International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation
ISSN: 2617-0299 (Online); ISSN: 2708-0099 (Print)
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/ijllt

The Individual versus Society: Nonconformity and Existential Resistance in Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Camus's The Outsider

Samira Jainab ✉[1], **Mst Arman Ara Alif**[2], **Md. Azad Jahan**[3], **Asma-Ul-Husna Ara**[4]

[1] *Mirpur Cantonment Public School and College, Dhaka, Bangladesh1*

[2] *Department of English, Pundra University of Science & Technology, Bangladesh*

[3] *Additional Divisional Commissioner (General), Mymensingh, Bangladesh*

[4] *PhD Research Fellow, Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh*

Corresponding Author: Samira Jainab**, E-mail:** jainabsamira@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study closely examines how conformity and nonconformity shape the lives of two literary characters: Ivan Ilyich in Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Meursault in Albert Camus' The Outsider. Although these two literary works emerge from different historical and cultural contexts, both explore the consequences of an individual's relationship with society and its expectations. Ivan Ilyich builds his entire life around social approval, making decisions about his career, marriage, and domestic life according to prevailing social norms. In contrast, Meursault rejects these expectations, refusing to express emotions that he does not actually experience. While previous studies have examined conformity in Tolstoy's novella and nonconformity in Camus' novel separately, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the two works comparatively through these interconnected concepts. This study argues that neither conformity nor nonconformity necessarily leads to a happy or meaningful existence. Conformity provides Ivan with comfort and social respect for many years but ultimately leaves him questioning the authenticity and meaning of his entire life as he approaches death. On the other hand, nonconformity allows Meursault to remain true to his personal convictions but results in social alienation and ultimately contributes to his execution, as society judges him not only for the murder he commits but also for his failure to conform to conventional expressions of grief at his mother's funeral. Drawing on the philosophical perspectives of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, alongside Sándor Karikó's theory of the conformity–nonconformity divide, this study employs close textual analysis to demonstrate that conformity and nonconformity are not merely opposing positions but interconnected responses to social expectations, each presenting challenges to authentic existence. Through close readings supported by relevant scholarly perspectives, the study reveals that both characters develop a deeper awareness of their authentic selves only in their final moments, when the social structures that have shaped their lives begin to lose their influence. Ultimately, this study suggests that the fundamental question is not whether individuals should conform to or rebel against society, but whether they can preserve their personal authenticity while maintaining meaningful relationships with others.

KEYWORDS

Conformity, nonconformity, existentialism, absurdity, authenticity, alienation

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 14 October 2026 **PUBLISHED:** 15 November 2026 **DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2026.9.11.25

1. Introduction

In modern society, social conformity, professional success, and material security are among the most common measures of a meaningful life. People are expected to follow particular norms and values in order to gain social acceptance and personal fulfillment. Literature, however, has always questioned this idea. Writers often create characters who do not follow societal expectations, and through them, literature challenges what society defines as success. This creates a tension between conformity and nonconformity that lies at the heart of human experience. Karikó argues that conformity and nonconformity are not simple opposites but two facets of the same underlying problem. Both can lead to alienation and failure to achieve genuine meaning in life (Karikó 409).

Copyright: © 2026 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

This problem becomes especially significant when viewed through the philosophy of existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophy that focuses on the freedom of individuals to choose their own way of life, and it also explores what life truly means. According to Sartre, "existence precedes essence," which means human beings are not born with a fixed purpose, but they must create their own meaning in life through their actions and conscious choices (Sartre 28). Albert Camus, in a similar but distinct way, introduced the concept of the absurd. Camus describes "the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, Sisyphus 28), suggesting that life lacks any built-in purpose and that human beings must honestly confront this absurdity rather than escape from it. Existentialist characters often struggle to find meaning in life, which leaves them feeling confused, lonely, and uncertain about their own identity. They also tend to feel disconnected from society, as if they do not truly belong anywhere.

To answer these questions, one could compare the two authors, Leo Tolstoy and Albert Camus, in terms of the works that they have created, The Death of Ivan Ilyich and The Outsider. The characters in both texts pose some basic questions of conformity, authenticity and success in the modern world.

Ivan Ilyich is a clear example of social conformity in The Death of Ivan Ilyich. He has a decent job, fits into his social class and lives by its rules. All of the regular measures of success should apply to his life. But as his own imminent death threatens, he begins to see his life as empty and meaningless. As he nears his death, Ivan faces an existential crisis as he realizes that maybe all his life is a lie: “What if my whole life is wrong?” (Tolstoy 91). The shocking revelation here is that ‘success without social acceptance’ and ‘material success' are not sufficient to bring about real fulfillment (Brinta 966).

The Outsider, however, presents a character who goes against social norms, and one that apparently shows no interest in social norms: Meursault. At the opening of the novel, he is extremely unfeeling toward the death of his mother, saying, “Mother died today, or yesterday, I don't know” (Camus 3). This opening line already makes it clear that Meursault is emotionally detached and yet points towards his desire to not conform to the social norm of grief and mourning. This denouncement of imposed values could be rethought in a more existential way, using the concept of authenticity (Khan 103). However, Meursault is neither welcomed nor accepted; he is judged, condemned, and executed. His nonconformity leads to freedom but also to isolation and punishment, raising questions about the nature of living an honest life in a rigid society.

