

Camus's *L'étranger* and the first description of a man with Asperger's syndrome

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Abstract: The continued discussion about the meaning of Camus's famous novel, *L'étranger*, provoked a re-reading, and this, in turn, led to its clinical analysis and further investigation. The book rests entirely on the thoughts, words and actions of its central character, Meursault, and these were found to show impairment of social relationships, communication and interaction, with other traits diagnostic of the Asperger's subgroup of the autism spectrum disorder. It was then found that Camus had based Meursault on his close friend Galindo, and a search was therefore made for evidence of Galindo's character; this revealed him to be an intelligent but odd person, who exhibited the characteristic impairment of social and personal behavior of Asperger's syndrome. Thus, Camus had recognized and understood his friend's strange behavior before Asperger's syndrome had been defined; his use of it for the creation of Meursault is therefore the first published account of a man with this disorder. Many of the interpretations and ideas developed from Meursault's words, thoughts and actions must now be reconsidered, as they are a misreading of the words and behavior of a man with Asperger's syndrome. The outcome of this clinical examination of *L'étranger* is unique; it shows that a precise account of a person with a neurobehavioral disorder was made by a novelist before the disorder had been clinically defined.

Keywords: Asperger's syndrome, Camus, Meursault, *L'étranger*

Introduction

The description and definition of the important behavioral abnormality of Asperger's syndrome, now recognized as part of the autism spectrum disorder, was published in 1944,¹ but, by chance, I found that an account of a man with this disorder had been published 2 years earlier. The man was Meursault, a French resident of an uneasy colonial Algiers. Although he was the central character of Camus's novel, *L'étranger*,² and not a real person, his description had been derived from close observation of a real person with the syndrome. This paper traces how this unique account of a man with what was then an unknown syndrome came to be written into a novel.

Camus is one of the great writers of the 20th century, and *L'étranger* is one of the century's major novels; it is thought-provoking and gripping, and the literary, philosophical and political stir it caused has persisted; critical publications continue to appear. The book's account of human life, with its alternation of absurdity and harsh philosophy, contributed greatly to the award of a Nobel Prize to Camus. The most recent reconsideration of *L'étranger* was *Meursault, Contra-Enquête*,³ Daoud's much-lauded novel, written as a rebuttal of the colonialist ideas he believed were

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expressed by Meursault. It was a reading of Daoud's book that returned me to my 1954 paperback, French edition of *L'étranger*,² in an attempt to understand Daoud's dismissal of Meursault as a cold racist. But, to my surprise, the explanation I found in my re-reading was clinical, not literary or politico-philosophical: it was soon clear that Meursault had a previously unsuspected behavioral disorder, of which Daoud and other critics of *L'étranger* were unaware, and which they had misinterpreted and misunderstood. This accidental and surprising finding led on, in turn, to a search for its source, to find how Camus had been able to create, with great accuracy, a character with the as yet undescribed Asperger's syndrome. The source was found, and it turned out to be Camus's observation and description of his close friend Galindo, and evidence of his behavior turned out to be that of Asperger's syndrome.

Definition of Meursault's Asperger's syndrome

L'étranger turns entirely on interpretation of the thoughts, words and behavior of Meursault, who is followed from the funeral of his mother to his blind involvement in a distant acquaintance's quarrel, and the pointless murder of an unknown Arab man, for which he is incarcerated, tried and executed. But from the ambiguity of the book's famous opening words, Meursault's "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday", to the end of the first chapter, I was suspicious of an underlying behavioral problem, and this suspicion increased throughout the book. I therefore did a second reading, this time a clinical reading, to detect, collect and analyze the evidence of Meursault's behavior. This showed that Meursault's words, thoughts, actions and behavior all fall into a consistent, repetitive pattern; there is a poverty of social and personal communication, an inability to understand what others are thinking, or to detect nuance and nonverbal signals, an apparent lack of feeling and emotion and an inability to emote; he is withdrawn and uncommunicative, but his silence may be interrupted by a disconcertingly tangential, if logical response; and he can be upset unexpectedly, usually by particular environmental stimuli, and this can result in aggression.

