**A Study of Camus’s *The Stranger***

*“****A novel is [only] a philosophy put into images…”*** (*From Camus’s review of Sartre’s Nausea)*

Though a work of fiction, Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* represents a key work of French existential literature. Lacking any discernible reason for his actions, Meursault claims that nothing in life matters since we will all inevitably die. Detached and apathetic, Meursault “represents the quintessential existential hero” (Galens 54). Likewise, he believes that “[a] person’s identity does not exist in anything except that person’s actions.” As such, Meursault “is outside of the bounds of social order [and ultimately] alienated even from those closest to him” (Galens 57). In truly embracing the idea that human existence holds no greater meaning, Meursault not only abandons all hope for the future, but also accepts the natural futility of the world.

First used to describe literary works by Albert Camus (Galens 60), absurdist philosophy states that while “[m]orality, religion, science, and philosophy purport to discover unchanging universal principles and values,…death chance, and the impenetrability of human motives render life essentially incomprehensible and controvert claims for transcendent meaning” (Michelman 265). While in prison, awaiting his execution, Meursault comes to realize that just as he had “lived [his] life one way, [he] could just as well have lived it another…[and] nothing [would] matter” (Camus 121). For Meursault, “life is absurd” (Michelman 266).

A product of the intellectual climate of the times, “Meursault’s ultimate vindication is in having remained true to himself and to his feelings in a society that cultivates deception and hypocrisy”. According to the existentialists, “[t]here is no outside force governing our lives” (Moser). As such, Meursault “does not hesitate to draw the inevitable conclusions from a fundamental absurdity” (Rein). For instance, after attending his mother’s funeral, it occurs to Meursault that “one more Sunday was over, that mother was buried now, that [he] was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed” (Camus 24). A man of existential logic and character, Meursault “confronts issues [such as]…the apparent randomness of violence and death [and] the emptiness of a social morality in the face of an irrational world” (Stanley 288).

Representing a life of “normality,” Marie represents the happy life Meursault desires to live. As depicted in Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus, “*[h]appiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable”(Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus*). So too, Marie is the only reason Meursault has for regretting his crimes. However, despite his clearly displayed affection towards Marie, Meursault claims that love “[doesn’t] mean anything [and] that [he] didn’t think [he loved her]” (Camus 35). Furthermore, on the one visit Marie is allowed at the prison, Meursault has little to say to her; he is distracted by the noise and confusion around him, and focuses mainly on the sensual desires she arouses. Wanting to prolong her stay, Meursault forces himself to utter a few responses, “mainly just to say something” (Camus 75).

Meursault’s readiness to follow the ordinary dictates of social courtesy, however, is best seen in his relations with Salamano, the elderly neighbor who resembles his mangy dog; Salamano seems pathetic and somewhat repulsive in appearance. In the reader’s first encounter with Salamano, he is cursing and beating his dog in the apartment stairway. Meursault does no more than utter a greeting and make a friendly inquiry, to which he obtains a rather rude reply. A few days later, the dog runs away. Meursault invites him in, listens to his story, asks some questions to keep the conversation going despite feeling bored, and even pleases the old man by saying the dog “was well bred” (Camus 57). Although Meursault does not bother to agree when Salamano suggests that he must be feeling very sad since his mother’s death, he urges Salamano to stay a bit longer and says he is sorry about the dog. Meursault’s kindness toward Salamano contrasts with his usual indifference and reserve, and furthermore reveals a fine sense of tact.

Immediately following his shooting of the Arab, Meursault’s perspective abruptly changes; he recognizes that a momentous event has just occurred. Unlike his mother’s death or his engagement to Marie, this deed marks a conscious turning point in Meursault’s perspective on life. Curiously, he “regards it as a beginning rather than an end, even though he has lost his freedom” (Galens 57) and, as he puts it, “shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I’d been happy” (Camus 59). While Meursault offers no more explanation for the additional four shots, “the act itself still belongs to his habitual pattern of behavior: impulsive, instinctive, and unconscious” (Galens 59). Nevertheless, Meursault understands that this act will have consequences for the future. In Meursault’s own words, “it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness” (Camus 59).

