



Death as Lover: A Romantic Rereading of the Absurd in Camus' *A Happy Death*

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a Romantic rereading of Albert Camus' *A Happy Death*, a novel generally regarded as a purely absurdist work. It argues that *A Happy Death* simultaneously preserves Romantic notions of subjectivity, emotional experience, nature, and transcendence despite its conventional association with the philosophy of the absurd. Through a close textual analysis of the protagonist Patrice Mersault's divided consciousness, this article explores the tension between the socially constructed self and the inward self that seeks authenticity, freedom, and emotional fulfilment. Drawing upon Romantic theory and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, the article interrogates binaries such as life and death, absurdism and Romanticism, and detachment and desire. Central to this rereading is the argument that death is not merely the culmination of absurd existence but an aesthetic, transformative, and affective presence that may be understood as Mersault's Romantic lover. Through the interplay of nature, memory, desire, and mortality, the novel transforms Mersault's search for happiness into a multidimensional experience that resists existential nihilism. Rather than rejecting Romanticism, Camus reworks its ideals within an absurd universe, revealing the coexistence of contradictory philosophical impulses. This rereading contributes to Camus scholarship by demonstrating that *A Happy Death* resists singular

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interpretation and invites a more nuanced understanding of absurdism, Romanticism, and literary meaning.

A Happy Death is a novel by Albert Camus that follows the life of Patrice Mersault, who leads his life as an existential being that distinctly separates his life into two philosophical and mental aspects. The narration starts with Patrice as he makes a final decision to kill Zagreus, who is the possessor of wealth without the chance to live through life. The act functions as a crime. It is also an allegorical act of how one personality dies and another takes its place. Mersault starts his path to attain financial freedom when he decides to build his own happiness by learning how to devote his time and his abilities to feel pleasure in his senses and avoid people. The dialogue between Patrice and Mersault introduces a mind and body conflict instead of solidarity, as it depicts the absurdist philosophy of Camus. These two identities are not the self, and it is this that makes it clear that the quest to achieve a happy death is counterproductive. Mersault also prefers to remain in secluded nature as he experiences the most dramatic scenes, yet nothing leads to any purpose. The gap between the fullness of life and going to the grave becomes more intense as the story develops, “heavy approach of tears, a mingled taste of life and death” (Camus 104).

Thus, Patrice and Mersault are not two people but two aspects of the same mind, which is torn between the necessity to live a valuable life and the understanding that it is not possible. In this duality, Camus creates a protagonist characterized by the existence of the absurd, where identity is vague, indeterminate, and in conflict. Mersault at the beginning appears to be a modern incarnation of the Romantic hero in the Romanticist view: he desires to discover himself and become authentic beyond social norms, connect with nature, and seek his own experience without paying attention to ethical principles. His need to live a life of intensity,

loneliness, and sensation reflects Romantic subjectivism. But Camus interferes with this course. Final harmony does not exist and, as Mersault experiences, it is not the Romantic view of unity with nature that can fulfil.

The experience of Mersault in A Happy Death can thus be regarded as an existential experiment. He tries to make his own happiness by learning to control time, money, and even death. What is found in the story, though, is the irony behind this endeavour. Another element that a deconstructive reading introduces is the destabilizing of the apparent coherence of Mersault’s philosophy. According to the novel, self-possession and detachment would enable a person to become happy, but the words and structure of the novel constantly prove that to be false. His claim that the sentiments of other people do not have any hold



on him is negated by the fact that Mersault is constantly interested in sensually and emotionally engaging with the world “Mersault recognized on the Bodhisattva’s ironic lips and on the chased brass of the trays the familiar and fugitive signs of the nights of moonlight and starlight he loved so much. It was as if the night had lost its lining of clouds and shone now in its tranquil lustre” (30).