This behaviour is typical of Asperger's syndrome as originally defined,¹ and since refined by many investigators; but although the syndrome has now been incorporated into the autism spectrum disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) of the American Psychiatric Association,⁴ it is still considered a valid behavioral subgroup by many working in the field.⁵

Examples of this behavior are apparent on almost every page, from Meursault's first sentence to his apparent emotional indifference to his mother in the mortuary, where he smokes, drinks and shares the mortuary attendant's interest in discussing the need for a speedy burial because of the temperature. He uses bare fact as if that is all that matters: when put in a cell with Arab prisoners they ask what he has done, he simply says "I had killed an Arab"; he is unaware of the inappropriateness and danger of his reply and the nonverbal meaning of the silence with which it was greeted. When his elderly neighbor is upset (Meursault hears him silently weeping) by the loss of his dog and asks Meursault's advice, his reply is get another dog; when his girl friend asks if he would marry her, he says yes, but that "it's all the same to me" – her unsurprising reply is that he is bizarre, a common response to people with Asperger's. He does not understand that his neighbors judge him badly for putting his mother in a home, nor the laughter in court when he explains his motive for the murder was "...because of the sun..."; he totally misunderstands the meaning of the court gendarme's question about the seriousness of being on trial for murder; likewise, the investigating judge's smile at his responses.

Meursault's lawyer cannot make him understand that his apparent lack of emotion, even at the death of his mother, would enhance the court's view of him as a cold-blooded murderer. But he is unaware he does not emote, or show emotion, and cannot, therefore, understand the lawyer's suggested counter to this or its importance; he therefore refuses to use the suggested defense, "because that's false". His lawyer looks at him "... d'une façon bizarre" and gives up. Camus is not concerned with minutiae, so it is difficult to assess the extent of Meursault's repetitive behavior, but where details are given, their nature is clear: for example, the repetitive sucking of pieces of board pulled from his bed, the specific way he turns his chair to a particular position and the hours he spends, repeatedly "simply listing everything in my bedroom".

Meursault is known to say little, as the judge points out, and his few, laconic replies often appear repetitively strange and inappropriate, because they are true to the logic of hidden thoughts: thus, just before his execution, his answer to the Chaplain's question about sin is immediately followed by the curious but logical thought that in the narrow cell, the Chaplain had no choice but to sit down or get up! Meursault's physical attack on the Chaplain was verbally provoked, and the untoward response to external stimuli he shows, in his case to sun and heat, is a feature of Asperger's; the relationship of this to the murder he commits, and the continued

shooting at the corpse, is remarkably similar to evidential accounts in medico-legal reports of murder by men with Asperger's syndrome.^{6,7} It is a supreme irony, that it was Meursault's "aspergic" inability to understand nuance and nonverbal communication, that led him to move forward "to get out of the sun", unaware, until too late, that this would be interpreted as aggression by his otherwise passive antagonist, who, in response, unsheathed and raised a knife; it flashed against him in the sun; and this, in turn, led Meursault to commit a pointless murder, with the gun he had been given. It was the laconic taciturnity, characteristic of his disorder that kept Meursault from presenting this factual sequence at his trial, although it would have made the obvious and reasonable mitigation of self-defense.

Each of the many behavioral anomalies shown by Meursault, of which I have given just a few illustrative examples, corresponds to those known to occur in Asperger's syndrome; none are diagnostic by themselves, but together they fulfill the criteria delineated both by the original⁴ and numerous subsequent descriptions of the syndrome, including those in the DSM-5's newer definitional classifications.⁴ This clinical match, and the absence of evidence of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive psychosis and other psychological and behavioral disorders which could explain the observed concurrence of descriptive features, makes the clinical diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome inescapable. Thus, in Meursault, Camus gives an accurate clinical account of the behavior of an individual with Asperger's syndrome, which, as shown below, was the first account to be published.

Observational source of Meursault's Asperger's syndrome

L'étranger was completed in 1940, so how did Camus create a character with Asperger's syndrome before the condition had been defined? Authorial creation alone could not explain the close correspondence of the character to the syndrome; it could only be achieved by direct observational understanding of someone with Asperger's syndrome. A search through accounts of how *L'étranger* came to be written revealed several separate admissions from Camus that "Meursault had mostly been developed" from Pierre Galindo, his best friend, and a man whose behavior Camus had closely observed for many years. So, did Galindo have Asperger's syndrome and was this the source of Camus's accurate description of the disorder? To test this, I looked for independent evidence of Galindo's behavior; the main sources I found were Lottman's⁸ and Todd's^{9,10} extensive biographies.

