

## Camus, *The Stranger*

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The following critical questions and chapter commentaries were all created by the Humanities 304 class, Spring 2005.

With regard to this specific book, the following might prove to be useful questions:

- Why is the book titled *The Stranger*? Who is "the Stranger" supposed to represent?
- Why does he start out his book with "Maman died today"?
- At what point in the Meursault's life did he become so mundane and unaffected? Did something happen in his life that would make him this way, did he have an epiphany, or was he just born this way? Why does he have no real emotion for anything or anyone?
- What was his relationship with his mother; was there ever a father figure in his life? Does this matter?
- What is he waiting for? What is he looking/searching for? What is the point of his story?
- Why does he tell his story? Does his outlook match his narrative style?

### PART ONE

#### Chapter 1

(3-18)

"Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday" (3). "I said, 'Yes,' just so I wouldn't have to say anything else" (4).

"They'd be getting up to go to work about this time: for me that was always the most difficult time of day" (12).

Concerning the vigil scene (6-12), the first moment that stands out is when the caretaker is chastised for making blunt comments about how disrespectful vigils seemed to be in Marengo, and Meursault isn't offended at all. In fact, he finds the observation "made sense" and is "interesting" (7). His interest in the vulgarity of the practice demonstrates how Meursault is disconnected from the normal human emotions of grief that usually accompany death. He seems to view the rest of humanity as "others," as if he were a mere observer rather than a member of the group.

This theme of separation is continually evident as the vigil scene continues. For example, the image of the elderly people gathered around the caretaker "nodding their heads" at Meursault conjures up the feeling of vultures surveying their prey. Even Meursault himself feels "that they were there to judge" him (10), as if he were of a different species. His behavior only reinforces this division as he finds himself unable to share in the emotional connection and experience of the vigil. For instance, when one of the women starts to cry, his only response to the tender display of love is, "I wish I didn't have to listen to her anymore" (10). He did not relate to nor understand the woman's humanity as if he were a "stranger" to the essential elements of what it means to be human. Moreover, when the vigil ends and the elderly friends leave they shake his hand, a gesture to which he mockingly thinks "as if that night ... had somehow brought us closer together" (12). This sarcasm underscores how utterly detached he feels he is from the rest of the world.

The ideals of existentialism seem to be imbedded heavily in this scene as Meursault harshly denies his belonging to the group of humanity and insists on being his own person. He even communicates the belief that hell is other people when he remarks, "I could feel how much I'd enjoy going for a walk if it hadn't been for Maman" (12). Any time he is forced by society to identify, interact, or express basic human emotions and behavior, he views it as a form of punishment that stifles his individual desires.

Concerning the role of Monsieur Pérez (introduced on page 14): he seems to be the only one showing any kind of extroverted emotion. However, neither he nor Camus attempts to hide them: "a few beads of sweat were forming on his forehead, but he didn't wipe them off" (16), and "Big tears of frustration and exhaustion were streaming down his cheeks. But because of all the wrinkles they weren't dripping off" (18). Could Mr. Pérez be some key figure later in the story, because of this (seemingly) unnecessary display of humanistic qualities (such as anguish or tiredness)? Camus further emphasizes the role of Mr. Pérez because the images of him are stuck in the main character's mind (18) consciously noting his presence and emotions. It is still unsure how we, the readers, are supposed to feel about Mr. Pérez; all we know now is his importance.

#### Chapter 2

(19-24)

"I don't like Sundays" (21).

After returning from the funeral, Meursault really demonstrates the meaninglessness of his life (20). What could possibly be more boring and meaningless than walking around your apartment for awhile? This passage is interesting because it gives us a rare glimpse of reflection about his mother. Even here, though, it is ultimately selfish in nature. Now that his mother is gone, he feels that his apartment is too

big for him. He still lacks remorse or grief, but he's realizing how his mother's death affects him: abstractly and spacially. We also thought that the apartment being too big also symbolizes his aloneness. Just as the apartment is too big and he lives only in one little part, the world is too big, and he is fundamentally alone.

### Chapter 3

(25-33)

We learn about Salamano and his dog. Meursault is drawn into conversation with Raymond and sees nothing amiss in Raymond's nasty perspective.

### Chapter 4

(34-39)

"I saw that he didn't have his dog" (38).

When Marie is visiting, Raymond creates a disturbance.

### Chapter 5

(40-46)

"When I was a student, I had lots of ambitions like that. But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered. That evening Marie came by to see me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said it didn't make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to" (41). Meursault mentions a turning point in realization after he was a student. He relates more material about his "relationship" with Marie and reports more about Salamano.

### Chapter 6

(47-59)

"He spoke slowly, and I noticed that he had a habit of finishing everything he said with 'and I'd even say,' when really it didn't add anything to the meaning of his sentence" (50).

