

Albert Camus

*L'Etranger (The Stranger)*

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# Lecture 1

# Chapter 1

## Short biography

Albert Camus was born into a poor family in Mondovi, Algeria in 1913. His father was a Frenchman, self-educated, who worked as a day labourer [Brée, 15]. His mother was of Spanish origin, deaf, and had never learned to read or write.

His father was wounded and died at the Battle of the Marne in 1914. He was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Médaille Militaire* posthumously. After his father's death he and his brother were brought up by his mother and grandmother in a small flat in working-class Algiers which they shared with an uncle. Brée contrasts the poverty he experienced growing up in this environment with his love for the natural environment, especially the sea.

Camus' eventual entrance into literary life can be largely traced back to the early recognition of his potential by his primary school teacher Louis Germain, with whose help he gained a scholarship to high school in Algiers, from where he eventually made it into univer-

sity there [Brée, 17].

Camus' devotion to physical life, especially swimming and football, was disturbed when he became ill with tuberculosis at 17. At that point he seems to have plunged himself into intellectual pursuits, under the guidance of his former philosophy professor, the author Jean Grenier. "To Camus he transmitted his love of Greek literature, of the Greek tragic poets as well as the philosophers" [Brée, 24–25]. Camus' attitude to the place of his contemporary Algeria in the world can be guessed through his choice of topic for a thesis he completed under Grenier's influence, which dealt with the philosophers Plotinus<sup>1</sup> (204–270) and St Augustine (354–430), both of whom originated from North Africa, but who have been exceedingly influential in Western thought. Like many North Africans over the millenia, Camus saw himself as part of a tradition of Mediterranean civilization, and not merely as part of an offshoot of a European or an Arab one.

Camus married Simone Hié in 1934 (divorced in 1936). He joined the Communist Party in 1935, but left it in 1937 over the attitude of the party to Algerian Arabs after the accord between the Soviet Union and eventual Vichy leader Pierre Laval. He worked in a number of jobs: in the weather office, in a motor company, and finally as a journalist. His sympathy for the non-French Algerians also expressed itself through a series of articles on the conditions of the Kabyle people which he wrote

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<sup>1</sup>According to Brée: "For Plotinus, all beings have fallen from a state of participation in the source of all being and are attempting through various stages of participation to return to this source. Meursault seems to go through the three essential stages of the "procession" from the physical to the intellectual to the spiritual level of awareness." [Brée, 70]

for the left-wing Alger-Républicain.

Through the Communist Party he had become involved in the theatre, helping to found the *Théâtre du travail* in Algiers which produced a variety genres including avant-garde and more traditional classical plays.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939 he worked as a journalist in Paris. It was during this time that he wrote *L'Étranger*. After moving south to Lyons to escape the German advance, he married Francine Faure, a Frenchwoman from Oran in Algeria, in 1940 (separated 1956). The execution of a prominent communist resistance leader, Gabriel Péri, pushed him to join the underground and write for the resistance newspaper *Combat* in Lyons. Later he wrote articles for *L'Express* on Algerian issues, expressing a moderate point of view concerned mainly with limiting the effects of the conflict on the ordinary people there. Because of this he was something of a lone voice in the middle of extreme opposing views. In the same way he became estranged from fellow socialist novelist Jean-Paul Sartre, on the question of the historical destiny of socialism. Essentially, Camus denied the necessity of relying on French communism to support socialist aims, while Sartre believed that, France being caught between two hostile powers—the USSR and the US—historical “ends justified the means” [Brée, 54–57].

He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1957. Although he pondered whether to accept it or not, it allowed him the financial security to leave Paris, which had never provided the kind of lifestyle he coveted. He



moved to Lourmarin on the Mediterranean, and involved himself in the theatre again, and began his final novel *Le Premier homme*, which remained unfinished, but which was published posthumously.

He was killed in a car crash at Villeblevin, south of Paris, on the 4th of January 1960, apparently the victim of “dappled light” [Camp].

