

THE STRANGER

ALBERT CAMUS

IN THE COLD AND mournful spring of 1942 when France witnessed one of the most dreadful periods of World War II, the publication of *The Stranger* heralded an era of literary stature and esteem for the young Camus. This enthralling novel that inflicts a considerable thought provoking wound at first reading brings forth and rummages through the deepest senses of one's anguish and throws a peripheral light on the mourning of French people going through the invasion of their country by the Nazis. Yet, the all-pervasive undercurrent of the novel does not seem to chiefly center upon war and invasion, but in essence, it echoes the tone of a chaotic mind reflecting the writer's own recollection of a life lived in this anarchic period. One that came into close contact with two inhumane and absurd world wars that vitiated Europe as the first victim, bestowing the massacre of thousands of innocent people. *The Stranger*, therefore, can be deemed as the evidence of Camus's sharpened critical observation of these disturbing wars and, indeed, of what he calls 'absurd' about the human life and destiny.

The novel opens with Meursault's indifference at his mother's funeral and the consternation it provokes among the people around him.

"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."¹⁹

They introduce Meursault's emotional indifference: one his most important character traits. Meursault does not express any remorse upon learning of his mother's death but rather he merely reports the fact in a plain and straightforward manner. His chief concern is the precise day of his mother's death – a seemingly trivial detail.

Meursault's comment, "That doesn't mean anything," has at least two possible meanings. It could be taken as part of his discussion about which day Madame Meursault died. That is, Meursault could mean that the telegram does not reveal any meaningful information about the date of his mother's death. However, the comment could also be read more broadly, with a significance that perhaps Meursault does not consciously intend; Meursault might be implying that it does not matter that his mother

¹⁹ Camus, *The Stranger* trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Random House, 1988), 3. Hereafter designated as *The Stranger*.



died at all. This possible reading introduces the idea of the meaninglessness of human existence, a theme that resounds throughout the novel.

Setting the collection of his impassivity, he thinks no thoughts and feels no feelings upon his mother's death, smokes cigarette, meets Marie the following day and goes swimming with her, which are again the proof of his indifference.²⁰ In fact, he can feel desire but not love; he feels fondness for his mother but not grief; he has thoughts but does not think; he exists but does not think of himself as existing. That is what makes him so strange, even to us as we read and try to make sense of his feeling system. He also admonishes himself in the mortuary, when his mother's friends in the nursing home come by to offer their words of consolation; he feels paranoid and gets the "ridiculous feeling that they were there to judge [him]"²¹ since he is not shedding any tears and seems indifferent. It is not much to surprise to treat Meursault as a reflective transcendental narrator and the unreflective bearer of experience in part one who only thinks inactive thoughts that cannot be involved in the process of judgment or reaction.

But then, as his deactivated derivation of feelings keep steering the wheel of the story, the denouement of the second episode finally reveals and unleashes his downright suppressed feelings and judgment of love, anger and guilt as he feels the claws of the imminent death upon himself. The prison deprives him of his unreflectivity and then his trial deprives him of his indifference to others' opinions of him, forcing him to reflect a range of feelings unprecedented in his life experience. Having the chaplain talked to him into the existence of God and afterlife, he ultimately feels that something seemed to break inside him and in a sort of ecstasy and rage he seems to pour out all the thoughts that had been simmering in his brain. He remembers his mother's final days of living "she had taken on a "fiancé",²² to make a fresh start and respectively he feels ready "to live it all again" that undoubtedly requires his rooted sense of judgment directed at the nature of love and nostalgia. He even states his bitter-sweet statement that for everything to be set and accomplished there should be a huge crowd of spectators greeting him with howls of execration that directly points to his wavering and judgmental sense of guilt and anger. These reflections can even turn his reaction to Marie as something changed as he himself is changed from the poverty of consciousness to richness of emotions as, theoretically, love is not simply a feeling but a system of judgments, meanings, expectations, regrets, needs, desires and metaphysical longings.

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

²¹ Ibid., 10.

²² Ibid., 122.



Though *The Stranger* is a work of fiction, it contains a strong resonance of Camus's philosophical notion of absurdity. Camus asserts that individual lives and human existence in general have no rational meaning or order. However, because "a man can't live without some reason for living,"²³ they constantly attempt to identify or create rational structure and meaning in their lives.

Though Camus does not explicitly refer to the notion of absurdity in *The Stranger*, the tenets of absurdity operate within the novel. Neither the external world in which Meursault lives nor the internal world of his thoughts and attitudes possesses any rational order. Meursault has no discernable reason for his actions, such as his decision to marry Marie and his decision to kill the Arab.

Society nonetheless attempts to fabricate or impose rational explanations for Meursault's irrational actions. The idea that things sometimes happen for no reason, and that events sometimes have no meaning is disruptive and threatening to society. The trial sequence in Part Two of the novel represents society's attempt to manufacture rational order. The prosecutor and Meursault's lawyer both offer explanations for Meursault's crime that are based on logic, reason, and the concept of cause and effect. Yet these explanations have no basis in fact and serve only as attempts to defuse the frightening idea that the universe is irrational. The entire trial is therefore an example of absurdity—an instance of humankind's futile attempt to impose rationality on an irrational universe.

Another major component of Camus's absurdist philosophy is the idea that human life has no redeeming meaning or purpose. Camus argues that the only certain thing in life is the inevitability of death; "death is one of the unavoidable things that will happen sooner or later."²⁴ And, because all humans will eventually meet death, all lives are all equally meaningless. Meursault gradually moves toward this realization throughout the novel, but he does not fully grasp it until after his argument with the chaplain in the final chapter. "...we were all condemned to die...if you don't die today, you'll die tomorrow, or the next day."²⁵ Meursault realizes that, just as he is indifferent to much of the universe, so is the universe indifferent to him. "Throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was

²³ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Albert Camus* (Canada: Grolier Publishing, 1996), 43.

²⁴ *The Stranger*, 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.



living.”²⁶ Like all people, Meursault has been born, will die, and will have no further importance.

Paradoxically, only after Meursault reaches this seemingly dismal realization is he able to attain happiness.

“And I felt ready to live all again too. As if that blind rage had washed me clear, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much life myself – so like brother, really – I felt I had been happy and that I was happy again.”

When he fully comes to terms with the inevitability of death, he understands that it does not matter whether he dies by execution or lives to die a natural death at an old age. This understanding enables Meursault to put aside his fantasies of escaping execution by filing a successful legal appeal. He realizes that these illusory hopes, which had previously preoccupied his mind, would do little more than create in him a false sense that death is avoidable. Meursault sees that his hope for sustained life has been a burden. His liberation from this false hope means he is free to live life for what it is, and to make the most of his remaining days.

²⁶ Ibid., 121.