Correspondingly, the difference between life and death is the basis of his quest for a happy death, which is destabilized, as death is not an end but a continuation of the absurd state that is life. In this respect, *A Happy Death* prefigures the main concept of *The Myth of Sisyphus*: that a person should not run away but confront meaninglessness. The end of Mersault does not resolve his search but confirms the impossibility of resolution. The delight that he has, very little, is not the mastery of life but a clear, astute awareness of its contradictions.

Camus ends up presenting happiness and death not as opposites but as belonging to an indefinite and essentially ambiguous human condition. According to Philip Thody, the main absurdist problem—the tension between human desire and a meaningless universe—already exists in the earlier works of Camus, such as *A Happy Death*, where the irrationality of the world leads the individual to seek happiness (Thody). In this regard, *A Happy Death*, according

to Herbert R. Lottman, expresses the early philosophical concerns of Camus, specifically the notion that happiness is something that must be consciously created in a world that lacks inherent meaning (Lottman).

Despite the repetition of the theme of absurdist philosophy and the meaninglessness of life inherent in Patrice Mersault, *A Happy Death* does not fully account for the Romantic ideals within his self. Patrice and Mersault act as two personalities existing within one body, which shows the contradiction between the socially conditioned self and the self that seeks individuality, freedom, and transcendence in nature and solitude. Current criticism is inclined to give more importance to Camus’s later philosophical formulations, which ignores the reworking of Romantic ideals in the novel rather than outright rejecting them. In addition, the duality of the protagonist has not been sufficiently explored as a Romantic opposition between the socially conditioned self and the self striving to experience unmediated authenticity.

This disjuncture restricts a more complete understanding of how the novel negotiates the possibility of happiness not merely as an absurd condition but as a reworking of Romantic aspiration. This paper posits that *A Happy Death* is a redefinition of Romanticism, where Camus explores the conflict between social restriction and the search for genuine personal experience through the dual identity of Patrice and Mersault. Although the novel initially seems to move toward an absurdist acknowledgment of meaninglessness, it



also maintains a Romantic belief in nature, sensation, and individual freedom as sources of value. In this dialectic, Camus does not reject Romantic ideals but modifies them, suggesting that it is not transcendence or resolution that brings happiness, but rather an enhanced, self-conscious experience of life in its fleeting and contradictory nature. Routine had, on the one hand, obscured everything; as Albert Camus sees, routine had blocked the sense of this and made life a megalithic circle, days in the circle indistinguishable, and all days, as Camus puts it, get by: “One more Sunday got through” (15).

Here, an absurd hero is a person who just takes the present as it is, even though it lacks a final sense, but grows to have a form of freedom premised on awareness. His attempts to order things properly only hide the chaos that he suspects is underneath “he was, a terror seized this man at certain times and forced him to acknowledge the extent of his desolation” (36).

The denial of traditional morality is further observed when Mersault decides to kill Zagreus; when, as soon as he is no longer a part of his mind, he is of no use and is distilled to physicality, “a huge bulging wound of brain, blood and bone” (5). However, the duality that emerges in the novel can also permit one to read it in other ways other than in terms of absurdism.

The split of the self into Patrice and Mersault gives the opportunity for some Romantic re-assessment, as life is not only marked by alienation itself, but there is also a certain movement toward emotional and metaphysical revelation. The desire of Mersault to die happy can thus be seen as not just an acceptance of death, but the desire to be united—a fantasized intimacy with death itself. Slowly, death assumes the characteristics of a romantic lover, who is formed in the course of his experiences of loss, passion, and transient moments of association. The logic of emotion introduced by his thought, that “she loved him, and he loved her—was not that love?”

(36)—destabilizes an absurdist interpretation. M. H. Abrams says that Romanticism also prefers adjoining extreme subjective experience and transformation of reality by imagination and feeling (Abrams).