Where can individuals find fulfillment or meaning if neither conformity nor nonconformity guarantees them? Are success and achievement dependent on social norms or on understanding and self-awareness? The thesis is that neither conformity nor nonconformity leads to a sense of fulfillment, because each creates its own form of alienation, which is based on the continuous conflict between social structures and individual consciousness (Karikó 114).

1.1 Research Objectives

This study has three main objectives. The first is to examine the social expectations evident in The Death of Ivan Ilyich and their ultimate cost to Ivan, whose career, marriage, and even day-to-day choices are shaped by those expectations.

The second is to examine the way that nonconformity works in The Outsider and the reasons why the lack of feeling and lack of respect for social conventions in Meursault's life prove to be the cause of his death at the hands of society.

The third is to make comparisons between the experiences of conformity and nonconformity in order to reflect on the limitations of this conformity and of this nonconformity as means of coping with the pressures of modernity.

1.2 Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways is conformity manifested in The Death of Ivan Ilyich and The Outsider?
2. What kinds of crisis and alienation do the characters undergo?
3. In what ways do their options illustrate existentialist principles of freedom and responsibility?
4. What do these readings suggest about the relationship between authenticity and success in modern society?

The study is relevant because it addresses a contemporary issue: the conflict between society and individual freedom. Drawing on existentialist theory (Jauhiainen 4), this study aims to show how both works illuminate the psychological and philosophical conflicts that people face today. This comparison also adds to literary scholarship. It shows the connections and differences between the two stories and helps readers better understand both. It also connects existentialist philosophy and the content of the stories.

Literary analysis isn't the only thing that's significant. People are still pushing others to conform to the norms of success, and encouraging people to be different and express themselves (Zhang 2). This is precisely the paradox Tolstoy and Camus explored, and it remains an all-too-familiar debate about what it means to know one's identity and to find one's meaning in the modern world.

For this reason, in this study existentialist theory will be discussed to try to understand what the main paradox of modern life may be: everyone who chooses to conform or be authentic could suffer from alienation and discontent. The comparative analysis aims in the end to demonstrate that success is neither uniform nor universal but depends on the interaction between social and personal consciousness.

This will be done by means of close textual and thematic analysis of two literary pieces (The Death of Ivan Ilyich and The Outsider). The analysis draws on the philosophy of absurdism that pervades The Myth of Sisyphus but is not limited to a discussion of Camus'

work as a whole. The themes of conformity, nonconformity, alienation and authenticity continue to be the focus but are examined in existentialist terms.

2. Literature Review

Many studies in existentialist literary criticism and philosophy have explored conformity, nonconformity, and the authentic self. This section reviews the main works and theoretical principles used in the comparative analysis of Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Albert Camus' The Outsider. The sources are organized around the main themes of this study: existentialism, authenticity, conformity and nonconformity theory, modern social conformity, readings of Ivan Ilyich and Meursault, Camus' philosophy of absurdism, and comparative readings of the two authors. These sources will be used in combination to identify the important gap that this study aims to address.

2.1 Existentialism and Authenticity

Any study that deals with conformity, nonconformity, and the search for meaning in the modern world must begin with existentialism. Patil offers a clear entry point into this tradition by distinguishing between two ways of living: an authentic life, shaped by one's own values and choices, and an inauthentic life, shaped by the expectations that others impose on us (Patil 4). This distinction sits at the heart of the present study, because Ivan Ilyich and Meursault can be read as representing these two modes of existence: one conforming entirely to external expectations, the other refusing them altogether.

Sartre sharpens this distinction through his concept of "bad faith." For Sartre, bad faith occurs when a person pretends they have no choice, hiding behind a social role to escape the anxiety that comes with genuine freedom (Sartre 28). Since "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (Sartre 28), choosing a socially approved life without genuine reflection is not really a choice at all; it is a form of self-deception. Pathak applies this idea directly to the context of absurdism, arguing that bad faith and social conformity are closely linked, because both involve refusing to face the world as it actually is (Pathak 132). Pathak also outlines Camus' three-stage response to absurdity: acknowledgment, rebellion, and transformation (Pathak 134-135). This framework will be important later in this study when examining why Meursault's refusal to conform, while honest, still falls short of the genuine revolt that Camus describes as the only meaningful response to an absurd world. To understand how this existentialist tradition developed over time, the next section traces its historical roots.

2.2 History of Existential Thought

Vilasini and Paul show that existentialism did not emerge suddenly in the twentieth century. Its roots stretch back to ancient Greek philosophy, particularly to Socrates' insistence that people examine their own lives rather than simply accepting inherited values (Vilasini and Paul 3). What this historical overview makes clear is that the tension between social expectation and individual authenticity is not a modern invention. It is a recurring human problem, and both Tolstoy and Camus are part of a long philosophical tradition that has always pushed back against the idea that a socially approved life is automatically a good one. Placing both authors within this tradition allows us to compare them across their differences in time, place, and literary style. With this background in mind, the following section moves to the specific theoretical tools that this study uses to analyze conformity and nonconformity in the two novels.

2.3 Conformity and Non-Conformity as Theoretical Concepts

The most direct theoretical foundation for this study is Karikó's study of what he calls the conformity-nonconformity dichotomy. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of "Das Man," or the "they-self," Karikó explains that conformity happens when a person dissolves into the anonymous expectations of the crowd, losing any genuine sense of who they are (Karikó 411). What makes Karikó's argument particularly valuable for this study is his claim that nonconformity is not automatically the answer. Refusing to follow social norms can be just as empty as following them, if the refusal is driven purely by reaction to others rather than by a genuine personal value system (Karikó 414). In other words, both Ivan and Meursault may be failing in different ways to achieve what Karikó and the existentialists would recognize as authentic selfhood. This idea that both paths can fail is the central claim of this study, and it sets up the comparative framework used throughout the analysis sections. The next section grounds this theoretical claim in the realities of modern social life.