## Chapter 2

# Camus and the absurd

### 2.1 *L'Étranger*

*L'Étranger* is one of four of Camus' works which deal with the concept of the absurd. According to Grenier, these works—*L'Étranger* (novel), *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (essay), *Le Malentendu* and *Caligula* (plays)—constitute the “cycle de l'absurde” [Grenier, 13] in Camus' writing. It appears that Camus had planned out his writing well in advance, and that these works were part of his exploration of the theme of “la négation” in different genres. They were followed by an exploration of the positive (corresponding to the concept of “la révolte”) in *La Peste* (novel), *L'Homme révolté* (essay), *L'État de siège* and *Les Justes* (plays). After this “layer” Camus had planned a rather complex outline which involved an exploration of judgement and then love.

*L'Étranger* is the “premier livre du premier cycle” [Grenier, 14]. So although it has evidence, especially in its narrow thematic range, of

being part of this larger plan, it is in many ways a personal novel and reflects the life of the writer to a greater extent than the other works. But first we will explore Camus' concept of the absurd, and it should become clearer what he meant by "la négation".

According to Camus, the mind of the individual has an inescapable desire for clarity. Unfortunately for Camus, he didn't see in the world any clues which might show us that there is in fact any purpose to existence. Because of this disjunction between the world and the individual, he termed the existence of the individual as absurd. If one recognizes this absurdity, one is faced with a stark choice: either revolt against the indifferent world, or simply set out to enjoy existence while it lasts.

It's important to recognize that Camus did not approach this problem as a philosopher. It would be fair to say that he found the problem fascinating, and set out to see what the consequences of it were in his works. He is not particularly concerned for the coherence of his arguments. In a review of Sartre's *La Nausée*, he encapsulates his attitude in this way:

Constater l'absurdité de la vie ne peut être une fin, mais seulement un commencement. ... Ce n'est pas cette découverte qui intéresse, mais les conséquences et les règles d'action qu'on en tire."

[To see the absurdity of life cannot be an end in itself, but only a beginning ... This discovery is not interesting, only

the consequences and the rules of action that one draws from it are. (My translation.)] [Grenier, (from *Alger Républicain* 1938, cited in) 122]

It would also be correct to say that he lived by his philosophy, or this “feeling of the absurd”, as far as he was able, but again, in the conviction that his argument was correct, but without any concern for its watertightness. It’s also important to realize that Camus was in a sense *forced* to live by this philosophy, from the moment he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. As Grenier points out: “Aimer la vie à la passion, et se la voir retirer sans raison, voilà une des premières manifestations de l’absurde” [Grenier, 15] [To love life passionately, and watch it being taken from you for no reason, this is one of the first manifestations of the absurd.]

It becomes apparent through this description of the absurd that the notion of suicide subverts the confrontation between the world and the individual. In fact Camus makes this the central theme of his essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* [*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*]. This essay opens with the bald statement: “Il n’y a qu’un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux : c’est le suicide” [*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 15]. We will see how the concept of suicide, both literal and intellectual, informs Camus’ thinking as it is expressed in the novel *L’Etranger*.

## 2.2 Other examples of the absurd in fiction

Camus saw the absurd in diverse places: the character of Byron's Don Juan, giving himself up to sensual pleasures in an obvious denial of retribution in an afterlife [Grenier, 123]. The "inarticulate, mystical" character of Kirilov<sup>1</sup> in Dostoyevski's *The Possessed*. Kafka himself, the artist continuing to attempt to decipher the world with its innumerable impenetrable signs. Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, relentlessly driven on a hopeless mission to defeat the great whale. All of these embody, in different ways and according to their peculiar circumstances, the attitude of Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll his boulder up the mountain and watch it roll down again for eternity, and whom Camus calls on us, counterintuitively, to imagine happy [*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 166]. For "La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme" [The battle to the summits itself is enough to fill a human heart.]

