

# L'Étranger: the absurd and the description of an unrecognized psychiatric disorder

## L'Étranger: el absurdo y la descripción de un trastorno psiquiátrico no reconocido

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Albert Camus (1913-1960) is one of the most influential authors and philosophers of the twentieth century. His novels and philosophical, influenced by the misfortunes of war during his childhood and his constant struggle against existentialism earned him the 1957 Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1942 Camus published his first philosophical essay, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, where he presents his philosophy of the absurd through the story of the Greek king Sisyphus, condemned to the eternal and futile labor of rolling a boulder uphill to watch it go down and start again. Camus uses this story to establish that human existence is absurd and that because of this, life has an inestimable value. Moreover, each one of life moments must be savored with passion and awareness of the absurd. Alternatively, as Camus wrote: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy".<sup>1</sup> His honesty, independence and rebellion against the absurdity of existence inspired a generation of students to generate the global movements during the '60s.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, Camus's novels still echo in our society. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, *La Peste*, published in 1947, has resurged and become the subject editorials addressing that the pandemic exposed how we are never entirely prepared for the pest and the cost in human lives is only comparable to the cost in social breakdown.<sup>3, 4</sup>

In *L'Étranger*, Camus experiments with absurdism by being a rebel, free, and passionate. Through Meursault, the protagonist, an *étranger* to the world (to his society) and himself (to individual thinking), Camus presents his philosophy that leads us into absurdism: a man who at his mother's funeral shows a complete lack of empathy, smoking and drinking coffee instead of mourning his loss, stunning his mother's friends.

Shuster (2018) analyzed *L'Étranger* and suggested that Camus's inspiration for Meursault was his close friend Galindo. Meursault's distinct social behavior, his lack of awareness of environmental situations (such as being on trial for murder), and peculiar personality (such as apparent lack of emotion) led Shuster to suggest Meursault had Asperger's syndrome. Shuster argued that Camus recognized Galindo's strange behavior four years before the first description of this clinical entity and captured it in his novel in form of Meursault. Therefore, Camus would have, unknowingly described Asperger's syndrome with Galindo as the first patient described, represented by Meursault in *L'Étranger*.

Nevertheless, Asperger syndrome, now included under autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is unlikely diagnosis for Meursault. Throughout the novel, he has problems with social communication skills and understanding relationships, fulfilling criteria A of ASD.<sup>6</sup>



However, Meursault does not have restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as criteria B of this diagnosis requires, he only presents with hyper or hyporeactivity to sensory output. At least two of these patterns must be present to fulfill criteria B. Although Criteria C (symptoms present in early developmental period) may be inferred, Camus never really states this explicitly. And medical practitioners seldom give ASD as an answer when questioned about a possible diagnosis of Meursault.<sup>7,8</sup> Recent media portrayals have shown that individuals with low severity autism and no intellectual disability (formerly known as Asperger's syndrome) can act aggressively but hardly lead to murder.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, ASD it is unlikely as Meursault's diagnosis.

Meursault's characteristics are more consistent with an antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), Rather than a developmental disorder (like ASD). These disorders can be evaluated through a categorical or dimensional approach, with the latter more appropriate when considering ASPD because substantial comorbidity occurs between different personality disorders. We may find that a particular person has criteria for more than one.<sup>10</sup> Using a dimensional approach that views antisocial personality disorder as a subtype of narcissistic personality (such as Kernberg's model of personality disorders), we can easily explain Meursault's difficulties and helps us understand why confusion may arise when analyzing his personality traits.<sup>11</sup> Through this dimensional approach, it becomes likely that Meursault's diagnosis is ASPD: he does not comply with social laws (1), is impulsive and fails to plan ahead (3), tends to be irritable and aggressive (4), shows a reckless neglect for his personal safety (5), and a profound lack of remorse (7), fulfilling DSM-5 Criteria 1 for ASPD.<sup>6</sup>

Alternatively, Meursault's traits could suggest schizoid personality disorder (SPD), which is included in the differential diagnosis of ASPD. Both personality disorders are located on the lower end of the spectrum of personality development and may share common characteristics: an individual with difficulties in establishing close relationships that seems to be alienated from society. Although Meursault has difficulties understanding people, he has close relationships, does not prefer solitary activities and is interested in sexual experiences, particularly extramarital affairs. Therefore, he does not fulfill DSM-5 criteria for SPD. Other personality disorders which might overlap with ASPD, such as narcissistic or borderline personality disorders are less likely, given the lack of grandiosity with need for admiration and the lack of efforts to avoid abandonment respectively.

Although Meursault's diagnosis will remain a subject of debate, we consider that ASPD is the most likely. Furthermore, an individual with ASPD is a good portrayal of Camus's absurd: an outsider, un étranger. Someone who does not fit into society, does not understand it, and in the end dies without remorse at the hands of that society.

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