2.4 Modern Social Conformity

Zhang brings the philosophical discussion down to earth by examining how conformity actually works in contemporary society. Drawing on landmark social psychology experiments by Asch and Milgram, Zhang shows that conformity is not simply a personal weakness. It is built into the way modern societies function, rewarding those who fit in and making it costly for those who do not (Zhang 4). Alongside this, Yadav introduces a useful way of categorizing social identity. He distinguishes between a "legitimizing identity," which upholds the existing social order, and a "resistance identity," which challenges it (Yadav 4). Ivan Ilyich's entire life can be read as the construction of a legitimizing identity: he defines himself through his professional rank, his social connections, and his respectable home. Meursault, on the other hand, refuses any stable social identity at all. Neither position, as this study argues, is enough to produce a genuinely fulfilling life. With this social context established, the following section looks at how these dynamics play out specifically in the scholarship on Tolstoy's novel.

Brinta's close reading of The Death of Ivan Ilyich gives the most detailed account of how conformity shapes Ivan's life from beginning to end. Every major decision Ivan makes—about his career, his marriage, and his home—is driven not by what he genuinely wants but by what people in his social circle consider appropriate (Brinta 965). Tolstoy captures this perfectly in the line that Ivan's life "had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible" (Brinta 966). There is nothing dramatic about Ivan's failure. It is precisely the ordinariness of his choices that makes them so devastating. Brinta also draws attention to Gerasim, the peasant servant who cares for Ivan without any social performance or pretense (Brinta 968). Unlike Ivan's family and colleagues, who maintain their social roles even at his deathbed, Gerasim simply responds to Ivan as a human being. This makes Gerasim the only character in the novel who points toward a third possibility—something beyond both conformity and nonconformity—which connects directly to Karikó's argument that the conformity-nonconformity binary is ultimately a false one. The following section turns to the parallel body of scholarship on Meursault, the character who represents the opposite extreme.

Where Ivan conforms completely, Meursault refuses to conform at all. Several scholars have examined what this refusal actually means and what it costs him. Gao reads Meursault's detachment not as indifference but as radical honesty: an unwillingness to perform emotions he does not feel (Gao 112). Islam and Islam take this a step further, arguing that Meursault's trial is not really about the murder he committed. The court is more disturbed by the fact that he did not cry at his mother's funeral than by anything else, which suggests that the legal system functions primarily as a tool for enforcing social conformity rather than genuine justice (Islam and Islam 30). Astorga et al. connect this to Camus' own life, arguing that Meursault's detachment reflects Camus' personal experience of absurdism and his belief that one life is as meaningful as any other (Astorga et al. 247). Abdullah and Saksono add that Meursault's situation produces two distinct kinds of alienation: he is alienated from his own inner life by his emotional flatness, and alienated from society by his refusal to perform what it expects of him (Abdullah and Saksono 35). Khan offers perhaps the most precise characterization of all, because he has genuinely chosen it. Camus ends The Myth of Sisyphus with the famous line that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, Sisyphus 98), pointing toward a form of meaning that neither Ivan nor Meursault fully achieves.

Having established this philosophical framework, the final section of this review looks at the only existing study that reads both novels together.

2.5 Comparative Studies of Tolstoy and Camus

Jauhiainen's comparative study is the closest existing work to the present study. Using Heidegger's idea of "being-towards-death," Jauhiainen argues that both Ivan and Meursault are confronted by death in ways that reveal the truth about how they have lived (Jauhiainen 9). Ivan has spent his life avoiding the thought of death through social performance, and his illness strips that avoidance away. Meursault has never avoided death in the same way, but when execution approaches, it becomes clear that his nonconformity has left him just as disconnected from meaningful human relationships as Ivan's conformity has left Ivan. Both men face death alone, in different ways (Jauhiainen 12). Jauhiainen's study is genuinely valuable, but its focus is on death and Heidegger's philosophy rather than on conformity and nonconformity as its organizing theme. This leaves open the question of what these two novels reveal specifically about the costs and limits of both conformity and nonconformity in modern life, which is the gap this study aims to fill.

2.6 Research Gap

Looking across this body of scholarship, two things are clear. First, the existing studies treat the two novels almost entirely separately. Scholars who write about Ivan Ilyich focus on Tolstoy's critique of bourgeois conformity. Scholars who write about Meursault focus on Camus' philosophy of absurdism and the costs of nonconformity. Second, even in studies that touch on both, like Jauhiainen's, the organizing framework is not conformity and nonconformity themselves but something else, such as death or existential authenticity. No existing study has brought these two novels into direct, sustained comparison using conformity and nonconformity as its central lens, and no existing study has made the argument that both paths—Ivan's conformity and Meursault's nonconformity—represent parallel failures that point toward the same underlying problem. This is what the present study attempts to do.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design. A qualitative approach is appropriate here because the central concern of this study is meaning, interpretation, and human experience rather than measurable data. Conformity, nonconformity, and alienation are not things that can be counted or tested with numbers. They are themes that exist inside characters' thoughts, choices, and relationships within a literary text. For this reason, this study relies on close reading and textual analysis instead of statistical methods. The qualitative design allows the researcher to examine language, symbolism, and narrative structure in detail, which is necessary to understand how Tolstoy and Camus construct their arguments about conformity and nonconformity.

