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Unconscious Repetition of Pattern in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*

التكرار اللاواعي للنمط في رواية الغريب لألبير كامو

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Abstract

This paper examines the unconscious repetition theme in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus through a psycho-Freudian lens (A Psychological and Freudian Reading). It also goes beyond the customary existentialist and absurdist interpretations to contend that the protagonist, Meursault, is driven by very rooted repetitive ways of behaviour that indicate internal psychological processes. The major theoretical perspectives involved are general principles of habit formation and conditioning, and basic Freudian concepts, the repetition compulsion (Wiederholungszwang) and the death drive (Thanatos) and defensive mechanisms such as repression and denial. The methodological strategy involves a close textual examination of the behaviour of Meursault, his feelings, and the sensory impressions, tracing the appearances of the given aspects throughout the story. The findings show that the affective detachment of Meursault, the focus on the sensory stimuli like the sun, his insistence on routine, and the mechanistic nature of his violent outburst are not just artificial features of an absurd hero but can be interpreted as signs of the compulsion to repeat. The investigation clarifies the way these tendencies escalate out of normal activities to the deadly struggle at the beach and are later replicated and condemned by the populace during his trial. To this end, this reading therefore resolves that the course of Meursault is not merely a philosophical indulgence into nihilism, but a psychological study of a man trapped in a loop of unconscious repetition, with the outcome of his repetitive fate being the tragic one.

ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث موضوع التكرار اللاواعي في رواية "الغريب" لألبير كامو من منظور نفسي-فرويدي (قراءة نفسية وفرويدية). كما يتجاوز التفسيرات الوجودية والعشبية المألوفة ليؤكد أن بطل الرواية، مورسو، مدفوعٌ بسلوكيات متكررة متجذرة تُشير إلى عمليات نفسية داخلية. تشمل وجهات النظر النظرية الرئيسية المبادئ العامة لتكوين العادات والتكيف، والمفاهيم الفرويدية الأساسية، ودافع التكرار (Wiederholungszwang) ودافع الموت (Thanatos)، وآليات الدفاع مثل الكبت والإنكار. تتضمن الاستراتيجية المنهجية فحصاً نصياً دقيقاً لسلوك مورسو ومشاعره وانطباعاته الحسية، مع تتبع مظاهر هذه الجوانب على مدار القصة. تُظهر النتائج أن انفصال مورسو العاطفي، وتركيزه على المحفزات الحسية كالشمس، وإصراره على الروتين، والطبيعة الآلية لاندفاعه العنيف ليست مجرد سمات مصطنعة لبطل عيبي، بل يمكن تفسيرها كعلامات على إكراهه على التكرار. يوضح البحث كيف تتصاعد هذه الميول من الأنشطة العادية إلى الصراع المميت على الشاطئ، ثم تُكرر وتُدان من قبل العامة خلال محاكمته. ولهذا الغرض، تُقرر هذه القراءة أن مسار مورسو ليس مجرد انغماس فلسفي في العدمية، بل هو دراسة نفسية لرجل عالق في حلقة من التكرار اللاواعي، وتكون نتيجة مصيره المتكرر هي المساوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

دافع الموت
قهر التكرار
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Introduction

The 1942 novel *The Stranger* by Albert Camus has been viewed primarily in the philosophical perspective of both existentialism and absurdism, and special emphasis has been placed on the alienation of the main character Meursault and his inability to face a seemingly meaningless universe. His detachment is often seen by the scholars as a protest against the pretence of the society. Even though these readings form a foundational corpus, they do not explain the structural and thematic importance of repetition in the narrative in their entirety. The life of Meursault is marked with successive repetitions of his acts, thoughts and sensory impressions, which implies that there is something deeper and psychologically motivated. The paper will argue that the behavior of Meursault can be interpreted as an example of unconscious repetition, a theory that is explored in general psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis.

