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An Analysis of Meursault's Subjective Predicament from the Perspective of Lacan's Triad of the Real-Symbolic-Imaginary-A Case Study of Part One of *The Stranger*

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Abstract: This paper employs Lacan's triad of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary as its theoretical framework to analyze Meursault's subjective predicament in the first part of *The Stranger*. Meursault's subjectivity in the Symbolic oscillates between passive suture and active distancing, while he indulges in sensory experiences within the Imaginary in order to avoid the traumatic Real of his mother's death. However, when the defensive mechanisms of both the Symbolic and the Imaginary fail, the unsymbolizable trauma of the Real erupts in the form of irrational violence. Meursault's "outsider" stance tragically embodies the subject's struggle within the fissures among the three orders. This stance reveals the profound impact of the modern symbolic order on the subject's psychic structure.

Keywords: Meursault; Lacan; The Triad of the Real-Symbolic-Imaginary; Subjectivity; *The Stranger*

1. Introduction

Camus's existentialist classic *The Stranger* [1] uses Meursault's "abnormal" behavior to expose the tension between the modern social order and the individual, and his figure epitomizes the existential predicaments of modern humanity. Previous studies have largely approached the novel from the perspectives of existentialism and the philosophy of the absurd, yet they lack a targeted theoretical analysis of the psychic mechanism underlying Meursault's subject-formation. Lacan's triad of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real posits that the subject is constituted through the interplay of these three orders, and that psychic distress originates from an imbalance among them. Adopting this framework, the present paper conducts a close reading of the first part of *The Stranger*, sequentially examining Meursault's passive struggles within the Symbolic, his defensive operations in the Imaginary, and the eventual irruption of the traumatic Real. In this way, the paper systematically traces the rupture and collapse of Meursault's relationships with society, with others, and with himself, thereby revealing the internal causes of his subjective predicament.

It should be noted that the three orders are not arranged in a linear succession [2]; rather, they are interlaced synchronically in Meursault's psychic structure as the three rings of a Borromean knot. The chapter-by-chapter focus in this paper serves only as an expository device, unfolding layer by layer to indicate which ring's tension predominates in a given scene.

2. The Symbolic: Passive Suture and Active Distancing

Meursault's subjectivity is first established in his tense relationship with the Symbolic order. The Symbolic is a network of meaning constituted by language, law, and ethics, oriented around the desire of the big Other. Meursault's predicament lies in the fact that he can neither fully integrate into this order nor completely extricate himself from it.

2.1 Anxiety and Suture

When confronted with the two symbolic orders of corporate protocol and filial piety ethics, Meursault invariably presumes himself to be "in the wrong" and harbors catastrophic expectations, only to subsequently exonerate himself through an alternative logic. Asking his boss for leave, he senses that the boss is "not too pleased" and excuses himself with "it can't be helped-my mother died." After the funeral, he expects to be recognized and understood through the symbolic act of "wearing mourning." At the nursing home, when the director addressed him, he feared he would be reprimanded and hurried to offer an explanation.; after refusing to view the coffin, he feels "rather embarrassed," yet he remains unable to justify himself within the logic of the

symbolic order.

These responses indicate that Meursault has internalized the desire and demand of the big Other [3] as the standard of his self-judgment. His anxiety stems from his self-positioning as one who fails to satisfy the big Other's desire, from the affect of the Real that emerges in the gap between the Imaginary and the Symbolic [3], and also from his rupture with the symbolic order. Because the boss, the director, and others perform specific functions within the two symbolic orders represented by the company and the nursing home, they are imaginarily misrecognized by Meursault's subjective projection as agents of the big Other's desire [4]. Their desires are conflated with the desire of the big Other, so that they can exert effects even when they are absent. In reality, however, these people exist only as little others. Sometimes they do not judge Meursault at all, as when the caretaker says "I understand"; at other times they complete the explanation on his behalf, as in the director's words. Yet because of Meursault's projection, certain of their reactions, akin to "the ignorance of the big Other [4]," have the effect of ignoring Meursault, preventing him from apprehending the big Other's desire and from ever ascertaining whether he has transgressed it.