The murder takes place. This is the climax of the story so far, and it makes you wonder why Meursault has no remorse and is so unhappy. Yet he makes no attempt to make himself happy. It seems that he does not want happiness in his life, so he ruins what he had by shooting the arab man. He had friends and a girlfriend who could have brought contentment to his life, but he doesn't want that. He wants to be lazy and unhappy with no cares at all. Most people would care if they shot another man, but since he has no cares, he did it with no worries or remorse. Basically Meursault just doesn't care about anything at all and he doesn't want anyone to get in the way of that.

Why does Meursault murder the arabian? What is his motive? What is his mindset? "If the other one moves in, or if he draws his knife, I'll let him have it" (56). This moment in particular is an example of his detached, passive, and psychotic nature. He offers to kill so nonchalantly that it shows no moral stance whatsoever. He's so mentally detached that the thought of murder poses no great emotion or even feared remorse.

"Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness" (59). It seems here that the act of murder seems trivial, and that he is in some sort of trance. As if he knows what is about to follow, but still "knocks" four more times. His disconnection is true madness, for he knows what he is doing, senses the repercussions, yet in a trance-like state, continues.

Prior to the actual act he complains that he is "throbbing in the sun" (58), and later his only plea is that the sun was driving him. If we look deeper, studies show that high heat tends to bring on more aggressive behavior in those more susceptible, so this could have had some real affect on his behavior. He did complain that the sun was burning at his back, and the glint of the arab's knife stood as an irritant, still no one in our opinion, in a normal state of mind would succumb to such irritation is such a way.

So although the sun may have served as an irritant and a factor in his actions, the actual act of killing comes from his innate disconnection with reality and his lack of moral fiber or sense of remorse.

## **PART TWO**

### Chapter 1

(63-71)

"Nevertheless I answered that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself and that it was hard for me to tell him what he wanted to know. I probably did love Maman, but that didn't mean anything... What I can say for certain is that I would rather Maman hadn't died" (65).

During Meursault's questioning, he does not seem to be aware that he's a criminal: more than that, he doesn't seem to try to remember. He remarks, "On my way out, I was even going to shake his hand, but just in time, I remembered I had killed a man" (64). It hasn't sunk in, nor does this questioning give him any reason to not only accept, but feel guilty about what he has done. What's more, Meursault does not take strides to convince others of his views, or accept other people's views as his own. When his lawyer

asks Meursault if he wants to refute the statement: "at one point or another, all normal people have wished their loved ones dead" (66); but he declines because he says that is how he felt. He does not feel bad about this statement, because he no longer analyses his actions or himself personally. When the lawyer leaves, Meursault thinks, "I felt the urge to reassure him that I was like everybody else ... but really there wasn't much point and I gave up the idea out of laziness" (66). This point also emphasizes Camus' philosophy that life is absurdity. Why would someone care about his life or actions if he are going to die anyway? It would be an unnecessary worry or even thought.

However, in this chapter Meursault starts to question why he should care about his life before he dies. He does not question what things would make his life worth while, but he questions why he should even question the things that would benefit his life. The Magistrate (consequently this man believes in God, which may be a tip to Camus' view) shouts at Meursault, "Do you want my life to be meaningless?" Meursault responds, "As far as I could see, it didn't have anything to do with me" (69). This emphasizes the point that Meursault is strongly disjointed from society and his (along with others) happiness (and this could also relate to an absurdity focused existentialism). But mainly that Meursault has no views, good or bad, on the value of life itself. All he knows is that its not worth his time to worry about it.

"He simply asked ... if I was sorry for what I had done. I thought about it for a minute and said that more than sorry, I felt kind of annoyed" (70). This is great indication of Camus' own view. Meursault sees all this as trying to analyze Meursault's life, and he categorizes it as unnecessary, because he (Camus) feels its pointless to assign value to someone's life or actions. It's all absurd, it's all pointless: everything we do has no real meaning or impact. Meursault is asked about emotions and feelings he doesn't have or care to have. Meursault is annoyed because this is all an worthless examination into something that will seemingly bring no real conclusion to anything, because life is absurd.

Finally, this quotation doesn't really relate to anything specific, but it made us laugh thoughtfully: "As always, whenever I want to get rid of someone I'm not really listening to, I made it appear as if I agreed" (69).

## Chapter 2

(72-81)

"Anyway, it was one of Maman's ideas, and she often repeated it, that after a while you could get used to anything" (77).

Maursault is still characterized as detached. He doesn't really latch on to anything or anyone, and that can be seen when he's talking to Marie. Instead of paying attention to her, his mind wanders to the louder people beside him.

He claims to accept the situation he is in and to accept the fact that he deserves to be in this situation (78). One may question whether he accepts his situation or not, though. The guard befriends Maursault because he "understands" his own situation better than the others, but Maursault is just detached and agrees with the guard. In all actuality, Maursault doesn't realize why he's in the situation he is in. He doesn't even understand that he's alive.

Marie, to Maursault, is just another object. He undoubtedly feels twinges in his loins and when she's around he satisfies those urges.

In short, Maursault is a guy who isn't really there.