The repetition as a psychological phenomenon is not just a question of habit but maybe a demonstration of the unsolved trauma, a coping mechanism, or a subconscious urge to repeat the essential events in the life. In the context of literature, the application of a psychological framework allows exploring the hidden motives of characters and the hidden meanings of the patterns of the stories. Through closer examination of the repetitive traits of Meursault, his daily life as well as his ongoing emotional detachment, a gradual turn takes place where a philosophical claim of nothing matters is replaced more with why nothing in his life seems to have meaning.

The given question begins with the creation of a theoretical framework based on psychological theories of habit formation and Freudian psychoanalysis. Further on, careful close reading of the work *The Stranger* will be done, tracing the repetitive motifs according to which the experience of Meursault is organised. The analysis will show that his allegedly passive and distant life is in fact an act of reenactment in a cycle, which is active but unconscious. This point of view does not aim at undermining existentialist readings; on the contrary, it aims at complementing them by revealing the psychological clockwork moving the absurd hero. Such Freudian and psychological interpretation will, finally, transform the story of Meursault into a powerful exploration of how the psyche might become trapped in self-created forms, falsely explaining compulsion as fate.

I. Literature Review

Psychological conflict, repression, alienation and repetition in literature have been studied with a significant amount of scholarship. Such studies are the theoretical basics of how fictional characters internalise social structures and recreate destructive affective patterns.

The first one is Kubie (1939), who provided a major criticism of the Freudian theory in the form of an article titled *A Critical Analysis of the Concept of a Repetition Compulsion*. Kubie also held that compulsion of repetition gives psychological rigidity; this binds and entraps people in behavioural cycles that reflect a previous emotional traumatic experience. He has stressed that this kind of repetitive behaviour is a hindrance to

individual development and emotional learning, thus placing literary figures who replicate the earlier psychological traumas as early illustrators of the ruinous patterns in narrative fiction.

Loewald (1971) expanded the psychoanalytic discussion several decades later with his highly acclaimed article *Some Considerations on Repetition and Repetition Compulsion*. Loewald argued that repetition is not entirely pathological but can be explained as an effort at achieving some mastery over the unresolved trauma, which is unconscious. His vision gave a more subtle interpretation of the concept of repetition, whereby the self-destructive character of works of literature can be regarded as a kind of internal conflict to be resolved and not as a dysfunction.

With the further development of psychoanalytic theory, Rogers (1987) released a book titled: *Freud and the Semiotics of Repetition; the development of repetition was based on linguistic and symbolic analysis*. Rogers maintained that there were patterns repeated in literature which were indicative of the symbolic functioning of the unconscious; he came to the conclusion, that repetition was an encoding of unresolved psychological struggle and thus made it an effective instrument of interpretation in the analysis of literature.

Billig (1999) made an important reinterpretation of the concept of repression in the late twentieth century in his book titled: *Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious*. Billig insisted that repression is not only a personal activity, but is constructed by social and conversational activities, hence bringing an element of culture to psychoanalysis. According to his findings,

literature as a linguistic artefact is involved in the process of repression formation and revelation.

In the twenty-first century, research began to focus on text-specific studies. In his article, *Psychological Interpretation of the Novel: The Stranger, by Camus*, Gnanasekaran (2014) used the psychoanalytic theory to explain the emotional numbness and detachment of Meursault. It has been suggested by the study that the behaviour of Meursault is indicative of unresolved psychological disturbances and not simply indicative of philosophical detachment, and Gnanasekaran came to the conclusion that the psychological aspect of the novel is what defines how Meursault reacts to society and meaning.

Along the same path, Abdullah and Saksono (2021) released a study titled *Alienation in Albert Camus the stranger: Existential-Psychological Location*, which is a reading of the novel. They explored the concept of Meursault as emotionally detached as a stressor of existential withdrawal and concluded that alienation is a personal state and a commentary on social requirements; their work proves how alienation of the psyche works in the literature of existentialism.