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<sup>1</sup>"Kirilov thinks of himself as a redeemer: his will be the first suicide in history to be committed for no purpose other than that of establishing man's free will (and the non-existence of the "old" God)." [Oates]

## Chapter 3

### What is existentialism?

Existentialism is a philosophy or system of thought which is considered a major influence on literary movements, particularly but not limited to those dating around the first half of the 20th century in Europe. A quick scan of the personalities who influence Existentialism, however, shows that this school of thought reaches back to certain of the writings of Descartes (1596–1650) often considered the father of modern philosophy [1]. In particular Descartes' idea—that human problems stem from one's inability to be happy sitting on one's own in a room—underline the concern for the individual which was to become the driving force behind the existentialist philosophy. However, the ideas upon which Existentialism were based were first clearly expounded by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard (1813–1855).

An important characteristic of the movement was exemplified by Nietzsche in his work *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in which the parable opens with an encounter between a mystic and a saint, after which the

mystic ponders the ignorance of the supposedly wise saint.

When Zarathustra was alone, however, he said to his heart:  
“Could it be possible! This old saint in the forest hath not  
yet heard of it, that God is dead!”<sup>1</sup>

This illustration of the recognition that the belief in God was eroding was also taken as necessary to a useful contemplation of how one is to live in the world, and is a recurring theme of existentialist works. In particular this idea provides a background for the rationale of Meursault in *L'Etranger*.

Added to these two essential characteristics is what can be seen as the logical result in the social sphere, if you like: a reaction against totalitarianism. In this system of thought the importance of the human individual is set against a social system where the collective is controlled by the subservience to a supposed higher being or a real overwhelming political force.

The positive result of these ideas is that a human being is obliged to seek the truth of what makes him or her an individual through lived experience. The assumption is that what makes me an individual is precisely that which I cannot explain in words, it is that which I experience through living. It is primarily this last characteristic of his

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<sup>1</sup>Or, as the Tom Waits song title goes: “God’s away on business.” As I was writing this I was listening to the recent album *Blood Money*, which features this song. Some snatches of the lyrics, which seem to echo Camus’ works: “I’d sell your heart to the junkman baby . . . If you’re looking for someone to pull you out of that ditch/You’re out of luck . . . The ship is sinking . . . Bloody moon rising with a plague and a flood/Join the mob . . .”

And what about the missing Tom Bombadil in the screen adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*?

thinking which sees Camus classified as an existentialist writer, although he himself rejected this moniker during his lifetime.



# **Lecture 2**

## Chapter 4

# Camus and existentialism

Camus' relationship to existentialism stems from his reaction to the absurd. He imitates to some extent the early existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard who attempted, by a leap of faith, to make sense out of the (absurd) human condition. These philosophers posit another world or a relationship with God as a hope which sustains conscious life, but without providing a thorough rationale for their conclusions. Instead they rely on the idea formulated by Blaise Pascal of a wager that there is a God, since the results of a positive outcome are better than if one bets that there is none. On the other hand, those who follow this line of thought deny human reason, or at least its power to provide one with the capacity to make sense of the world. This is intellectual suicide, and has the same value as real suicide in strict existentialist terms, since it breaks the relationship between the absurd and the individual. In *L'Envers et l'endroit* Camus redefines the wager: "Que l'espoir de vie renaisse et Dieu n'est pas de force contre les intérêts de

l'homme" [Let hope in life be reborn and let God be powerless against human desires] [Davison, 5, quoted in]. In other words he chooses to bet on life, the reward for which, although not "eternal", is nevertheless certain and immediate.

Camus' response is therefore constant revolt. Only by realizing the absurdity of one's existence and nevertheless revolting against it, by experiencing as much of life as possible, can one remain in any way autonomous. There is a conscious refusal to accept vain hopes such as the possibility of a beyond or of a relationship with a creator, even if this is constructed out of our "experiences". In *L'Homme révolté*, Camus sees Nietzscheas nourishing this philosophy of revolt:

La philosophie de Nietzsche tourne certainement autour du problème de la révolte. ... il n'a pas formé le projet de tuer Dieu. Il l'a trouvé mort dans l'âme de son temps. Il a, le premier, compris l'immensité de l'événement et décidé que cette révolte de l'homme ne pouvait mener à une renaissance si elle n'était pas dirigée. [*L'Homme révolté*, 90]

[Nietzsche's philosophie certainly turns on the problem of revolt. ... he did not conceive a plan to kill God. He found him dead in the soul of his era. He was the first to understand the immense importance of this event and he decided that this human revolt could only lead to a renaissance if it was directed.]