3.1 Research Approach

This study follows a comparative literary analysis approach. Rather than studying The Death of Ivan Ilyich and The Outsider separately, this study places the two texts side by side in order to find points of similarity and difference. This comparative method is supported by Jauhiainen's earlier comparative study of the same two works, which shows that reading Tolstoy and Camus together can reveal deeper philosophical connections that might not be visible when each text is studied alone (Jauhiainen 9). The

comparative approach is also well suited to the central argument of this study, which claims that conformity and nonconformity, although they appear to be opposite responses to society, may actually lead to similar forms of alienation. This kind of claim can only be tested by reading both texts in direct relation to one another, rather than reading them in isolation.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary data for this study consist of the two literary texts under examination: Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Albert Camus' The Outsider. Both texts are read in full, with close attention paid to key scenes, dialogue, and narrative description that relate to the themes of conformity, nonconformity, and alienation.

In addition to the primary texts, this study uses secondary sources to support and contextualize the analysis. These secondary sources include philosophical works such as Sartre's Existentialism and Humanism and Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus, as well as peer-reviewed journal articles and academic theses that discuss existentialism, conformity theory, and previous scholarship on both novels. These secondary sources were selected because they directly address the theoretical concepts central to this study, including authenticity, bad faith, the conformity-nonconformity dichotomy, and the philosophy of the absurd. Together, the primary texts and secondary sources form the complete body of data analyzed in this study.

3.3 Analytical Framework

This study is guided by an existentialist analytical framework, drawing primarily on the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger. From Sartre, this study borrows the concept that "existence precedes essence," meaning that individuals must create their own identity through conscious choice rather than inheriting a fixed purpose (Sartre 28). This study also uses Sartre's concept of "bad faith," which describes how people deceive themselves by hiding behind socially assigned roles instead of taking responsibility for their own freedom (Pathak 132).

From Heidegger, by way of Karikó's analysis, this study borrows the concept of "Das Man," or the "they-self," which describes how individuals can lose their authentic identity by sinking into the anonymous expectations of the social crowd (Karikó 411). This concept is especially useful for analyzing Ivan Ilyich's conformist life in the Discussion section. Importantly, this study also adopts Karikó's argument that conformity and nonconformity should not be treated as simple opposites, since unprincipled nonconformity can be just as inauthentic as blind conformity (Karikó 414). This insight shapes the comparative structure of this study, since it allows both Ivan Ilyich's conformity and Meursault's nonconformity to be examined critically, rather than treating one character as simply right and the other as simply wrong.

From Camus, this study borrows the concept of the absurd, defined as the conflict between the human need for meaning and the universe's silence in response to that need (Camus, Sisyphus 28). This concept supports the analysis of Meursault's nonconformity in the Discussion section, since Meursault's behavior can be read as an honest response to this absurd condition rather than as simple indifference. Together, these three thinkers provide the philosophical vocabulary used throughout the analysis sections of this study.

4. Discussion

Ivan Ilyich's life is shaped by conformity from the very start. He becomes a lawyer not out of passion but because law is the kind of career that brings respectability without too much effort. Tolstoy notes that men in Ivan's social circle often end up with comfortable positions despite having little real talent, simply because of their social standing (Tolstoy 44). Ivan fits this pattern exactly. As Brinta observes, every major decision in his life is driven by the desire for social approval rather than by what he genuinely wants (Brinta 965). His marriage follows the same logic. Tolstoy writes plainly that Ivan married Praskovya Fyodorovna because she was "a good match" and marrying her had the approval of people whose opinion mattered to him (Tolstoy 48). He did not marry for love. He married because it was the proper next step for a man in his position. This is bad faith in its clearest form. Pathak describes bad faith as adopting a socially expected role without ever asking whether it reflects genuine desire (Pathak 132). Ivan never asks that question. He builds a respectable career, decorates his home with care, and lives a life that looks, from the outside, like success.

The cost of this arrangement becomes visible once illness enters his life. A doctor visits to examine him. Praskovya watches with what Tolstoy calls "a surge of loathing", and Tolstoy adds that "she has not been able to rid herself" of this feeling toward her own husband (Tolstoy 81). Moments later, she puts on a "sweetly condescending smile" for the doctor and pretends concern she does not feel (Tolstoy 82). This single scene captures something important about Ivan's marriage. It was never built on real connection. It was built on appearances, and even at his deathbed, those appearances continue. Husband and wife perform concern and care for each other in front of witnesses, while privately feeling something closer to resentment. Ivan's illness eventually forces him to see himself honestly, if only for a moment. After visiting the doctor, he goes home, locks his door, and studies his own reflection. Tolstoy writes that Ivan compares an old photograph of himself with what he now sees in the mirror, and "the difference was enormous" (Tolstoy 67). His brother-in-law, seeing him for the first time in a while, can barely hide his shock, admitting only that Ivan has "changed...rather" (Tolstoy 67). This moment shows the limits of conformity. Ivan has spent his whole life managing how others see him, but illness strips away his control over his own appearance. For the first time, the gap between the image he has built and the reality of his body becomes impossible to ignore.