Meursault's self-justifications do not directly confront his anxiety; rather, they operate through the Imaginary and exploit the rules of the Symbolic to effect a symbolic suture. He evades the trauma of his mother's death through fantasies such as "it's over with the burial" and "business is business," refusing to incorporate the Real into a symbolic explanatory framework. By fleeing into the symbolic order and completing a "deception [4]" of both himself and the big Other, he attempts to mend the psychic fissure. Yet he is invariably confronted with the internal contradictions of the symbolic order-which is, in fact, never total-and with the Real that seeps through the cracks [5] of those contradictions; the suture is therefore far from stable. The director's explanations do not provide ultimate guarantors of meaning, and the caretaker's "permission" also harbors the fantasy of "deceiving the big Other." Random events from the Real, such as Raymond's unexpected phone call, constantly breach his defenses.

Meursault lives almost entirely within the symbolic order constituted by signifiers. This false suture and the illusion of totality prevent traumatic feelings from manifesting instantaneously, so that the experience of trauma is necessarily deferred-as, for example, his delayed affect regarding his mother's death. Likewise, the external signifying system and symbolic order cannot immediately register Meursault's predicaments; this parallels his own temporal lag, reflecting both the disciplinary and constitutive origins of his defense mechanisms and the fundamental inconsistency of the imaginary big Other with which he identifies-an Other that is at once self-contradictory and incapable of bridging the rupture with the Real. The silences and oversights in his interactions with the symbolic order and with others connect him to the Real and mirror the self he thereby constructs [3]. As an unstable point of suture, they leave him an opening for self-reflection.

2.2 Disenchantment and Distancing

What distinguishes Meursault is his gradual recognition of the "performative" nature of the subject within symbolic relations [6]. When Marie is taken aback by his wearing mourning while enjoying himself, he initially wishes to explain himself but ultimately falls silent, realizing that no one can serve as the guarantor of meaning for the big Other to judge or absolve him. Upon returning to work, his boss's inquiry feels more like a social ritual than genuine concern; when Marie asks whether he "loves" her and presses for a marriage commitment, Meursault finds it "meaningless" and refuses to perform acts that contradict his own feelings. In social interactions, concrete little others are constantly projected as the big Other by virtue of their positions and the symbolic roles they occupy, yet they are not the big Other as such.

These instances reveal an inherent property of the symbolic order: it merely assigns individuals to particular positions through signifying markers [5], without ever reaching the affects and traumas of the Real themselves. The boss's solicitude shows that he is not a vehicle of the big Other; rather, he is likewise a little other performing in order to cater to the "big Other" as he conceives it. His amiable inquiry is intended to conform to moral conventions, not because of any genuine concern for Meursault. Marie, for her part, misrecognizes Meursault as the big Other, attempting to ascertain his desire and her own position within it, while complying with the symbolic framework's validation of love-a framework that cannot recognize affect and desire as such, let alone symbolize them.

Meursault becomes aware of the emptiness of the big Other itself and the absence of any ultimate judge. He actively perceives his rupture with the symbolic order and develops a strategy of active distancing characterized by an attitude of "whatever" (ça m'est égal), refusing to ascribe or recognize any "true" interpretation within a unified framework. He deconstructs interpersonal bonds at the symbolic level into hollow exchanges of signifying identities: he responds casually to Raymond's declarations, declines to react to others' judgments, and withdraws from the system of moral evaluation in the face of various conflicts. He relinquishes his subjectivity within the Symbolic, only to purchase a measure of tranquility as an onlooker.

In the text, Meursault's reflection that "people are always a little to blame" represents his attempt to cease catering to the big Other's demands and to extricate his subjectivity from the disciplinary power of the big Other. It is an act of self-construction of a foundational meaning, while also alleviating his moral anxiety over his mother's death, and simultaneously transferring and "knotting [4]" the previously unstable point of suture onto this very stance. He consistently feels that he cannot satisfy any other's desire; everything related to others appears to him uncontrollable, opaque, and anxiety-inducing. He leaves all things open to arbitrary interpretation, refusing to subsume the complex tensions of the Real under a unitary hermeneutic framework, and likewise refrains from touching upon either his own or others' traumatic Real. In this way, he respects the unsymbolizable core of the Real in both his own and others' subjectivity-and it is precisely this preservation of subjective Real that constitutes the essence of his stance as an "outsider."