By operating in this way, the experience of Mersault with death can be seen as an aesthetic and emotional creation rather than a philosophical one. Rather than strengthening the feeling of powerlessness, his fascination with death makes his experiences meaningful, transforming the absurd world into a world of desire. So, the absurd hero willingly accepts his meaninglessness without complaint, whereas the Romantic hero struggles to overcome his meaninglessness via passion; Mersault is both a person who is indifferent and a person who desires—he is in between these two extremes.



As William Wordsworth writes in *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, memory is the source of the self that is sustained beyond immediate sensation: While here I stand, not only with the sense Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts, And I have felt A presence that disturbs me with the joy Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime Of something far more deeply interfused . . . Nor perchance, if I were not thus taught, should I the more Suffer my genial spirits to decay; how should this be? (Wordsworth, lines 95–98, 114–115) Here, Wordsworth develops the idea of the reflective “I” maintaining their identity through memory and introspection; without this inward interaction with the self, the self is in danger of spiritual decay. This Romantic focus on interiority is one way of providing a critical lens through which Albert Camus's *A Happy Death* may be reread - not as a strictly absurdist narrative, but as a narrative profoundly invested in the fragmentation and eventual reconciliation of the self. Within this framework it may be understood that Patrice Mersault is a divided character, between a constructed, socially legible identity and a repressed inner self. Patrice is the outward persona - controlled, dignified and deeply concerned with appearances.

His detachment is made visible in his reaction to the death of Zagreus: “But Patrice, watching him, saw his eyes fill with tears. It was Patrice who closed his eyes” (Camus 5). This moment makes a paradox show; although he seems composed, his actions make clear that there is an emotional disturbance beneath. Patrice keeps on doing a version of himself that conforms to social expectations, in which he would rather remain silent than vulnerable: “Patrice, who has his dignity, prefers to say nothing, until everyone bursts out laughing” (66).

His identity is therefore created through restraint, with a fear that loss of composure will reveal the instability below. This obsession of appearance spills over into his relationships and worldview. Patrice's contempt for emotional excess is clear when he says that, “Anyone who loves you is in for a lot of pain . . . Other people's feelings have no hold over me” (30). Such statements are revealing not indifference, but repression-a deliberate distance from emotional

entanglement, in order to be able to maintain control. His obsession with exterior beauty only reinforces this tendency: “A lovely creature is not entitled to grow ugly” (64). Here, ugliness becomes synonymous with disorder, a threat not just to other people but first to the foundations of his own identity. Yet, this carefully maintained façade is not impermeable. Moments of physical and emotional intensity throw off his composure, as when he is described as “left in a devastated state, mouth dry, temples throbbing, loins hot” (68). In these cases, he reveals the conflict between the self he acts and the self he represses. In contrast, Mersault escapes to the position of the repressed interior self - silent, marginalized, yet deeply affective.



Unlike Patrice, however, he is not given the freedom of expression, and is instead characterised by absence and restraint: “Everything in Mersault fell silent” (5).

His position “in front of the closed door” (3) comes to represent his condition, implying a sense of exclusion and self-imposed confinement. Mersault's life is filled with sacrifice and invisibility; he leaves his studies to provide for his mother; he becomes an object of pity in his community “People in the neighbourhood felt sorry for Mersault” (11). Yet this pity masks a tragedy of greater depth - his alienation to his own desires. His emotional life, while extreme, still goes unexpressed: “Mersault felt everything inside him fall apart and tears of rage welled up under his closed eyelids” (18).

This internal implosion attests not to weakness, but the result of long-term repression. However silent he is, Mersault is not without passion. Rather, his desires are expressed in broken and often indirect ways, mainly in his relationship with the thought of love and death. In his plea “Come here, image” (23), he seems to have a longing for contact which he cannot comprehend or maintain. Unlike Patrice, who deals with the visible and performative dimensions of being, Mersault is fascinated by that which is more-than - the intangible, the transcendent. However, being unable to articulate this yearning, he is misunderstood: “Mersault's a good fellow. He's got guts. But he doesn't talk - so people don't always realize what he's like” (20). His silence becomes both his best character and his worst handicap. The tension between Patrice and Mersault is, in the end, a larger Romantic conflict - between our external and internal self. As the story unfolds, this division starts to break down and there is a moment of reconciliation. Patrice's later assertion, “Find your happiness in yourself” (77), is an indication of a shift away from being validated by others to being validated internally. This evolution culminates in his changing perception of love and existence, as suggested in his farewell to the “Till next time, image” (83), where love is not bound to physical sureness and enters the world of the sublime.