The article by Haber (2019) titled *Intimate Strangers: Albert Camus and Absurdity in Psychoanalysis* is the most modern in this review. Haber combined psychoanalysis and existential philosophy to analyze the contradiction between the desire, repression and the absurd in writing of Camus. He claimed that absurdity does not resolve the conflict at a psychological level; on the contrary, it makes it more obvious, exposes the unresolved tensions within the self, and he concluded that the absurd appears as a location where

unconscious struggles and existential questions intersect.

Collectively, these works form fertile research in psychological repetition, repression and alienation in literature. But even though there is extensive research available, none of them utilize these theoretical frameworks in the way this paper suggests to *The Stranger* or even attempt to examine the novel in terms of unconscious repetition. To that end, the current paper addresses a major gap since it uses psychological and theoretical frameworks to analyse Albert Camus's *The Stranger* in a new way.

II. Theoretical Framework

In modern day psychology, repetition has been seen as one such mechanism which forms the basis of behaviour, learning and memory. In its most basic form, behaviours become crystallised into habits; repeat behaviours, which are automatically triggered by environmental factors. According to Gardner, Lally, and Wardle (2012), "It is a very efficient process because it allows the brain to use the cognitive resources on more complex activities" (p. 664). They also establish habits as behaviors "that occur automatically based on the circumstantial stimuli that have been linked to their execution"(Gardner et al., 2012, p. 665). The associative learning states that through repetition of a simple action in a consistent surrounding, "the action will eventually be activated when exposed to the same circumstances" (Gardner et al., 2012, p. 666). When established, habits are not dependent on conscious motivation and can be maintained even when the original interest or purpose has faded away thereby having a strong, almost unconscious effect on everyday life.

However, repetition may also be a sign of deeper psychological distress, especially when there is trauma that has not been resolved. Trauma reenactment is closely related to his notion of repetition compulsion, and the phenomenon is defined as the unconscious urge to re-experience or re-repeat traumatic events/circumstances. It is not a conscious decision but a necessity. According to Guy-Evans and McLeod (2023), "repetition compulsion is a psychological phenomenon when persons repeatedly engage in the reenactment of a traumatic event or its circumstances in an effort to control, recover, or understand it, despite the repetition potentially being harmful" (p.87). Reenactment can take a variety of forms, "including the search of relationships that would recreate the past dysfunctional relationships to self-destructive behaviours that recreates the emotional context of the original trauma"(Cherry, 2025, p. 2). People usually cannot judge "the connection between their present behavior and the history, especially in cases when the initial trauma has been repressed or dissociated" (Guy-Evans and McLeod, 2023).

The first work of Freud on pathological repetition, the term *Wiederholungszwang*, or repetition compulsion, is best known in his treatise *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud noted that his patients re-enacted painful events again and again, which was a clear contradiction of his previous principle of pleasure principle which said that human beings are driven by the quest of pleasure and avoidance of pain. He, as a result, concluded that there was a deeper drive. Van de Vijver, Bazan, and Detandt (2017) sum up the conclusion of Freud that the primary most fundamental module of

the mental life is the principle of repetition, rather than the pleasure principle, which is based on drives (Van de Vijver et al., 2017).

Freud hypothesised that the necessity to overcome the traumatic material is why people are compelled to do it as they cannot process the material consciously. He has stated that the inability to recall causes those who are unable to remember to repeat repressed content as a modern experience (Guy-Evans and McLeod, 2023). This repetition is an unconscious struggle to have a command over the initial event, but it is usually a paradoxical struggle that results in more torment. In order to explain this self-destructive drive, Freud theorized that there is a death drive (Thanatos), which is an inherent drive toward dissolution and returning to an inorganic state. It is the instinct which contradicts the instinct of life (Eros): when turned outward Thanatos expresses itself as aggression, but inward turned it is self-destructive. In this context, the concept of repetition compulsion can be taken as the manifestation of Thanatos that directs people to the situation that endangers their stability and well-being (Cherry, 2025, p. 8).