In other words Nietzsche commented on a revolt that he perceived was

already there in the Europe of his time. In a way the fate of Meursault in *L'Etranger* stems from his solitary, undirected living out of his life-worshipping creed. He fails to realise the significance of his revolt until, through circumstances largely outside of his control, it is identified, judged and crushed. (But is it really crushed?)

## Chapter 5

### Structure of *L'Etranger*

Camus finished *L'Etranger* in May 1940, just before the German invasion [Brée, 38], while he was living in Paris. It was published in 1942, simultaneously with *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, which was written after *L'Etranger*.

The narrative is neatly divided into two parts. The first deals with the everyday life of the protagonist, Meursault, up until the crime for which he is tried. His imprisonment and trial is dealt with in the second part. The two parts necessarily set up a contrast between these two conditions—freedom and confinement. The contrast goes deeper than that though, and thematically and stylistically the second half is like a reverse image of the first.

King sees this structure firstly as a play of perceptions:

The two-part structure provides a set of contrasts between two ways of looking at the world. The two parts contrast Meursault's acceptance of immediate sensations as truth with

society's need to find abstract motivations.[King, 60]

But she also sees it as essential to Camus' idea of the role of the artist.

The balanced two-part structure, with parallel events and parallel tonal patterns, is part of the classical order, as Camus understands it, that the artist must impose on his material. [King, 61]

So in this work we have the outline of the author's whole approach to the writer's craft, from the perception of the world to the recounting of it. Although these days we would tend to focus on what Camus is saying here about the act of writing itself, it is important to realise that the emphasis at this stage of European history is primarily on the relationship between people's actions and others' judgements of those actions. However the ambivalence around the status of the narrator in this work cannot be ignored completely. We may even be tempted to infer that Camus is placing us all, as intelligent beings, in the position of writer, and thus in the context of the novel, as witness to the crime which it recounts. At the very least we may say that the first part tells us about how we *experience* the world, and the second tells us about how we *think about* the world.

As a final comment about the two-part structure of the novel, I would underline what King refers to as the "violent break in the normal tone" at the close of each part, where the "language becomes highly metaphorical" [King, 61]. This is indeed a remarkable phenomenon in the context of the predominant style of the novel, which in both parts

can at the very least be described as matter-of-fact and unaffected. It is true, however, that other parts of the novel give signs that the effort at objectivity which Meursault's narrative displays can become fractured whenever the pressure of elements becomes overwhelming. In the first part we have the episode which summarises the events at the close of the funeral and following it. Here we have, to borrow Meursault's own word from the last paragraph of the first chapter (30), a "précipitation" into a stream of consciousness narrative such as we might find in a William Faulkner novel such as *As I Lay Dying*. This is characterised by the narrator resorting to listing events instead of using coherent sentences.

Il y a eu encore l'église et les villageois sur les trottoirs, les géraniums rouges sur les tombes du cimetière, l'évanouissement de Pérez (on eût dit un pantin disloqué), la terre couleur de sang qui roulait sur la bière de maman, la chair blanche des racines qui s'y mêlaient, encore du monde, des voix ... [*E*, 30–31]

Then there was the church and the villagers on the sidewalks, the red geraniums on the graves in the cemetery, Pérez fainting (he crumpled like a rag doll), the blood-red earth spilling over Maman's casket, the white flesh of the roots mixed in with it, more people, voices ... [*The Stranger*, 18]

This sentence foreshadows the tonal break at the end of Part One, and

also the imagery used during the episode of the killing. In particular it is prefaced by a description of Pérez's tears, which cling to his face in the same way as the Meursault's sweat does in the scene of the shooting. Also, the image of death represented by the burial is echoed in Pérez's fainting and in Meursault's exhausted twelve-hour sleep.