Soon after, Ivan experiences his first full confrontation with the idea of death. Alone at night, he suddenly asks himself, "When I'm dead, what happens then?" The question terrifies him, and he thinks, "Yes, I have been alive, and now my life is steadily going away and I can't stop it" (Tolstoy 69). This moment matters because it shows that Ivan already knows the truth before he is ready to accept it. The knowledge arrives first as raw fear, not yet as something he can reason through.

Later, he tries to make sense of this fear using logic, and this attempt reveals the deepest form of his self-deception. He recalls a syllogism from his school days: "Caesar is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caesar is mortal." For his whole life, this had felt true only when applied to Caesar, never to himself. As Tolstoy puts it, Ivan "had always been a special being, totally different from all others" (Tolstoy 71). This is bad faith in its purest form. Ivan knows, as a fact, that all men die. But knowing a fact and accepting it as true for oneself are two different things, and Ivan has spent his entire life keeping that gap open. Sasan's discussion of Nietzsche's slave morality helps explain why. Slave morality, according to Sasan, is built on fear of judgment rather than self-created values (Sasan 3). Ivan's life fits this description closely. His career, his marriage, and even his denial of death are all shaped by what others expect of him, not by values he has chosen for himself. A man who has never created his own values has nothing solid to fall back on when the structure of social approval finally collapses.

What makes Ivan's illness so unbearable is not only physical pain but the social performance that continues around him as he dies. Tolstoy calls this performance simply "the lie." Ivan eventually says it aloud to his wife: "Stop all this lying! You know and I know that I'm dying" (Tolstoy 77). Yet the lie does not stop. When his daughter visits, dressed for the theatre, Tolstoy writes that she has "no time for the illness, suffering and death" disrupting her happiness (Tolstoy 84). The family discusses an actress they have seen perform while Ivan lies dying in the next room. This scene shows conformity at its most disturbing. The family is so committed to proper social behaviour that it cannot stop performing even in the presence of death. Against this background of performance stands Gerasim, the peasant servant. Gerasim does not pretend. When Ivan apologises for needing his help, Gerasim simply answers, "'Tis God's will, sir.'Twill come to us all" (Tolstoy 75). He cares for Ivan "easily, willingly, simply," without any of the discomfort that defines everyone else's behaviour around the dying man (Tolstoy 76). Tolstoy writes that Gerasim was "the only one who did understand his situation," which is why his presence brings Ivan real comfort (Tolstoy 77). Gerasim is not rebelling against anything. He has no need to be. In Karikó's terms, he represents something beyond the conformity-nonconformity dichotomy altogether, a quiet honesty that neither blind social conformity nor any act of rebellion against it could produce (Karikó 414).

In his final weeks, Ivan looks back over his entire life and finds almost nothing real in it. The pleasures he once thought were genuine now seem "trivial and often disgusting," with the partial exception of a few memories from early childhood (Tolstoy 87). He remembers the taste of prunes from his boyhood, his old nurse, his toys, and these small memories feel more truthful to him than anything from his adult life (Tolstoy 89). His marriage, by contrast, he now describes as "an accident and such a disappointment," remembering only "sensuality and hypocrisy" (Tolstoy 87). He arrives at a devastating realisation: "It's as if I had been going downhill when I thought I was going uphill" (Tolstoy 87). Society told him his life was a success. His own dying body tells him otherwise. The clearest statement of this realisation comes when Ivan looks at Gerasim and is struck by one terrible thought: "What if my whole life, my conscious life, really have been wrong?" (Tolstoy 91). This is not a small doubt about one decision. It is a question about everything: his career, his marriage, his entire conformist existence. He cannot fully accept the thought, because doing so would mean admitting that "everything that he had experienced about good in the highest positions" was false (Tolstoy 91). But once the question has been asked, it cannot be unasked. This moment confirms what Karikó's theory predicts: a life built entirely on social expectation, with no space left for an authentic self, leaves nothing behind once the performance is no longer needed (Karikó 411).

For three days, Ivan screams in agony, struggling against what feels like an invisible black sack, resisting "like a condemned man resisting his executioner" (Tolstoy 93). What finally releases him is not an answer to his question but a small, genuine human connection. His son Vasya comes to his bedside in tears, and the sight of the boy's grief breaks something open in Ivan. He tries to say "forgive me" to his wife and son, managing only "for...give" before his strength gives out, but his wife understands him anyway (Tolstoy 94). For the first time in the novella, Ivan reaches the people closest to him without any performance at all. Immediately afterward, Tolstoy writes that "instead of death there was light." Ivan's pain disappears, and his last words are simple: "Death is gone" (Tolstoy 95).

Ivan Ilyich does everything society asks of him, and society rewards him with respectability and comfort. But none of it gives him a self he can call his own, and none of it prepares him for the one experience every person must eventually face. Only at the very end, through Gerasim's plain honesty and his own broken apology to his family, does Ivan touch something real. The following section turns to Meursault in The Stranger, a character who refuses from the very beginning the kind of social performance that defines Ivan's entire life. As this study will show, Meursault's nonconformity creates a different kind of isolation, one that is no less painful than Ivan's, even though it comes from the opposite direction.