In this final stage, death is not an object of fear, but is intertwined with desire - a consummation of the self rather than its negation. Through this Romantic lens, *A Happy Death* may be interpreted as a narrative of self-realization, in which the individual passes from the repression to the recognition. Patrice and Mersault are not individuals but together form one, fragmented consciousness that seeks to attain unity. In accepting the constructed and the concealed elements of the self, the individual achieves not only self-awareness, but also a transcendence of sorts.

Thus, Camus' protagonist, trapped in these often absurdist interpretations, may rather be seen as a deeply Romantic figure that is, as one who rejects the limits of his own self and in the process,



transforms death into an extension of the most intimate passion of life. In *A Happy Death*, the Mediterranean landscape does not act as a mere backdrop, but serves as a kind of secular transcendence, as Meursault grows out of the absurd detachment he experiences into a state that can be compared to Romantic unity. Nature is nearly alive in the house above the world: “below him the sea was whispering softly... smooth and undulating, like the pelt of some animal” (97). To Meursault, it is not a passive landscape, but a close conversation; nature mirrors and receives his loneliness. This difference is further evidenced by the metaphor of the

mistress, when nature is likened to a mistress that “one walks with after a long and stifling afternoon” (95). Meursault, on the contrary, goes beyond this superficial involvement.

It is also during the same moment that he acknowledges the change of time and existential readiness: “Meursault realized then that the season was ending. A long winter would begin. But he was ready for it, he would wait” (96). In this case, nature is instructive and requires patience and attention. The fact that he sees love and squashed, fragrant fruit also shows that he sees no opposition in experiencing creation and decay, pleasure and dissolution, and in this regard, he is echoing a romantic sense that contradiction cannot be resolved, but is to be reconciled in experience. This changing interaction with nature eventually redefines death itself. Instead of being an absurd ending, death turns out to be the last serious act of being united with the material world that has greatly influenced the consciousness of Meursault. It makes his transformation complete: “And stone among the stones, he went back in the gladness of his heart to the reality of the lifeless worlds” (106).

It is not destruction but assimilation—Meursault attains a sense of belonging beyond being an individual. In this regard, death ceases to be an unfeeling endpoint and takes the position of a silent lover and completes the relationship that nature had already brought to fruition. Meursault, unlike Patrice, does not ever half-heed the call of the natural world but accepts it whole, and submits to the rhythms. His experience, therefore, defies a purely absurdist interpretation: nature allows him to achieve a more down-to-earth, secular conception of the sublime, in which meaning is never projected onto him but is achieved through personal involvement with the world. Death is thus no rejection of the value of life, but its fulfilment, a reconciliation with the earth, which brings him peace, fulfilment, and a sort of transcendence ironical in character. The aestheticization of death challenges the absurdist interpretation of the novel by reconfiguring death not as a final point, but as a meaningful experience. In the realm

of absurdism, death is commonly reduced to an ultimate end—an indication of the absence of inherent meaning in life.



Romanticism, in contrast, provides another vision: death as sublime, intimate, and even harmonious. As John Keats writes, in *Ode to a Nightingale*: I have been half in love with easeful Death, Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme, To take into the air my quiet breath; Now more than ever seems it rich to die. (Keats, lines 52–55) In this case, death is desired but not feared, and is made soft, approachable, and almost beautiful. This Romantic sensibility reworks death as an entry into a state of equilibrium rather than destruction. In *A Happy Death*, Patrice as well as Mersault face death, particularly in the context of the prolonged suffering of Mersault's mother. Yet their responses diverge.