3. StylingThe Imaginary: Sensory Indulgence and Aggressive Transference

Faced with the dual pressure of the absence of meaning in the Symbolic and the trauma of the Real, as well as the contradictions exposed at the fissures between them, Meursault retreats into the Imaginary-constituted by sensory perceptions, images, and dyadic relations-and becomes highly dependent on immediate sensory experiences in the Imaginary as a defensive mechanism.

3.1 The Sensory World: Filling the Void of Meaning

During the vigil at the nursing home, Meursault asks the caretaker for coffee with milk, hesitates but still smokes, savors his surroundings and fragmented details, and quickly extricates himself from the moral discipline of the Symbolic through a kind of self-effacement, redirecting his attention from the trauma of "mother's death" to the gratification of his own desires. On the first Sunday after the funeral, he pursues the saltiness of Marie's hair, gives up eating out to avoid inquiries from the symbolic order, pastes up advertisements, observes the passing crowds, and covers over the traumatic Real with trivial activities, filling the void left by the deconstruction of symbolic meaning. On weekdays after work, he indulges in basic needs such as sunlight and food, takes pleasure in noisy stimuli and the "green sky," and even accepts Raymond's invitation simply because it means "not having to cook."

In his interpersonal dealings, Meursault goes to the cinema, drinks, all the while dissolving the tension of the Real through sensory indulgence devoid of emotional investment. Violent scenes are received by him as sensory data, only to be overlaid by the comfort of being with Raymond. He casually agrees to accompany Raymond to the beach, ignoring the potential threat from the Arabs; when sensing hostility, he uses Raymond's reassurance as a pretext to remain immersed in the immediate experience, throughout indulging in sensory gratification and refusing to consider the symbolic conflicts underlying interpersonal tensions, thereby screening out the risks of the Real behind sensory pleasures.

Meursault fills the void with fragmented sensory stimuli, simultaneously evading the trauma of "mother's death," the nihilistic sense of "life's meaninglessness," and the troubles associated with the Symbolic-demonstrating the continuity of his defensive mechanism. These fragmented experiences layer over the ruptured deep meanings and the irreducible traumatic Real, thereby affording him a false yet instantaneous subjective identity through the Imaginary: "I am, because I feel." However, this avoidance is no more stable than symbolization in the Symbolic; for instance, the gazes of his mother's friends during the vigil constitute the gaze of the Other in the Symbolic [4] and signals connecting to the Real, puncturing the imaginary space Meursault has labored to construct-though they do not entirely dissolve his fantasy of maintaining the defensive mechanism.

3.2 Desire Projection and Aggressive Transference

In interpersonal relationships, Marie becomes an object onto whom Meursault projects his desires. His interactions with her consistently revolve around sensory desire: bodily contact at the seaside, physical closeness on summer nights-all are immediate discharges of instinctual desire. Marie thus serves as an imaginary vehicle for his desire-projection and for the avoidance of trauma. Yet when Marie asks whether he would accept the same offer from another woman, he replies that Marie is "replaceable," refusing both to perform a commitment of love and to recognize his own desire through symbolization, declining to incorporate unidentifiable symbolic meanings and emotional attitudes into the framework of the Symbolic. When Raymond's invitation threatens the sensory comfort he shares with Marie, he prioritizes adjusting his plans to sustain the continuity of his desire-projection. At this point, Meursault's desire-projection has begun to orient itself vaguely toward Marie, to the extent that he misrecognizes Marie as the "big Other"; his excessive attention to the interactions between Raymond and Marie betrays a latent aggressivity [6] toward Raymond.

Meursault's aggressivity erupts directly when his subjectivity is threatened, as illustrated by his rejection of the "odd little woman." The woman's mechanical behavior of actively inserting herself into the symbolic order mirrors back to Meursault his own rupture with the Symbolic; meanwhile, having just been labeled a "peculiar man" by Marie, his self-positioning in Marie's eyes wavers, and he immediately expels the woman from the category of "normal" by branding her with the same label. Through this negation of the other, he defends the illusion of his own mode of existence and his imaginary position in Marie's regard. This aggressive discharge in the form of mirror-projection foreshadows the subsequent outbreak of violence.

