral evidence, interpreting restraint as proof of ethical deficiency. What Meursault does not say becomes more significant than what he does.

This process reveals the extent to which moral judgment relies on narrative coherence and emotional legibility. Subjects are expected to narrate themselves in ways that align with dominant cultural scripts, particularly in moments of crisis. Meursault's failure to do so marks him as deviant, regardless of the material facts of the case. Narrative restraint, therefore, operates not as neutrality but as a refusal of cultural participation.

4. Institutional Judgment and Cultural Violence in a Colonial Context

Building on the previous discussion of cultural deviance, this section analyzes how emotional nonconformity is translated into institutional judgment and ultimately legitimized through legal and colonial authority.

4.1 The Courtroom as Cultural Theater

The courtroom in *The Stranger* functions less as a site of legal deliberation than as a stage for cultural performance. While ostensibly concerned with determining guilt or innocence, the trial is structured around the evaluation of Meursault's character, particularly his emotional conduct. Legal discourse thus merges with moral spectacle, transforming juridical procedure into a ritual of social reaffirmation. Throughout the trial, the prosecution repeatedly invokes episodes unrelated to the murder itself, most notably Meursault's behavior at his mother's funeral. These references serve to construct a narrative of moral deviance that renders the crime both intelligible and condemnable. By foregrounding emotional transgression, the court establishes a causal link between Meursault's indifference and his capacity for violence, despite the lack of substantive evidence connecting the two.

This conflation of emotional normativity with legal culpability reveals the cultural logic underlying the trial. The court does not merely judge an action; it judges a subject's conformity to social expectations. In doing so, it reinforces the idea that emotional performance is integral to moral citizenship. The trial becomes a public lesson in the consequences of affective noncompliance. Moreover, the courtroom's theatricality underscores the performative nature of justice itself. Witnesses, lawyers, and judges participate in a collective reaffirmation of shared values, using Meursault as a negative exemplar. His execution thus functions symbolically, restoring moral order by eliminating a figure who embodies emotional disorder.

4.2 Cultural Violence and the Colonial Context

The cultural judgment enacted against Meursault cannot be fully understood without considering the colonial setting of French Algeria. The novel's treatment of the Arab victim—unnamed, voiceless, and narratively marginalized—reveals the racialized hierarchies that structure both legal and cultural authority. While Meursault is scrutinized for his emotional deviance, the victim's humanity remains largely unacknowledged.

This asymmetry highlights a form of cultural violence that operates alongside emotional discipline. Certain subjects are rendered hyper-visible and morally accountable, while others are reduced to abstractions. The colonial context thus intensifies the novel's critique of cultural normativity, exposing the selective application of moral concern. Meursault occupies an ambiguous position within this structure. As a European colonist, he benefits from legal recognition, yet his emotional nonconformity renders him disposable. His execution serves to reinforce cultural norms within the colonial order, demonstrating the consequences of deviation even for those nominally included within the dominant group.

5. Conclusion: Indifference as Cultural Transgression

By approaching *The Stranger* through the lens of cultural studies, this article has argued that Meursault's indifference constitutes a form of cultural transgression rather than a purely existential condition. His condemnation arises not from the act of murder alone but from his failure to conform to emotionally normative expectations that underpin social and moral order.

The novel thus exposes emotional discipline as a mechanism of cultural power, one that regulates subjects by demanding affective legibility and punishing deviation. In revealing the violence embedded in these normative structures, *The Stranger* invites readers to reconsider the relationship between emotion, morality, and social belonging. Meursault's indifference, far from signifying ethical emptiness, illuminates the coercive force of cultural judgment and its enduring relevance in modern society.

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