Despite the strange ordinariness and the odd banality of his life, part one of *The Stranger* ends at a familiar literary moment. A dramatic and mysterious event has erupted in the midst of the commonplace. The mystery is, of course, not who did it, but why it was done. Most readers would expect the story to proceed now toward an explanation of Meursault’s motives; searching his own soul, he should find a key to his behavior.  In life, the judicial process bears the burden of assessing motives and assigning responsibilities; while the court in The Stranger attempts to do just this, it cannot as Meursault “does nothing but denounce…the real and miserable aspect of man’s fate” (Galens 55).

With an inevitable guilty charge based more on Meursault’s indifference at his mother’s funeral than on his murder of another human being, Meursault is sent to prison where he changes very little. He talks several times about his difficulty in learning to think prisoner’s thoughts, but he brings a certain aptitude or predisposition to the task. He relinquishes his sensual pleasures without much struggle. He feels that “if [he] had to live in the trunk of a dead tree, with nothing to do but look up at the sky flowering overhead, little by little, [he] would have gotten used to it” (Camus 77). Living as he does, outside the symbolic orders of meaning, he is essentially unpunishable. Everything is simply a condition of existence; nothing is retribution and nothing is reward.

Ultimately, Meursault is a troubled soul trying to find happiness in an indifferent world. His attitude should inspire no admiration, and certainly is not to be imitated. He is a quasi-antihero. Where typical heroes devote their entire lives to a cause, Meursault has no faith in any cause, and indeed recognizes no meaning. Despite his tenacity for living in the present moment, Meursault is blind to the fact that every choice he makes is made with his knowing that no matter what choice is made, he will ultimately die. Most of the time implicitly, but sometimes explicitly, Meursault regards his own impulses as natural. When Marie asks whether he would say yes to any girl who proposed marriage to him, he replies, “Naturally” (Camus 42). When he comes upon the Arab on the beach, he says “Naturally, I gripped Raymond’s gun” (Camus 58). Intellectually lazy and irresponsible, Meursault does not see his “natural” impulses as signs of indifference to society; in Meursault’s own words, he “gave up the idea [of defending himself in court] out of laziness” (Camus 66.) This laziness pervades Meursault’s attitude so much that he assumes everything is equal if he has no feeling about it: one woman is as good a wife as another; one man makes as good a friend as another; one job is as good as another job; shooting the Arab is just the same as not shooting him.

Meursault is completely prey to his own conditioned responses, utterly unaware that they, too, express the very sort of meaning and purpose that he does not want to acknowledge. This apathetic ignorance produces a monster of pure egotism.  Likewise, this laziness allows Meursault to become one with the reality of death. As described in Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “the inescapability of death voids the very possibility of ‘ultimate’ or metaphysical freedom.” For Meursault, “death is the ultimate canceler of freedom: what a man chooses, how he lives, what he has done, all make no difference, since the one same fate—death—chooses all alike” (Maus 141).

Unconsciously, then, Meursault accepts his inevitable death and execution. In effect, he commits not only ordinary suicide, by not attempting to redeem himself in front of the court, but also what Camus calls philosophical suicide; more specifically, Meursault needs the moral order of society to which he is consciously indifferent to in order to continue on living. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus asks: “Is one going to die, escape by the leap, re-build a mansion of ideas and forms to one’s own scale? Is one, on the contrary, going to take up the heart-rending and marvelous wager of the absurd?” Meursault, is not really taking up the “wager of the absurd;” in essence, rather than continuing to struggle in the gray twilight of the life of the absurd, Meursault leaps into the maternal sea of death, thereby ending his meaningless life on Earth (Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus)*.

As the reader immediately learns in *The Stranger*, Meursault is aware of feelings and opinions in others, yet he acknowledges few emotions in himself. Particularly in situations where one expects feelings, he professes to have none. Thus he feels little sorrow at his mother’s death, little joy at Marie’s love, little pleasure at the boss’s offer of a promotion, and little, if any, remorse for his crime. He expresses no anger and hardly any regret even at the loss of his freedom. He seemingly feels no resentment toward Raymond, who drew him into the quarrel with the Arabs, nor towards his lawyer, who handles his case poorly, nor toward the court, which condemns him to death. Ultimately, Meursault’s most consistent feelings are a combination of fatigue, boredom, and “indifference to the activities of the outside world” (Stanley 281). Using Albert Camus’ very own words, the reader sees that “[a] novel is [only] a philosophy put into images” (Kirjasto). No image is more poignant than Meursault’s suicide-by-existentialism, whereby his continued indifference to the world would ultimately leads to his death. In the end, Camus demonstrates that from his perspective, human condition has no greater meaning then the two facts of existence: we live, we die.

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