4.1 Meursault: The Life of Non-Conformity

Where Ivan spends his whole life trying to fit in, Meursault refuses from the very first page to perform feelings he does not have. The opening line, "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know" (Camus 3), tells us almost everything about him. He does not know exactly when his mother died, and this does not seem to trouble him. When his boss reluctantly grants him leave for the

funeral, Meursault tells him "It's not my fault," without realizing that this kind of defensive honesty is precisely what unsettles the people around him (Camus 3). As Khan argues, Meursault is not trying to provoke anyone. He simply cannot manufacture feelings he does not have, and this single trait marks him as an outsider from the start (Khan g104). The pattern continues in his relationships. The day after the funeral, he goes swimming and meets Marie, and when she later learns his mother died only the day before, she "recoiled slightly, but made no remark" (Camus 18). Her reaction reveals what society expects; his behaviour reveals what he actually feels. When his employer later offers him a transfer to Paris, Meursault answers that "one life was as good as another" and that he was content where he was (Camus 38), and when Marie asks whether he would have accepted a marriage proposal from any woman, he simply says, "Naturally" (Camus 39). This is not cruelty so much as a refusal to pretend that one choice is more meaningful than another, an attitude Astorga et al. connect directly to Camus' own philosophy of absurdism (Astorga et al. 247).

This same lack of judgment pulls Meursault into events he never actively chooses. When his neighbour Raymond asks him to write a letter meant to lure back and punish a woman he has beaten, Meursault agrees without objection, writing it "not to please him" but simply because refusing requires more effort of judgment than he is inclined to make (Camus 29). Abdullah and Saksono describe this as a form of self-alienation: Meursault's flatness cuts him off even from his own moral instincts, not only from other people (Abdullah and Saksono 35). This same drift carries him toward the central crisis of the novel. On the beach, facing a man whose knife catches the sunlight, Meursault feels the glare strike him "like a long, flashing sword lunging at my forehead" (Camus 53), and describes the gunshot itself in oddly passive language: "the trigger gave...and it was there...that it all started" (Camus 54). The sentence places the action with the trigger, not with him. Gao reads this as evidence that Meursault's violence is less premeditated cruelty than a breakdown of ordinary moral processing under physical pressure (Gao 112). What troubles him most immediately afterward is not the man he has killed but the fact that he has "destroyed the balance of the day and the perfect silence of this beach" where he had been happy (Camus 54). He fires four more shots into the lifeless body, calling each one "a sharp knock at the door of unhappiness" (Camus 54).

Once arrested, the legal system that judges Meursault reveals exactly how society treats this kind of indifference. Islam and Islam argue that the trial functions less as a search for justice than as a mechanism for enforcing conformity (Islam and Islam 30), and the courtroom scenes bear this out closely. The investigating magistrate is more troubled by the fact that Meursault "displayed a lack of emotion" at his mother's funeral than by the killing itself (Camus 58), and when asked why he paused between his first and second shots, Meursault has no real answer, because there was no calculated reasoning behind his actions, only heat, light, and a strange paralysis (Camus 61). Unable to find the motive he is looking for, the magistrate starts treating Meursault as something monstrous, eventually calling him, half-jokingly, "Mr Antichrist" (Camus 63). This reaches its peak in the prosecutor's closing speech, which dwells not on the murder but on Meursault's behaviour after his mother's death: "the day after the death of his mother, this man was swimming in the sea, entering into an irregular liaison and laughing at a Fernandel film. I have nothing more to say to you" (Camus 83). The prosecutor goes further still, declaring that Meursault has no soul and "no access to any humanity nor to any of the moral principles which protect the human heart" (Camus 89), before asking for "this man's head" with what he calls "an easy mind" (Camus 89). Society, in other words, condemns Meursault less for his crime than for his refusal to perform grief on schedule.

After his sentencing, Meursault faces death the same way he has faced everything else, honestly and without seeking comfort in religion. He refuses the prison chaplain repeatedly, explaining simply that he does not believe in God (Camus 102), and reasons that since everyone eventually dies, it makes little difference whether a person dies at thirty or seventy, since other people will go on living regardless (Camus 100). When the chaplain accuses him of speaking out of despair, Meursault corrects him; he is not in despair, only afraid, "which was only natural" (Camus 102). Sarlin and Kirubakaran's account of Camus' philosophy clarifies this distinction. For Camus, a genuine response to the absurd is not despair but a clear-eyed acceptance that life carries no built-in meaning (Sarlin and Kirubakaran 4), and Meursault holds this position almost perfectly until the chaplain's visit pushes something unexpected to the surface. When the chaplain speaks of seeing a divine face in the prison walls, Meursault tells him that the only face he ever searched for there was Marie's, "the colour of the sun and burning with desire" (Camus 104), and when the chaplain refuses to accept that he has no hope of another life, Meursault shouts that any other life would have to resemble this one (Camus 105). This is the only moment in the novel where his composure breaks. He insults the chaplain and declares that none of the man's religious certainties is worth "one hair of a woman's head" (Camus 105). The outburst matters because it proves that Meursault's calm is not emptiness; he holds real convictions, rooted in physical experience rather than doctrine, and defends them fiercely when pushed.

Once the chaplain leaves in tears, Meursault's calm returns and deepens into something close to peace. He thinks of his mother for the first time in a long while and understands, suddenly, why she had taken a companion near the end of her life: facing death so closely, she must have felt "liberated and ready to live her life again" (Camus 107). He reaches the same feeling himself, opening his eyes to what he calls "the benign indifference of the world" and finding it so close to his own nature that he realises he has been happy, and remains happy still (Camus 107). His final wish, that a crowd gather at his execution and greet him "with cries of hatred" (Camus 107), shows that even at the very end he wants some form of human contact, even a hostile one, rather than dying

entirely alone. Meursault never performs the roles Ivan spends his whole life maintaining, but his honesty brings him no real connection until his last hours, and even then only after society has already condemned him to death precisely for that honesty.