The compulsive repetitions often are supported with the help of defence mechanisms which use unconscious strategies to defend the ego against anxiety. Some mechanisms are especially relevant in the case of a character like Meursault such as repression, denial, and acting-out. Combined, these two notions are sufficient to offer an effective analytic tool to evaluate a character whose conduct is morally empty at the surface but is structurally internally consistent as a pattern of repressed repetition.

IV. Analysis: Unconscious Repetition in *The Stranger*

The Stranger, by Albert Camus, was published in 1942 and set in French colonial Algeria, where the main character, Meursault, works as a shipping clerk. The novel is split into two parts ; the first one describes the normal life of Meursault after the death of his mother up to the time when he killed an Arab on the beach; while the second part describes the account of arrest, trial and his eventual conviction. One of the features of the story is a first-person detached point of view where Meursault narrates the events and sensory information without the apparent emotional interpretations of the information. This is the tone that is conveyed in the very first lines of the novel:

Maman died today. Or yesterday, maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday. (Camus, 1988, p.3)

Such programmatic aloofness prefigures the whole novel, defining the emotional lifelessness of Meursault and his concentration on the tangible and physical as opposed to the emotional and abstract. His transformation into an active participant and condemned man provokes the conflict of his personal, monotonous world with the meaning and regret required from society. The most dramatic repetitive pattern of Meursault is the deep and steady lack of emotion in him, a condition that organizes his whole life. This is not a single response to an episode but a default position in the way of interacting with the world. The main and most quoted example is how he responds to the death of his mother, wherein his thoughts are rather practical and physical than emotional. He

is concerned with the borrowing of the tie and the transportation of the bus journey and his major contemplation on the loss of his mother is procedural:

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.(Camus,1988, p.4)

This is the emotional blunting or affect blunting which is a known psychological symptom that is commonly related to trauma, schizophrenia or some personality disorders. It is a strong act of defense mechanisms such as repression and denial, in a Freudian environment. Meursault is systematic in the repression of the emotional value of events. He does not remember the age of his mother and when she is on her deathbed, he does not grieve, in fact, he takes a cup of coffee and smokes a cigarette, and says "I thought about it; it didn't matter"(Camus,1988,p.3). This tendency of alienation is replicated throughout all his significant relationships. When Marie inquires whether he loves her, he says that it did not mean anything and when his boss proposes him a job in Paris, which is about to become a big change in his life, he turns it off and concludes by saying that "I couldn't see any reason to change my life" (Camus,1988,p.4), on her point; that was not a philosophical decision to make, but an obsessive condition of being, an automatic failure to relate to the emotional content of his own life.

The strongest and most repressive recurrent theme in *The Stranger* is the sun which serves as a persistently triggering sense making condemning Meursault physically and psychologically. It is something outside and embodies a reflection and magnification of his inner

strain, which causes him to leave passive living to compulsive action. The overwhelming presence of the sun is introduced at the very beginning, at the funeral process of his mother:

The sky was already filled with light. The sun was beginning to bear down on the earth and it was getting hotter by the minute... with the sun bearing down, making the whole landscape shimmer with heat, it was inhuman and oppressive. (Camus,1988,p.15)

This is not just a description of weather but an illustration of physical and even mental attack. The heat is causing me difficulties looking straight or thinking straight and the sky glare was unbearable(Camus, 1988,p.58). This is a repeat of sensory overload already happening with increasing intensity throughout the novel before a pivotal moment. On the murder day, there is even more direct and violent assault on the part of the sun. In Meursault's pre-first encounter with the Arabs, he observes "The sun was shining almost directly overhead onto the sand, and the glare on the water was unbearable" (Camus,1988,p.57).