In his encounter with the Arabs, Meursault's aggressivity erupts in full force. As others marginalized by the symbolic order, the Arabs' "silent gaze" is itself an aggressive signal emitted by an unassimilable heterogeneity that cannot be expressed through linguistic signs [5]. Their desire, blocked from circulation, accumulates into oppressive bodily signals. They occupy precisely the same structural position as Meursault, naturally becoming the vehicles of his aggressive projection. He attempts to simplify and exclude them from the symbolic order, instinctively evading and repressing the escalation of aggressivity. Yet their sustained silence renders symbolization utterly ineffectual, allowing imaginary aggressivity and the tension of the Real to accumulate in the space of silence. Finally, at the moment of the confrontation by the rocky shore, the blazing sun, bodily postures, the glint of the knife, and dripping sweat converge into an overwhelming scene of the Real. Meursault's long-operating defensive mechanisms are shattered completely, and his capacity for symbolization is totally paralyzed. The accumulated traumatic pain and irrational affects from earlier finally erupt in the form of the Real-the pulling of the trigger. This marks the total collapse of both his imaginary defenses and his symbolic strategies of avoidance.

4. The Real: The Unsymbolizable Nature of Trauma and Violence

When the defensive operations of both the Symbolic and the Imaginary fail, Meursault is compelled to confront the impact of the Real directly. The Real, as an unsymbolizable and unspeakable traumatic domain, ultimately expresses itself through irrational violence, under the compounding convergence of multiple factors.

4.1 The Erosion of Psychic Structure by the Traumatic Events

The death of Meursault's mother is by no means an ordinary life event; rather, it constitutes a fundamental trauma of the Real that runs throughout the narrative. This trauma alone has already destabilized his originally relatively stable psychic structure.

Other events related to the Real likewise repeatedly invade Meursault's psyche, and these experiences trigger fissures that the symbolic order cannot fully cover. On the way to the nursing home, the intrusion of the Real is already faintly visible: concrete pressures such as jolting, heat, and forced conversation have already made Meursault "a little annoyed" and "disinclined to talk." His attempt to insert himself into the Symbolic by playing the role of a "filial son" proves largely ineffective, and the stability of his psychic structure gradually declines. The nursing home environment concretely presents signals of

death. The aged appearance and silent gaze of his mother's friends, whose “eyes are lost in wrinkles,” signal the presence of the Real, making him feel that he cannot escape a kind of “being judged” that transcends the symbolic order. The director's words-marked by “seizing every opening, speaking indiscreetly, and disclaiming responsibility”-implicitly evade the problem of the Real, betraying fear and anxiety toward it. His repeated refusal to open the coffin and confront his mother's body is likewise a typical manifestation of this avoidance of trauma.

Although Meursault continually refuses the Real through suture, the trauma of his mother's death repeatedly invades him indirectly in later episodes, and he can only repeatedly evade it. When Raymond brings it up on his own initiative, he transforms it into a meaningless commonsense judgment; Salamano's lament over losing his dog reminds him of his mother, and he immediately blocks this thought through the act of “going to bed,” using objective statements to avoid the moral judgment concerning the nursing home. These behaviors are all manifestations of Meursault's refusal to symbolize the traumatic Real-he remains unable for a long time to complete the psychoanalytic process of mourning [7], refusing to “incorporate the lost object into the Symbolic.”

In his confession, Meursault says that his mother “used to watch me all day long without saying a word.” Through this clue, the silent gaze in his early mother–child relationship can be retroactively constructed as a possible traumatic kernel bound up with the Real in his subject-formation. The mother's silent gaze blocks the circulation of desire through language and forces him to be exposed to an anxiety of the Real that is difficult to symbolize. To alleviate this anxiety, he resorts to symbolic suture to cover over the fissures of the Symbolic; yet this traumatic kernel cannot be fully dissolved through symbolization. This is both the structural reason for his strenuous rejection of the traumatic Real and the seed of his later rupture with the symbolic order [8]. Everything related to his mother is constructed around this traumatic kernel; the anxiety of the Real affects the moments of Meursault's subject-formation and is also the source of his traumatic affect. As an aspect irreducible to the Symbolic, this complex dimension is not only a part that his psychic structure cannot integrate but also something he refuses to incorporate in his symbolic suture. As an event related to his mother, her death is not only traumatic in itself but may also, owing to the aforementioned primordial factors, lose its anchor in reality, thereby destabilizing Meursault's psychic structure and subjective identity.