We might also look for a parallel pair of episodes in Part Two. On the occasion of Marie's visit to the prison we are impressed by the arrangement of the meeting room, which seems to resemble more closely the scene of an execution rather than a conventional visiting room of a prison. The visitors and the inmates are separated by a space of about 10 metres, as if the visitors are spectators, and no intimacy, even of speech, is possible. Meursault speaks of feeling ill and loses track of time and of the details of Marie's conversation [*The Stranger*, 73–76] [*E*, 114–19]. This is reflected in his rage at the priest following his condemnation to death, when the priest announces that he will pray for him:

Je déversais sur lui tout le fond de mon cœur avec des bondissements mêlés de joie et de colère. Il avait l'air si certain, n'est-ce pas? Pourtant, aucune de ses certitudes ne valait un cheveu de femme. Il n'était même pas sûr d'être en vie puisqu'il vivait comme un mort. [*E*, 182]

I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy. He seemed so certain about everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was



worth one hair of a woman's head. He wasn't even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man. [*The Stranger*, 120]

These emotive passages can be seen as key points on Meursault's psychological journey on which he codifies the system of belief by which he was living unconsciously until the moment he learns of his mother's death at the beginning of the novel.

# Chapter 6

## Form

The reader of *L'Étranger* is struck immediately by the apparent mix of genres in the first few pages. According to King, “The contrived narrative form of *L'Étranger* keeps the reader at a distance from the story and reminds him that it is fiction” [King, 58]. She explains that the opening seems to indicate that we are reading a diary or an interior monologue, but that we are confounded in this expectation by the use of the past tense, precluding a monologue, while days described as “today” seem to stretch over a weekend, making the diary model illogical also.<sup>1</sup> For example, in the first part of Chapter 4 we have “Hier, c’était samedi” [E, 57]. The “ce matin” [E, 58] following must refer to Sunday, but at the end of the chapter Meursault says “. . . je me suis couché sans dîner” [E, 66], which would situate the narrative act at a later date (unless he wrote in his sleep).

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<sup>1</sup>King mentions Robert Champigny’s theory that Meursault writes the story at the end of his life, and that “the narrative is another way . . . of witnessing to the truth of his life” [King, 59], although Champigny admits this is not probable (*Sur un héros païen*. Paris: 1959).

The most logical conclusion is that in this first part, Camus is trying to get across the idea that to Meursault, time is of no importance. Sensual data are the only defining points of reference for the protagonist in his existence, wilfully free of conventional frames of reference. While it is entertaining to speculate on the moment in the narrative when Meursault actually sat down to write the story—whether during the trial, after his sentence is passed, or in the day or two before his execution (to allow for the episode with the priest).

Since he does not mention the act of writing at all in the narrative, one valid conclusion is that the story is not about writing, but instead about living and thinking, and that perceived inconsistencies stem from our expectation that Meursault is supposed to have sat down at one particular point and written the narrative. If we try and read the novel without this preconception, then the immediacy of the narrative speaks for itself. Consider even the intellectual reaction of Meursault to his sentence.

Je n'ai pas regardé du côté de Marie. Je n'en ai pas eu le temps parce que le président m'a dit dans une forme bizarre que j'aurais la tête tranchée sur une place publique au nom du peuple français. [*E*, 164]

I didn't look in Marie's direction. I didn't have time to, because the presiding judge told me in bizarre language that I was to have my head cut off in a public square in the name of the French people. [*The Stranger*, 107]

In the absence of a clear idea of Meursault's state of mind as he recounts this event, and of his possible temporal distance from it, the account is received by the reader as if she is present at the moment the sentence is pronounced, in a visceral way which emphasizes the physical relationship of the protagonist with his fate. One almost feels as if one's own head is going to be cut off.

# Lecture 3

# Chapter 7

## Plot

I would like to go through the action in some detail, because in this particular novel there is hardly a thing which is superfluous. Also I would like you to be able to avoid the pitfalls of interpreting things which you might think you understood from the novel, but which didn't actually happen. For example, it's important to know that the sun only reflected off the Arab's knife, and that, for example, it was not actually thrown at Meursault, and he was not stabbed with it, or anything similar.