According to Freudian understanding, the sun is a catalyst that assaults the already weak ego defence of Meursault, causing a state of sensory overload that requires the release of energy. This ends in the scene of murder, where the aggression of the sun is not different as a physical weapon:

The light shot off the steel and it was like a long flashing blade cutting at my forehead... All I could feel were the cymbals of sunlight crashing on my forehead and, indistinctly, the dazzling

spear flying up from the knife in front of me. The scorching blade slashed at my eyelashes and stabbed at my stinging eyes. (Camus,1988, p.59)

In this case, the sun does not remain a passive component of the setting, but is an active adversary. The reason why Meursault chooses to walk back to the spring where he is sure that the Arab is is a compulsive move to the root of this intolerable sensory stress. The only available release is the murder, a performance of the death drive which has been precipitated by an external force that has turned into an internal agony.

The life of Meursault is a prison of routine. His days are also held together by a multitude of carefully maintained routines: he eats at the place, Célestes, his Sunday routine of watching the street out of his balcony, boarding the streetcar, and attending the movies. These habits serve as a psychological refuge, as they provide a predictable, automatic framework, which keeps him secure against the uncertain and anarchic realm of emotion, choice and meaning. Habits, according to Gardner et al. (2012), are “cognitively efficient behaviours”(p.665), as psychological studies demonstrate, which are initiated automatically by stimuli and are activated by stimuli without conscious cognition. This automation is a defence mechanism to Meursault. An especially eloquent example is his Sunday ritual. Following the funeral of his mother and his initial physical experience with Marie, the postmortem self-reflection shows the strength of his repetitive mindset to devalue important occurrences in life :

It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work,

and that, really, nothing had changed. (Camus,1988,p.24)

This is denial by way of habit. The incidences that transform his life are taken into his daily life, aiding the main idea that nothing was changed. This obsessive following the known is also the reason why he turns down the proposal of his boss to come and live in Paris. The future is a menace to the well-built, subconscious stability of his tedious life. He informs his boss, that, "I couldn't see any reason to change my life. Looking back on it, I wasn't unhappy" ((Camus,1988,p.41)). He is not happy because fulfillment has happened, but merely because disruption has not taken place. The novel even offers an outside reflection of the same patterns that Meursault follows in the character of Salamano and his dog, who are locked in a sadomasochistic routine that has been eight years old. Meursault sees their day-to-day, hateful ritual, what Celeste calls “pitiful,” and concludes, "but really, who's to say?" (Camus,1988, p.45). With this, he identifies and authenticates a life in which the patterns are inescapable and repetitive.

The killing on the beach is not a single, spontaneous act and the bloody culmination of an accumulation of repeated confrontations, a school instance of a maniacal re-enactment. The conflict with the Arabs progresses in three different and progressive phases: the first encounter, the first fight in which Raymond is wounded, and the last, fatal encounter. Meursault is brought back to the beach, to the very place where the conflict took place, to the root of it, as though being forcefully brought by some unseen power. The first fight is followed by his going back to the bungalow after which he cannot rest. The sun rings in his head and he is dragged back to the beach, and this he has no

rational reason. His account of the shooting is unemotional and cold, as he describes the physical feelings of the process as opposed to any motivation or passion. It is the language of acting-out, in which an intolerable inward pressure is relieved in bodily activity:

My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started. I shook off the sweat and sun. I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I'd been happy. Then I fired four more times at the motionless body... And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness. (Camus,1988,p59.)

In Freudian terms, this series is a very vivid expression of the death drive, Thanatos. The other four shots, which are discharged into a dead body, are of no logical value. They are an innocent, incendiary discharge of destructive force, an obsession that is well beyond self-defence. Even Meursault appears to be aware of the transgression of the act, as he has broken the peace of the day. The last, poetic line, which is knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness, is the hint to an unconscious, self-destructive aim. He has not only killed a man, but he has obsessively and irreversibly determined his own destiny, and this is a cycle of repetition which is leading him straight to his own death.

