

Questions to explore with The Stranger

Greetings! Unfortunately I am still sick and I'd sad not to be there with you on this day to discuss the end of the novel and to move towards your essays. I've pulled together lots of different questions for you to discuss with your group. The goal for today is to think about the end of the novel and to choose a focus for your essay. We will have time together in class next week to work on the essay (Monday and Tuesday) as well as a final discussion. But by this point I think you'll already have plenty to say about it.

As for the essay, first of all I'm going to make it 6 pages instead of 8 pages. You can write either a single-text analytic essay, an intertextual essay, or a personal / hybrid essay. It is due on Wednesday.

For today, first of all make sure you've read the end of the book. If you need to take the time to do that, go ahead. Then, spend time looking over these questions. I hope you find a few of them to be worth some good discussion. I'm not going to be collecting anything today - again, the goal is for each of you to find an idea for your essay. If you have individual questions, please email me. I'll do my best to get back to you asap!

1. Who sets the acceptable norms of behavior / emotion in the novel? (e.g. crying at a mother's funeral)
  - a. How are these norms communicated?
  - b. What are the consequences (positive or negative) of not knowing or now following them?
  - c. Examine Meursault in his various social relationships (I use all of these terms lightly): son, lover, friend, observer, etc. What do these reveal about him as a character? What do these reveal about our society and its standard behaviors?
2. What about actions that might go outside the usual run of cultural norms - Does anyone in the novel say domestic violence or animal abuse is wrong? Does Camus rely on us to do that?
3. Do we need to "relate" to another person in order to care about / sympathize with / understand / judge (or not) them? Why? What does it mean to "relate" to another person?
4. Is it easier to judge strangers than those known to us? Why?
5. When / why do people "judge" one another?
6. Why do some people feel sorry for Meursault? Why don't others?
7. The controlling metaphor in Part II of *The Stranger* involves the relationship between Meursault and the judicial system. Through this relationship, Camus metaphorically represents man's Absurd condition in the universe. What is this suggesting about how and why people judge each other?
8. What influences the (real or perceived) passing of time?
  - a. Consider the idea that while Meursault uses time as a way to escape from his life, it also holds him back from the possibility of happiness.
9. How do the daily activities of our lives distract us from personal reflection and self-discovery?
10. What do our routines say about us? How much or how little can be known of us through knowing our patterns of behavior?
11. Do the patterns and routines in Meursault's life give it meaning? Or does he start to find meaning once they are broken?
12. If patterns and routines in our lives are just arbitrarily chosen, and can change at any time, what gives our life "meaning"?

13. To what extent is it true that "A person can get used to anything" (77)?
14. Is Meursault changing his values in part two, or being made more sensitive to / aware of what already exists in his world? How are these two (change; increased awareness) related?
15. Is change always good? Does Meursault feel "trapped" in his life, without a possibility of change?
16. How is it that being treated as an individual makes a person feel more connected to the world? Would it be better to be treated as part of the norm?
17. What happens when there is a discrepancy between how we act and how we feel?
18. Does Meursault ever consider the implications of his actions? Do we think about the implications of all of our reactions, or sometimes do we just "respond" by reflex? Why?
19. If Meursault is "detached" from his emotions, does that mean he doesn't have any? Or maybe that he just doesn't understand them, or know what they mean? Or how he should respond to / process them?
20. Is Meursault entirely self-absorbed? Are there times when he cares about or shows interest in others?
21. Does Meursault not show emotions because he is trying to have more control over his life? Does he fear a loss of this control? Why else might he not show them?
22. What does / doesn't Meursault have "control" over?
23. Does knowing one's fate make one less involved in one's life? Does it make a person care less about their existence?
24. Camus was a self-proclaimed "absurdist." Based on *The Stranger* and Meursault's beliefs in *The Stranger*, how would you define "the absurd"? What role do concepts like "detachment," "alienation," "acceptance," and "society" play? How is absurdity reflected in (a) the events in Meursault's life, (b) the relationships Meursault finds himself in, and (c) the attitudes with which Meursault faces, and subsequently rejects, the world?
25. In what sense does Meursault triumph at the end of *The Stranger*? (This was what Camus intended, but you're welcome to argue that, in fact, Meursault doesn't triumph at all.) Does Meursault overcome society's judgment, and thereby, its shackles? Or is it more important that he rebelled against conformity? And what's up with him wishing for a large crowd of hating spectators at his execution?
26. In Absurdism, the necessity of existence is for the individual to find his or her own happiness regardless of one's environment or situation...even in "the rock" itself. How does Meursault do this?
  - a. Are you able to do this? Can you find your happiness, regardless of your environment and your situation? Can you find a reason to be happy and a moment of happiness in every single day?
27. \*Recall that French Algeria (Camus himself was French Algerian, as well as his character Meursault) is the setting in the book. Understand that *The Stranger* (a.k.a. *The Outsider*) is about a human being, Meursault, who does not display the characteristics, behavior, and values that the rest of his society deem "normal", and after his murderous act, the jury convicts him as such, calling him a "monster" (in other words, not human). Is it true that their willingness to condemn him to the verdict they deliver is due in part to their unwillingness to understand and empathize with him?
28. \*Lastly, consider this: Meursault is not the only stranger, or outsider. The Arabs, of which there are several character examples throughout the work, are also relegated to an "outsider" or "stranger" role; the French characters who interact with them never name them, never seek to understand them, and mistreat them. Human beings are capable of mistreating any "stranger", "outsider", or "Other"; this is the danger of believing anyone else to be less human than you (consider also, Hitler's attempted justifications of atrocities towards the Jewish: something taking place when Camus wrote *The Stranger*). What if "the stranger" being referred to in the title isn't Meursault, but the man he kills? How might that change your understanding of the novel?