Patrice does not want to die and is surrounded by distractions; Mersault accepts it without resistance and feels that dying is a relief: "The suffering had been long... One day she died"

(11). To Mersault, death is not an absurd nothingness but the cessation of pity and degradation; it becomes a merciful resolution. Even the very title of the novel implies personification: death is not only an event but a condition to be reached—a "happy death". This is also supported by imagery such as the revolver, where, as the author says, "death lay in the cold, salty metal" (32), suggesting a tactile embodiment of death. It is made real, almost personal. Such closeness is reflected in the repetitive sensory descriptions of scent: "The scent of orange-blossoms came out of the darkness, and around him with its tender shawls" (12). In this case, death takes the place of a mother, and it surrounds Mersault in the form of a lover. This draws parallels to Cynthia Ozick's short story, *The shawl* where the child is fed, protected and loved by the maternal embrace of the shawl, "She lived by the shawl." (Ozick). The "shawl" metaphor suggests comfort and enclosure, transforming death into something nurturing rather than destructive. Likewise, death serves as a figurative veil—hiding and nourishing—to enable Mersault to withdraw into a world of inner transformation.

It is another way Mersault shows his fascination with death as the desire to be close to the unknown: "the infinite desire to grasp onto something... the inhuman and inanimate world"

(71). Death, as silent as the mouth of Lucienne, is a passage to a realm inaccessible to human understanding. Not fear, but fascination is reflected in this desire. It does not turn him away, even when death seems to have a hold on him, its damp breath, which he feels at the very moment he starts walking away (51). Rather, it becomes an intimate and familiar presence, making it a permanent companion.

The same dynamic is reflected in John Donne's *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, where love exists despite distance: "If they be two, they are two so/ As stiff twin compasses are two;". (Donne, lines 25–26) Similarly, death and Mersault are in a state of bondage, detached and together at the same time. Finally,



fear is ultimately broken by the romanticization of death. Fear, which often anchors individuals to life, does not affect Meursault. He sees death as an element of a greater cosmic rhythm: “that patient truth, which moves from star to star, and from death to death” (72). In this continuity of a vast interconnected system, death is no longer an end. Therefore, death emerges as a dual-edged force, both denying and giving.

It denies, as a traveller who tries in vain to quench his thirst, but it also gives liberation, “the deadly and sweet gesture that erases and denies” (103). In this dichotomy, death turns out not to be an absurd end but an aesthetic and almost intimate presence— something that Meursault ultimately comes to embrace. Zagreus’ assertion, I do not like superficiality and I do not like romanticism. I prefer to be conscious (30) seems to be the expression of the rejection of romanticism by Albert Camus, which is solidified when he calls it infantile and blatant (49). But this cannot be regarded as conclusive. According to Roland Barthes in *The Death of the Author*, “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” (Barthes), which is breaking off the power of the will of the author. Likewise, in proposing that there is nothing outside the text, Jacques Derrida implies that meaning is not predetermined but constantly

deferring (*Of Grammatology* 158) to language itself. Read through this deconstructive prism, the novel disrupts an absurdist reading that would have been exclusive to the act of negation, but instead allows a romantic re reading, in which death can be seen not as negation, but as an affective, desiring presence, that of a lover. This redefinition starts with the death of Meursault’s mother, “one day she died” (11).

This statement may sound harsh and cold-blooded, but its connotations are much more complicated. Her death ends her years of agony which would turn death into a deliverer but not a destroyer. The memory of this moment stands to this day, but reformulated in the terms of reciprocity, “was it not love, said she, that she valued him, and he valued her” (36). Death in this case is reconfigured as a close company, as one that comes about in a rather abrupt and yet significant way and is therefore reminiscent of a first romantic encounter: unexpected, formative, quietly transforming. This awakening intimacy intensifies during the scene of the death of Zagreus. Being faced with a man who wants to die, the action of Meursault goes beyond the moral judgment and becomes a paradoxical union. In contrast to Patrice, who shuts his eyes, Meursault keeps his eyes open and is directly involved in the act in spite of his internal trembling. This is the difference that is essential- not indifference, but a forced attraction to death as a manifestation of freedom and realization.