4.2 Natural Oppression and the Irrational Response of Violence

In contrast to the latent trauma of his mother's death, the "hot weather" functions as an overt oppressor from the Real, entirely beyond the interpretive scope of the Symbolic, descending directly upon Meursault's body and constituting an irresistible invasion through sheer physical suffering. From the scorching heat on the day of the funeral to the sunlight on the day of the killing, the heat is always intertwined with the trauma of his mother's death. The anxiety that Meursault cannot process is repressed and displaced onto this other experience of the Real. The scorching experience of being "between a rock and a hard place" during the funeral procession exposes him to the overwhelming power of the Real once it breaks through his defenses. On the day of the killing, the sun's heat escalates from mere "warmth" to a "boiling" blaze; the burning sand and its glare, the stifling air, and the glint of the knife together constitute a full-spectrum assault of Real stimuli. The unsymbolizable force of nature and the tangible threat of the Arab's knife converge, plunging Meursault into an "incomprehensible drunkenness."

When Meursault walks alone toward the rock and confronts the Arab once more, the tension of the Real reaches its peak. The trauma of his mother's death, repressed aggressivity, and the immediate physical suffering-all the psychic fissures left by failed sutures-converge at this moment, utterly demolishing his defensive apparatus. He briefly considers that "a turn of the heel and it would all be over," attempting to continue his strategy of avoidance, but the mechanism of symbolization has completely failed. He pulls the trigger not out of self-defense or hatred, but as an irrational response to the overwhelming invasion of Real pain-the four successive shots are a desperate act of terminating suffering through Real violence, after the paralysis of his capacity for symbolization. He attributes it to "the sun being too strong"; this seemingly absurd explanation

precisely confirms the irrational nature of the violence. Unable to account for the trauma of the Real in the language of the Symbolic, he can only name his act through the most primitive attribution, betraying the "true position" of his subject [5]. At this point, the Real has completed its final invasion, and Meursault's subjectivity, precariously sustained within the interstices of the three orders, collapses entirely.

5. Conclusion

Meursault's subjective predicament is the inevitable outcome of the symbolic violence inherent in the symbolic order. He can neither embed himself in the network of meaning of the Symbolic nor extricate himself from the discipline of the big Other; he oscillates between passive suture and active disenchantment, taking refuge in the Imaginary as a shelter from trauma and filling the void with sensory experiences, all while the stability of his defensive mechanisms remains subject to multiple influences. His mother's death, as the root of the traumatic Real, persistently resists symbolic resolution; ultimately, compounded by heat and interpersonal conflict, it invades his psyche, and when his capacity for symbolization is entirely paralyzed, violence becomes the sole outlet.

Meursault's predicament stems from the imbalance among the three orders [9], and his choices ironically serve as a vivid demonstration of Lacan's proposition that "the subject is constituted by the signifier and simultaneously rebels against it." Though his resistance in the stance of the "outsider" is largely passive, it constitutes both a silent refusal of the totalizing violence of the symbolic and an unconscious guardianship of the unsymbolizable core of the Real within his subjectivity. His tragic fate mirrors the absurd condition of the individual in modern society: within the symbolic order, one can neither genuinely integrate into the network of meaning nor utterly reject the invasion of the Real. When traumatic Real confronts the oppressive force of established meaning-frameworks, the individual is caught in the perilous interstice between being a "puppet of order" and an "outlier of order." The framework of meaning promised by modernity bestows upon the individual the legitimizing recognition of the symbolic system while simultaneously negating the authentic existence that cannot be reduced to symbolic codification. This paradoxical predicament is not an accidental misfortune of the individual, but rather a structural violence engendered by the modern symbolic order and embedded in the psychic structure of the subject-all in the name of reason.

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