## Chapter 3

(82-97)

"It took some time doing on my part to understand that I was the cause of all the excitement. I said to the policeman, "Some Crowd!" (83). This moment shows that Meursault feels awkward being in the spotlight. He doesn't even seem to realize that all the people are there are to watch and see him, because he does not comprehend the phenomenon of voyeurism.

The witnesses of the trial are the director, the caretaker of the home, Pérez, Raymond, Masson, Salamano, Marie, and Celeste. The majority of the questions directed toward the witnesses concern Meursault's relationship with his mother. They ask about his demeanor at her funeral and what he did the day after with Marie. "Come now, is my client on trial for burying his mother or for killing a man?" (96). The courtroom stops listening to the witnesses after Marie gives her testimony about what they did the day after the funeral. His friends try to defend Meursault and say what a good guy he is, and as Salamano insists laconically, "You must understand" (95). Celeste claims that he is just unlucky: "The way I see it, it's bad luck. Everybody knows what bad luck is. It leaves you defenseless. And there it is! The way I see it, it's bad luck" (92). The prosecutor says back to his attorney, "Indeed, I accuse this man of burying his mother with crime in his heart" (96). When reading the end of this chapter, you can tell that the "stranger" is losing hope and that he knows things do not look good for him. He even says he enjoyed his life before all this, and that he recognizes that it will most likely never return to the simple way it was.

## Chapter 4

(98-107)

Meursault is basically describing the effects of waiting and how he for once has no control over his fate. He has previously realized that the sea of faces behind him are recognizable, but now he just wishes to be elsewhere. The reader wonders if Meursault would feel any different if he is declared guilty or innocent, yet when the judge asks him if he has anything he'd like to say in his defense, he says "almost randomly" that "I never intended to kill the Arab" (102) and Meursault blames, of all things, the sun.

How does Meursault feel about having his fate in other's hands? Meursault feels quite detached from the whole situation, hearing the ramblings of the prosecutor and getting distracted by the outside sounds of the ice cream vendor and actually has what could be identified as a feeling or remorse: "I was assailed by memories of a life that wasn't mine anymore, but one in which I'd found the simplest and most lasting joys" (104).

Does Meursault really feel anything? At the memories of those joys, he tries to push them out and "get it over with and go back to my cell and sleep" (105), as his brief glimpse of having feelings is much too overwhelming for him. The blur of the next moments leads to a judge telling him in a very "bizarre language" that he was to have his head cut off. So, as he now a condemned man, they all now treat him "delicately" in consideration of his sentencing.

Amazing how they give so much consideration to a man with no remorse, no feelings, who took a man's life and blamed it on the sun, yet now that he's going to die, they mourn his presence in advance.

## Chapter 5

(108-123)

"Then, I don't know why, but something inside me snapped" (120).

The chapter begins: "All I care about right now is escaping the machine of justice" (108). This seems to set the feeling for Meursault's time in prison leading up to the execution. Meursault seems to be having an internal battle whereby he is trying to reconcile his life, philosophy, and beliefs with his inevitable execution. Meursault is put into a situation where there is no escape, the outcome is inevitable: "What really counted was the possibility of escape.... A wild run for it would give whatever chance for hope there was" (109). Meursault is having great difficulty in accepting this circumstance in which he is forced to become visible, no longer a stranger but a visible person whose execution will be witnessed by everyone.

Meursault, in his struggle to accept his circumstances, comes to the realization that he must believe in what must and will happen: "Since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter... I had to accept the rejection of my appeal" (114). Meursault is able to accept his circumstances and let go of his necessity for hope.

The visit of the chaplain comes a re-visit of concerns about what is expected of Meursault. The chaplain addresses Meursault's sins, but Meursault says that he didn't know what a sin was and he has been found guilty (118). The insistence and determination of the chaplain drives Meursault to anger, whereupon the chaplain flees. With the consolation of having defeated his worries and gotten rid of the chaplain, Meursault sleeps peacefully and wakes up ready for his execution: "I opened myself to the general indifference of the world" (122).

## FINAL NOTE

Existence can more or less be defined as standing out or doing something that distinguishes a person from the environment. In Meursault's case, he wanted to be free from hope because hope meant that there was some disconnection between who he should attain to be and who he actually was. He wanted to just blend perfectly into his environment and no longer have to bear the burden of proving to the rest of the world he existed in their terms. The last line -- "I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate" (123) -- underscores the freedom Meursault found in death. By suffering final judgment from the world, he realizes that he is no longer bound to conform to their standards. He can finally exist in his own realm and behave not the way he should "hope" to attain, but simply the way he wanted to. Indeed, with his execution he doesn't have to stay up all night waiting for the "dawn" when the world will come in and take him because he now understands that they can only free him: no one has "the right" to steal his life. Thus the "cries of hate" would be proof that he did not exist in the world's acceptance, but rather in a world of his own creation.

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### Works Consulted

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. NY: Vintage Books, 1989.