### 7.1 Part One

#### 7.1.1 The Funeral

The story begins with Meursault informing the reader that his mother has died. He does this in a very informal way—in a New Zealand translation we might say: “Today, Mum died”. It is important to keep this in mind when we are confronted later with “evidence” of Meursault's lack

of feeling for his mother. In this case, his lack of affectation seems to reveal a kind of intimacy that society would actually frown on in this context. Meursault refuses to call his mother by another name than the one he always used (ie. the stiff and impersonal “ma mère”, regardless of her death.

He has to ask for leave and travel some distance from Algiers to Marengo on a bus to attend the funeral. He borrows a tie and an armband to wear from his workmate Emmanuel. The heat causes him to fall asleep on the bus. In these first pages, confusingly, the present tense is used—“Je ne sais pas”, “Cela ne veut rien dire” “c’est un peu comme si”, as well as the future tense—“Je prendrai l’autobus”, but these are later abandoned for the present perfect (*passé composé*).

He meets the caretaker (le concierge) and his wife [*E*, 16] at the old-people’s home (l’asile de vieillards), and introduces him to the director (le directeur) who discusses his mother with Meursault. He is led to a whitewashed mortuary (morgue) with a glass roof (une verrière). His mother is in a coffin (la bière) with the lid on, but not screwed down. He refuses the offer to have the coffin opened. Interestingly, this seems to contradict his earlier assertion, on arriving, that “J’ai voulu voir ma-maman tout de suite” [*E*, 11]. It’s as if his natural instincts have been subsumed in the awkwardness of the formalities and rituals. He is immediately conscious of having said the wrong thing, and can’t explain why he doesn’t want the lid taken off [*E*, 14].

The caretaker stays with him while he keeps the vigil. He discusses his life in Paris with Meursault, who remembers back to a conversation

with the caretaker on arriving. This recollection puts the narrative out of sequence, and serves as a clue to Meursault's emotional state. It is these types of clues which the reader must be alert to in the absence of the protagonist's self-conscious narration in this first part. He does not say: It made me sad, it made me angry, not because he necessarily lacked those emotions, but because he reports only what he sees and hears, and what he does. In this respect we see the beginning of the idea that Camus, in a preface to *L'Étranger*, later explained in this way:

On ne se tromperait donc pas beaucoup en lisant dans *L'Étranger* l'histoire d'un homme qui, sans aucune attitude héroïque, accepte de mourir pour la vérité. [Davison, vii]

As he says in this preface, Meursault refuses to say more than is true. And for him, in this first part, only phenomena which are perceived by his senses (and not another's) correspond to the truth. Others have interpreted this to mean that he in fact feels nothing, but I can't find any evidence for callousness per se.

Night falls and an Arab nurse (l'infirmière, la garde) with an abscess where her nose had been, returns, and bright lights are switched on. The caretaker brings Meursault a coffee. Then Meursault offers him a cigarette and they smoke. Meursault nods off. These details about the coffee and cigarette return in the trial, but it is only in this first part that clues are given which mitigate the prosecutor's later condemnation of Meursault. We notice, for example, that Meursault accepts the offer of a coffee only after refusing the evening meal. And that he



hesitated before smoking, wondering if he could do it “devant maman”. The fact that he has no appetite even after his exhausting trip might show the emotional strain of the event and his respect for his mother, although he has no concept of society’s rules we are supposed to follow which are supposed to convey these ideas in a formal way.

His mother’s friends come in. They sit across from him. This seating arrangement brings a foreshadowing of the trial when Meursault remembers: “J’ai eu un moment l’impression ridicule qu’ils étaient là pour me juger” [*E*, 19]. A woman who was close to his mother (we never find out her name or anything more about her) cries for a long time. The caretaker brings coffee (no mention is made of the other guests drinking at the trial), and the vigil goes on all night. In the morning they are woken by a man’s coughing, and his mother’s friends all shake Meursault’s hand as they leave. Meursault’s astonishment at this is testimony again to his ingenuousness with regard to society’s conventions. To him a handshake has a real value, representing “intimité” or closeness (22), while the old people do it as a matter of course, and see no reason to speak to a person before taking this step.