4.1 Comparative Analysis: Two Opposite Paths, One Shared Failure

Ivan Ilyich and Meursault look, on the surface, like opposites in every way. One pleases everyone around him; the other refuses to please anyone. But Karikó's theory of the conformity-nonconformity dichotomy suggests that the distance between them is smaller than it first appears, because both men fail, in different directions, to build a self they can genuinely call their own (Karikó 411). It is worth examining how this failure plays out across several specific areas of their lives, since the comparison reveals more than a simple contrast between a conformist and a rebel.

The first area worth comparing is marriage, and here the two stories illuminate each other in an unexpected way. Ivan's marriage to Praskovya is built entirely on social calculation; he chooses her because she represents "a good match" approved by people whose opinion matters to him (Tolstoy 48), and the marriage settles into a lifetime of polite performance that finally curdles into the "surge of loathing" Praskovya feels at his sickbed (Tolstoy 81). Meursault's relationship with Marie runs on the opposite logic. He never calculates anything about her; he simply enjoys her company and tells her honestly that he would have married any woman who proposed in the same way (Camus 39). Yet neither approach produces a relationship of real depth. Ivan's marriage is full of social form and empty of feeling. Meursault's relationship with Marie is full of physical affection but almost empty of commitment; when she asks him to wave back at her in the courtroom, his heart feels "locked" and he cannot manage it (Camus 93). Both men, despite living at opposite extremes, end their lives without a partner who is truly close to them in the way that matters most.

A second point of comparison is how society itself reacts to each man, and this is where the most important difference between conformity and nonconformity becomes visible. Ivan's society does not punish him for conforming; it rewards him richly with status, income, and respect, right up until his illness makes the performance impossible to sustain. Meursault's society does punish him, swiftly and severely, the moment his nonconformity becomes visible in a courtroom. The prosecutor builds an entire case not around the killing itself but around Meursault's failure to cry at his mother's funeral (Camus 83), which shows that society has far less tolerance for visible nonconformity than for quiet conformity, even when the nonconformist's actual crime is identical to what any rebellious or impulsive person might do. This asymmetry matters for the argument of this study. Conformity is rewarded while it lasts and only reveals its emptiness privately, at the moment of death. Nonconformity is punished immediately and publicly, often for reasons that have little to do with the act being judged.

A third comparison concerns the presence, or absence, of someone like Gerasim in each man's life. Ivan has Gerasim, a figure who offers honest, undemanding care without performance or judgment, and this relationship gives Ivan his only real comfort in his final months (Tolstoy 76). Meursault has no equivalent figure. Raymond treats him as a useful "mate" rather than a friend (Camus 30), Marie offers affection he cannot fully return, and even his own lawyer speaks for him in court as though Meursault were not present, reducing him, in his own words, to "insignificance" (Camus 91). Where Ivan's conformist world eventually produces one figure capable of real honesty, Meursault's nonconformist isolation produces no such figure at all. This suggests that nonconformity, on its own, does not automatically create the kind of authentic connection that Karikó's theory points toward (Karikó 414). Refusing to perform is necessary for honesty, but it is not sufficient for connection, and Meursault's story shows the cost of having one without the other.

Finally, both novels use the approach of death to strip away whatever has defined each man's life, and what remains afterward is genuinely different in each case. For Ivan, what remains is a desperate need for forgiveness, expressed through a single broken word to his son and wife, after which Tolstoy describes light appearing where there had only been the fear of death (Tolstoy 94-95). For Meursault, what remains is a strange, settled peace with the universe itself, a recognition that the world's indifference matches his own and that this shared indifference is, in its own way, a form of kinship (Camus 107). Jauhiainen's reading of both novels through Heidegger's idea of "being-towards-death" captures this well: both men are forced to confront mortality honestly, and both discover something true about themselves only once every social performance has been stripped away (Jauhiainen 9). The difference is that Ivan's truth arrives through reconnecting with people he had kept at a careful distance, while Meursault's truth arrives through accepting a universe that has always been distant from everyone, himself included.

Taken together, these comparisons support the central argument of this study. Ivan's conformity buys him decades of comfort, but it leaves him questioning, in his final hours, whether his entire conscious life had been a mistake (Tolstoy 91). Meursault's nonconformity preserves his honesty from the very first page, but it leads him directly to execution, condemned less for killing a man than for failing to grieve correctly (Camus 83). Neither path delivers what Karikó calls authentic selfhood (Karikó 414), and neither man finds real peace until almost everything else—status, relationships, even the fear of death itself—has already been taken from him. The lesson these two novels offer together is not that conformity is worse than nonconformity, or the reverse. It is that both are incomplete answers to the same question: how does a person live honestly with other people, without either disappearing into their expectations or shutting them out entirely? Neither Ivan nor Meursault finds a full answer. But each, in his final hours, comes close enough to glimpse what the answer might look like.

Limitations

This study is limited to two literary works and therefore cannot claim that its conclusions apply universally to existentialist literature. Although Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus has been used to support the philosophical discussion, the wider works of Tolstoy and Camus have not been examined. The study also focuses primarily on conformity, nonconformity, authenticity, and alienation, while other important issues, including gender, religion, and colonialism, receive limited attention.