The thought by Zagreus that he can find happiness in endurance is achieved even in death itself, and this is where he finds the liberation he desires. In this regard, the very act of murder is readable as a unique romantic gesture: an effort to conform to the same regard with the beloved through logic. Like a romantic



gesture that proves the extent of passion between lovers, Meursault realizes that he must make a grand gesture—one that requires sacrificing his moral obligations of good and evil—in order to go beyond and encounter his lover once again. This sacrifice takes the form of killing Zagreus, an act that forever tarnishes his morality, yet appears a small price to pay for experiencing death through Zagreus' lifeless body, thereby creating a

situation that is out of the ordinary in order to meet his lover. In this sense, his act becomes a way of surprising death with death.

The physical dislocations of Meursault after the act, his aching head, his drying mouth, at first glance might seem indicative of physical trauma of his own actions but on deeper inspection this dislocation is reminiscent of the physical over-indulgence of Romantic desire seen in Shakespeare's Sonnet 147: "My love is as a fever, longing still/ For that which longer nurseth the disease" (Shakespeare, lines 1–2). Love in this is not rational but devouring, disruptive and inseparable with destruction. Meursault is unable to clearly define this attraction and therefore, transfers his attraction to the women in his life. His relations with Marthe and Lucienne are not based on the mutual recognition; they are fragmented reflections of the unrealized ideal. The fact that he can now only see a white space where Marthe had been suggests that the shift towards abstraction is underway "All he could see now was a white patch where Marthe's face was" (22) in which the object of love is transformed into form instead of being. Similarly, his appeal to the extreme blank beauty "At the point where the mind denies the mind, he touched his truth and with it his extreme glory, his extreme love" (86) implies that he favours the lack of understanding over understanding, just as he favours death as something incomprehensible and fascinating.

The same dynamic corresponds with what Emily Brontë wrote in *Wuthering Heights*: "whatever our souls are composed of, so are his and mine" (Brontë): here love becomes metaphysical and beyond that, beyond individuals. However, contrary to the mutuality portrayed by Brontë, the relationships that Meursault has do not work, in part because they cannot support the strangeness he seeks. The familiarity kills the fascination; it is only death that has made its indelible mystery. Only by this injuriously constant attraction toward the unknowable is the fragmented self of Meursault starting to come together. Death, being a romantic lover, is no enticement rather a form of healing. In yielding to its presence, he feels relieved of the weight of the memory and loss: "he felt himself free of his past, and of what he had lost" (59). This freedom is not attained by the clear-eyed acknowledgement of absurdity but through an emotional reconciliation where the beloved provides comfort, continuation and regeneration. "The desire to lose himself so that he can be found again" (99) is an indication that a shift in transcendence is going to



happen, where the loss of the self would be a state of fulfilment as opposed to negation. Finally, the ultimate letting go of death by Meursault reinstates the direction of his life. Death is no longer an end but a consummation, “a kind of tremendous chord of tenderness and hope which doubtless dissolved his fear of death,” (102) which removes the tension between desire and limitation.

At this point he does not surrender himself to the meaninglessness; instead, he adopts a kind of unity which is similar to Romantic transcendence. His life is not filled with coherence but with the emotional climax since “he would have a reason to die in what was his entire reason to live” (101). Therefore, instead of being the absurd hero, Meursault is readable as a functionally Romantic character whose eventual completion is his marriage with death. The novel does not dismiss romanticism; instead, it undermines its own philosophy and becomes vulnerable to a deconstructive interpretation where death has been aestheticized, longed after, and eventually beloved, the lover which brings freedom, wholeness, and fulfilment.

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