It was apparent that Galindo's contemporaries thought he was "strange"; he was intelligent yet uncouth, tough-acting and without social graces, emotionally cold, laconic and phlegmatic, with odd repetitive practices – for example, he would drop things from his window to entice cats, then spit at them and laugh when he scored a hit. He was taciturn and "could remain silent for a quarter of an hour during a conversation"; in a New Year's Eve party in Gide's studio, complete with trapeze, piano and guests, including Sartre and de Beauvoir, Galindo managed to say not a word all evening. His physicality could become aggressive, and an incident on a beach, involving some Arab men, and a knife and gun, became an essential element of *L'étranger*. Galindo's mixture of intelligence with behavioral oddities, emotional coldness, poor social communication, with lack of social grace, inability to converse and mix socially fits well with the diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, as does his aggressivity.^{4,6,11}

It seems, therefore, that Camus's close observation of his friend's abnormal behavior, which was apparently that of Asperger's syndrome, was the source of Meursault's character, which became the substance of *L'étranger*. It is interesting, but not surprising, that Camus was able to achieve his accurate account of Asperger's syndrome without a clinical knowledge: the signs and symptoms of all clinical syndromes have an underlying causal logic; clinicians observe the pattern made by this logic and use it to predict response and outcome long before they know or understand its underlying cause. Camus had a similar opportunity for close observation of his friend's behavior; furthermore, the characteristics of the Asperger's mind he so accurately defined allowed him to develop his novel creatively, beyond the mere recording of observation, and to ensure that Meursault's responses to the events created for him were always contained by, and true to, his behavioral disorder. This precision reveals the close understanding of personal psychology shown by great writers.

Discussion and conclusion

The elucidation of the origin of Meursault's behavior from Camus's observation of a man with Asperger's syndrome has profound consequences for the interpretation of *L'étranger*. The novel depends entirely on Meursault's thoughts, actions and speech, and these have been widely considered and debated; his style of speech has been discussed stylistically by some; others have used his words and actions philosophically to support existentialism, absurdism and ethical systems based on the inexplicability of humanity;^{12–19} and for some others they concerned colonialism and French Algeria.^{3,10,20,21}

It was always understood that the continued debate and diverse conclusion about Camus's great novel depended on the unresolved puzzle of Meursault's character. But it is now obvious that this puzzlement derived entirely from the misinterpretation of Meursault's words and behavior as if they were those of a normal individual, whereas, it is now clear they were a reflexion of his Asperger's Syndrome. This serious misunderstanding of Meursault's words, thoughts and actions and the conclusions and writings derived from them, including Daoud's novel,³ which led to this reassessment, will be presented elsewhere (in preparation); they will need much discussion and reinterpretation, from matters of literary style to their philosophical and political implications. Thus, for example, the literary belief that Meursault's character is unreal is incorrect: he behaves as does a real person with Asperger's syndrome; his unemotional, laconic neutrality is likewise part of his behavioral disorder, but has been misread as a racist; furthermore, words and actions arising from his Asperger's mode of thought and state of mind have been inappropriately used to develop and support philosophical ideas such as absurdism and existentialism. *L'Étranger* is not the novel it once seemed, now that we know it was powered by Meursault's behavioral disorder and can only be understood in this respect.

Much of that discussion lies in the future; for now, I wish only to present the evidence that Camus's observations of his friend Galindo, as reconstituted in the character of Meursault, were the first written account of a man with the disorder now known by Asperger's name. Luzhin, the lead character in Nabokov's novel, *The Luzhin Defence* ⁽²²⁾ (first published in 1939), shows some of the features of Asperger's syndrome, but these do not make a clinically diagnostic picture. More importantly in the present context, Nabokov's description of Luzhin was not an account of a living person with the disorder (although Nabokov knew Curt von Bardeleben, a chess grandmaster), as was Camus's Meursault; indeed, Nabokov ⁽²²⁾ explains how he deliberately "... introduced a fatal pattern [and] endowed the description ... with the semblance of a regular chess attack demolishing the innermost elements of the poor fellows sanity". John Updike, ⁽²²⁾ notes this artificiality, and how it "foreordained outcome of an abstract scheme"; he also notes Luzhin's ("un-aspergic") charm and compassion. But although Camus's account has temporal precedence, Camus was unaware he had observed and was describing a clinical syndrome, let alone one that was previously unknown; whilst, therefore, Camus cannot take

priority for the discovery of Asperger's syndrome, perhaps we should give him credit as the syndrome's covert co-creator.

The finding that the behavior of a well-known character in a famous novel was that of Asperger's syndrome, which the novel's author had observed in a close friend and used for the novel's development, shows that clinical abnormalities can be detected by sensitive and creative observers, such as a novelist, despite the absence of a clinical background. Although I have found no similar instances, but it may nevertheless be found, that a clinical reassessment of other well-known characters in literature, and their observational sources, produces evidence of yet other syndromes.

Disclosure

The author reports no conflicts of interest in this work.

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