

The Stranger: Understanding the Author's Purpose

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In the following excerpt, the author discusses the development of the novel's principal character, Meursault, "from an acquiescent figure who admits no limits to a combatant who claims the right to be different."

The Stranger, which grew out of the experiment of *A Happy Death* and was nourished by Camus's political experiences, constitutes an attack on the accepted norms of bourgeois society. It calls into question many aspects of an oppressive colonial regime: the use of the judiciary, religion, and above all, language to maintain dominance. It is an ironic condemnation of colonialist and racist attitudes. The novel also develops a theme with variations on indifference and difference, a theme rooted in the Algerian experience, as Camus's articles in *Alger-Républicain* have shown. If the hero Meursault has a moral message—and the reference to him as a Christ figure would suggest that he has—it is one that plays a constant role in Camus's thought; there are no absolutes to which one can adhere, only limits, and the vital nuances are played out within those limits. Total indifference and apathy allow others to act without limits. Meursault develops from an acquiescent figure who admits no limits to a combatant who claims the right to be different.

The story has a simple plot. Meursault, a clerk in an Algiers shipping office, attends his mother's funeral at an old people's home in Marengo. The following day he goes swimming, meets an old friend, Marie, takes her to see a Fernandel movie, and initiates an affair with her the same evening. With another friend, Raymond, he spends a Sunday on the beach with Marie, where they encounter three Arabs, one of whom has a grudge against Raymond. In the ensuing confrontation, Meursault shoots one of the Arabs.

The second half of the novel relates Meursault's trial and conviction, and his growing self awareness during the months in prison. After being sentenced to death, he affirms his own system of values and rejects that of established society.

When *The Stranger* was first published in 1942 the aspect that evoked the most interest among critics was the use of the *passé composé*, the compound past tense, since the traditional tense used in literary narrative is the *passé simple*. Sartre, in his review of the book, comments that the effect of the *passé composé* is to isolate each sentence, to avoid giving any impression of cause and effect. Meursault's experience is a succession of presents. During the transition from Mersault to Meursault, Camus changed the form of the narrative: an omniscient author using the *passé simple* and the third person was replaced by a first-person narrative in the *passé composé*. The author leaves his hero in a situation where he is dominated by the power of language rather than in control of it; language is equivalent to destiny.

Camus's concern with language is evident in *The Stranger*. [The] use of language beyond [Meursault's] mastery reveals an intellectual confusion that stems from the limits of his education. It is true that Meursault was once a student; but in rejecting ambition, he also rejected the value of an intellectual life. Rational thought is not worth the linguistic effort involved. Ironically enough, misinterpretation is not limited to Meursault. The French authorities misinterpret too.

“Literature” obscures the true nature of reality: Meursault is someone who has “given up language and replaced it with *actual revolt*. He has chosen to do what Christ scorned to do: to save the damned—by damning himself.” Viewed in this light, Meursault’s deliberate firing of four more shots into the dead body is an act of revolt, a defiance of the society in which he lives. Meursault, who places no reliance on language, throws down the gauntlet but fails to justify his action in the eyes of the world.

[It] is obvious that Meursault is in conflict, albeit unconsciously, with all the norms of the French system; in response to his narration of events, the reader’s sympathies lie with the Arabs defending their honor rather than with the unsavory Raymond. Meursault refuses to play the game, to be part of the family. The authority figures are all predisposed to be kind to Meursault: the soldier on whose shoulder he falls asleep on the bus, the director of the old-age home, his employer, the examining magistrate, his lawyer, the priest. It is only when he says no that they begin to resent him; he declines to view his mother’s body, he turns down a promotion that would take him to Paris, he refuses to recognize the Cross, or to misrepresent the details of his case. When he says yes, it is to the “wrong” things: to a cup of coffee, to a Fernandel film, and to Raymond’s sordid plan.

During the trial, it becomes clear that Meursault is being tried not for his action, but for his attitudes. The ironic presentation of the prosecutor’s arguments, in which the narrator’s use of free indirect discourse shows up the emptiness of the rhetoric, makes the trial seem farcical. Indeed one could assert that Meursault is innocent with respect to the invalid reasons for guilt attributed by the prosecution: “I accuse this man of burying a mother with a criminal heart.” The implications of “the void in the heart that we find in this man” are enlarged to the scale of “an abyss into which society could sink.” Meursault is accused of two crimes which he has not committed: burying his mother with a criminal heart (although psychoanalytical studies of this text have concluded there is some basis for his feelings of guilt at her death), and killing a father, since the prosecutor affirms in a flourish of rhetoric that he is responsible for the crime that will be tried in court the following day.

Bearing in mind the trials in Algeria that Camus covered as a journalist, one could conclude that the parodic deformation is mild, for in many of those cases the charges were politically motivated, the witnesses bribed, and the verdict a foregone conclusion. It is true that Meursault makes no effort to defend himself; but it is because he does not understand the ideas behind the verbiage, nor the consequences of his own words and deeds. The words used do not express reality, but Meursault and his friends are unable to counteract the force of their intent. They are verbally ill-equipped. The prosecutor, however, rejects such a defense before it is voiced. “This man is intelligent.... He can answer. He knows the value of words.” In a sense, this is true. Meursault refuses to use words that do not precisely translate his feelings, words like love, guilt, shame. Society is accustomed to euphemism and lip-service.

Meursault finds a voice and an adequate command of language in the final pages of his narrative. The reader is led to suppose that his execution is imminent and that his voice will be silenced: the guillotine effectively dislocates the very source of speech.

Only in his final outburst does Meursault consciously evaluate other people, although still in a negative way. Camus called him “a negative snapshot.” In an absurd world, all men are equal. It is through a kind of askesis, a narrowing down of his field of vision, that Meursault reaches an initial state of awareness, just as Mersault did. But Mersault is committed to death, and Meursault is committed to life.

Camus is playing ironically with ambiguity here, but this does not detract from the moral intent, to demonstrate that judgment is unjust because it is based on ambiguous data. Misinterpretation can be accidental or intentional, but in either case the consequences can prove fatal.

Metaphysical absurdity is mirrored by the social situation depicted in *The Stranger*; as Camus remarked, “*The Plague* has a social meaning and a metaphysical meaning. It’s exactly the same. This ambiguity is also present in *The Stranger*.” The injustice of that social situation is in turn reflected and complicated by the particular attributes of a colonial society. Meursault learns in the course of writing his life that it is not meaningless, and his desire to relive it is the first positive affirmation he makes.

One aspect of Meursault’s statement, which will be a constant in Camus’s ideas on rebellion, is the emphasis on the concrete and the present. The prison chaplain embodies exactly what Meursault rejects: a nonphysical relationship with the world and with human beings, a passive submission to the injustices of God and society, and a dogmatic faith in a better life in the future. Meursault is solidly involved in the here and now, convinced that joy is one of the most precious of human emotions, not to be sacrificed for some abstract and hypothetical goal. He sums up, but only for his readers, his notion of happiness during the final day in court: “While my lawyer went on talking, I heard the echoing sound of an ice-cream vendor’s horn. I was overwhelmed by the memories of a life that was no longer mine, but in which I had found the simplest and most persistent joys...: the smells of summer, the neighborhood I loved, a certain evening sky, Marie’s laughter and her dresses.” The core of Camus’s arguments in *The Rebel* is here in embryo.

Source: Susan Tarrow, “*The Stranger*,” in her *Exile from the Kingdom: A Political Rereading of Albert Camus*, University of Alabama Press, 1985, 215 pp.