Part Two of the novel, where the trial of Meursault is described, is a social re-enactment of his personal, repetitive patterns. The courtroom is turned into a theatre where the story of his life is replicated to him, but now, with an

interpretation and evaluation by society. The prosecutor painstakingly re-creates his history and compels the replay of everything that happened before the murder in public. But the court does not care about the psychological fact of what Meursault went through, the oppressive sun, the overload of his senses, the obsessive quality of his behaviours. Rather, it is the way his personal, obsessive actions are turned into a story of monstrous and premeditated purpose:

Gentlemen of the jury, the day after his mother's death, this man was out swimming, starting up a dubious liaison, and going to the movies, a comedy, for laughs. I have nothing further to say. (Camus,1988,p.91)

This judicial process is society's attempt to impose a coherent, moral meaning on Meursault's absurd and repetitive actions. His lack of tears, his coffee and cigarette at the vigil, and his trip to the beach with Marie are all re-framed as proof of his guilt. When Meursault finally offers his own, genuine explanation for the murder—"it was because of the sun"—the court erupts in laughter (Camus,1988,p.103) . His subjective reality is inadmissible. The trial thus becomes the ultimate social mechanism for converting a private, psychological compulsion into a communal narrative of evil, demanding his death not for what he did, but for who he is.

His affective flatness, which was earlier in his life a personal defense mechanism, becomes restated against him as a sign of a criminal soul. The prosecutor bases his whole case on the inability of Meursault to do the emotional rituals expected:

I had lived my life one way, and I could just as well have lived it another. I

had done this, and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done this thing, but I had done another. And so? (Camus, 1988, p. 121)

From an entirely emotive and existential viewpoint, this could be seen as a moment of liberty, a foreword to absurdity. But, seeing the matter from the Freudian perspective, it is also a goodbye kiss to the tragic conclusiveness of her overwhelming destiny. Meursault realises that instead of breaking the cycle of repetition, he could easily embrace it. He realises that the 'oppressed wind of the future' had been uncertain to stop him from the beginning, threatening everything in its path. His other wish, to be met with "shouts of hatred" in his absence, is a desire to experience a powerful emotion and another violent relationship with the world, a stark contradiction to the emotional void that characterised his repeated existence. It descends upon the "gentle indifference of the world" (Camus, 1988, p. 222), an external reality that perfectly reflects its state of internal separation.

V. Conclusion

The following psychological and Freudian interpretation of *The Stranger* assumes that the path of the main character is immensely influenced by the unconscious repetitive patterns that are deeply rooted within the mind of Meursault. His behavior, instead of being only the philosophically detached decisions of an absurd hero, is persuasively explained as the expressions of repression, compulsivity of repetition, and the death drive. The novel has carefully recorded how these personal, routine actions his lack of emotions, his obsessive reaction to sensual stimuli, and his compliance with routine grow into a serious murder.

The trial in the second part of the novel can be seen as a reflector of the society where the same patterns are repeated, and Meursault is not punished because he has killed another person, but because he does not fit the template of how people are supposed to feel and what is morally right or wrong. His ultimate revelation is a multifaceted act of existential liberation and mental defeat in which he acknowledges the infinite monotony and apathy of the universe, of the self. Through the combination of a psychological structure with classic existentialist interpretations, a more detailed, more mature way of understanding *The Stranger* is formed. The novel is thus reimaged, not as a philosophical work about meaninglessness, but as an enormous and terrifying portrayal of a man maniacally stuck in the unseen workings of his own mind. It is the tragedy, then, of the absurd world that Meursault cannot live in, not that he is forced to live in the absurd world, but that the unconscious compulsions guarantee he can never leave the absurd world, and ends up, as the sole true manifestation of his life, accepting his destructive fate.

Conflict of Interest

The researcher(s) confirm that they have no conflicts of interest—whether financial, professional, or personal—that could affect the design of the study, the analysis of the data, the interpretation of the results, or their publication. They also confirm that all research procedures were carried out in accordance with the standards of integrity and scientific objectivity.

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