Another limitation concerns translation. The analysis relies on English translations rather than the original Russian and French texts. Certain linguistic, cultural, and stylistic nuances may therefore have been altered in translation. In addition, literary interpretation necessarily involves an element of subjectivity, meaning that other researchers may reasonably emphasise different aspects of the texts.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the functions of conformity and nonconformity in Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Albert Camus' The Outsider, with particular attention to authenticity, alienation, freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in modern life. The central argument is that neither conformity nor nonconformity, when pursued as an absolute way of living, leads to genuine fulfilment. Instead, both extremes can produce alienation because they reflect the continuing tension between social expectations and individual consciousness.

Ivan Ilyich represents the conformist extreme. Throughout his life, he follows socially accepted standards of success, selecting his profession, marriage, lifestyle, and social relationships largely according to what society considers appropriate. Although this conformity brings him professional success and social approval, it fails to provide genuine happiness or meaningful human connection. His illness gradually removes the social structures on which his identity depends and forces him to question the value of his entire life. His final realisation that his life "really have been wrong" (Tolstoy 91) demonstrates the consequences of living according to external expectations rather than personal authenticity.

Meursault represents the opposite extreme. From the beginning of The Outsider, he refuses to display emotions simply because society expects them. His unwillingness to perform conventional grief, love, or remorse makes him socially unacceptable. His trial demonstrates that society judges him not only for his crime but also for his failure to behave according to accepted emotional standards. His nonconformity therefore provides a form of personal honesty, but it also produces profound isolation.

The comparison of these protagonists suggests that authenticity alone is not sufficient for a meaningful life. Ivan lacks authenticity because he lives primarily for social approval, while Meursault possesses a radical form of authenticity but remains emotionally disconnected from others. Gerasim provides a possible alternative. His honesty, compassion, and willingness to remain present with Ivan demonstrate that authenticity can coexist with human connection. Thus, the novels suggest that the more meaningful alternative to conformity and rebellion may be an integration of personal honesty and genuine relationships.

Future research could extend this comparative approach to other works by Tolstoy, Camus, and other existentialist writers to determine whether similar patterns of conformity, nonconformity, and alienation appear elsewhere. Further research could also explore gender and religious dimensions in greater depth. Finally, Gerasim could be examined as a model of authentic human relationships, providing insight into how honesty, compassion, and social connection might offer an alternative to the conformity–nonconformity divide in both literature and contemporary life.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

Abdullah, M. Adam, and Suryo Tri Saksono. "Alienation in Albert Camus' The Stranger." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, vol. 26, no. 4, 2021, pp. 34-38.

Astorga, et al. "The Stranger: Meursault as the Reflections of Albert Camus' Absurdism."

International Journal of Research and Scientific Education, 2025, pp. 243-251.

Brinta, Moyedun Zannat. "The Death of Ivan Ilych: A Poignant Story of Psychological and Social Reality." International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, vol. 7, no. 11, 2023, pp. 964-970.

Camus, Albert. The Myth of Sisyphus. Translated by Justin O'Brien, Vintage International, 1991.

Camus, Albert. The Outsider. Translated by Joseph Laredo, Friends' Book Corner, 2019. Gao, Yi-xiao. "The Absurdity in The Stranger." Sino-US English Teaching, vol. 18, no. 3, 2021,

pp. 110-114.

Genovese, Maria K. Meaningful Meaninglessness: Albert Camus' Presentation of Absurdism as a Foundation for Goodness. Senior Thesis, Salve Regina University, 2010.

Islam, Md. Sahidul, and Muhammad Nurul Islam. "Albert Camus' Meursault in The Outsider: An Existential Hero and Beyond." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, vol. 23, no. 1, 2018, pp. 30-34.

Jauhiainen, Irina. "The Theme of Being-Towards-Death in Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich

and Camus' The Outsider." Academia.edu, 2020.

Karikó, Sándor. "What Is the Conformity-Nonconformity Dichotomy?" Philosophy Study, vol.

13, no. 10, 2023, pp. 409-415.

Khan, Arshiya. "Exploring Existentialism and Alienation from Albert Camus's Works 'The Myth of Sisyphus' and 'The Stranger'." International Journal of Novel Research and Development, vol. 9, Apr. 2024, pp. g100-g112.

Patil, Yogesh R. "Authenticity and Inauthenticity in Relation with Existentialism." Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research, vol. 8, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1-6.

Pathak, Amrit. "Freedom, Authenticity, and the Absurd: Exploring Existentialism in the Modern Era." International Journal of Novel Research and Development, vol. 9, no. 5, 2024, pp. 131-137.

Sarlin, I., and S. Azariah Kirubakaran. "Absurdity and the Human Condition: A Study of Albert Camus' Literary and Philosophical Works." International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research, vol. 7, no. 4, 2025, pp. 1-11.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Existentialism and Humanism. Translated by Philip Mairet, Methuen, 1948. Sasan, John Michael. "Existentialism and Its Influence on Our Understanding of Knowledge,

Truth, Morality, Values, and Religion." Social Science and Culture, 2023, pp. 1-12.

Tolstoy, Leo. The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories. Translated by Anthony Briggs, David McDuff, and Ronald Wilks, Penguin Classics, 2008.

Vilasini, K.A., and X. John Paul. "The Origin, History and Development of Existentialism."

Serials Journals, 2020, pp. 1-10.

Yadav, Shashank. "The Evolution of Identity in Modern Society: A Sociological Exploration.International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research, vol. 5, no. 6, 2023, pp. 1-9.

Zhang, Baolun. "Duality of Conformity in Modern Society: Mechanisms, Manifestations, and Challenges." Scitepress, 2025, pp. 1-8.