Meursault is taken to the caretaker’s room, then waits in a courtyard until the director has him sign some documents. The priest (le curé) and altar-boys (enfants de chœur) arrive, and go with Meursault to the vigil-room, where pall-bearers are waiting, as well as a nurse (l’infirmière déléguée (assigned)). The funeral director (l’ordonnateur) is waiting with the hearse (la voiture). An old man named Thomas Pérez, a close friend of his mother’s, is there to attend the funeral.

They set off towards the church in the town nearby. The director of the home tells him about Pérez' relationship with his mother (they were like fiancés). Pérez keeps falling behind and takes shortcuts across the countryside to catch up.

The sun beats down relentlessly. Melted tar sticks to the feet of the procession. A man from the funeral home and the nurse speak to Meursault on the way. Pérez is weeping when they arrive at the church. Meursault's mother is buried, and he takes the bus back home to Algiers. This episode is characterized, as we have already seen, by the breaking-up of the narrative's coherence, caused by the effect of the sun.

We notice from this short summary that there seems to be nothing particularly unusual about this funeral. It is nevertheless these bare facts that form the basis for the prosecution's character assassination of Meursault during the trial, and against which even his own lawyer finds it impossible to argue, as shown by his omission of these events in his summing-up.

### **7.1.2 Marie and the beach**

The events following the funeral seem to be designed to test our ability to sympathize with the protagonist. They all allow a wider interpretation of Meursault's character than previous events.

The next day is Saturday and Meursault goes to the beach. While swimming he meets Marie Cordona, a former typist from his work. He

flirts with her, and she invites him to a comedy movie.

In this episode we have the same kind of sensual descriptions as in the first chapter—light, heat, etc.—but it is pleasant sensations that are described [*E*, 34]. We have the first hint of judgement creeping in in Marie’s reaction to his mourning attire (black tie), and the news that his mother was buried the day before. “Elle a eu un petit recul” [*E*, 35] “She gave a little start” [*The Stranger*, 20]. He even has to resist the urge to say that it’s not his fault—he is aware of people’s tendency to feel guilty in such situations (fautif (35)).

After the movie she spends the night with him. The next day he spends in his apartment, watching the people in the street from his balcony.

Work is busy, and at lunchtime he goes with Emmanuel to their friend Céleste’s restaurant. He sleeps during siesta, then goes back to work. On the way home he meets his neighbour, the old Salamano, and his mangy spaniel (épagneul), which he beats and never allows to urinate when he takes it for walks. Meursault’s other neighbour, who seems to be a pimp (maquereau (61)), Raymond Sintès, who calls himself a warehouseman (magasinier), invites him to eat with him. They discuss a fight Raymond has been in with his “mistress’s” brother, whom he suspected of infidelity. Raymond asks him to write a letter for him to his mistress, and when he does this declares that he is now his friend (copain).

The episodes with Salamano and Raymond illustrate Meursault’s reluctance to judge others. Even though his account of Salamano’s

treatment of his dog inspires pity, he disagrees with Raymond that it is disgusting [*E*, 48].

On Saturday he and Marie go swimming. Back at his place for lunch, she asks if he loves her, and he says no. Raymond then starts abusing his mistress next door, and a policeman comes. Afterwards Raymond asks Meursault to be a witness for him. They go out and shoot some pool, and Meursault refuses his offer to go to a whorehouse (*bordel*). The next day he testifies for him at the police station that Raymond's girl had been cheating on him (*avait manqué à (78)*). Salamano complains that his dog has run off, and cries in his apartment.

Raymond invites Meursault and Marie to spend the next Sunday at a *bach* (*un cabanon*) with some friends of his. Meursault's boss offers him a transfer to a branch in Paris, but Meursault is not enthusiastic. Marie asks if he wants to marry her, but is unsatisfied with his acceptance because he still maintains he does not love her. Although this seems callous, we might also consider a declaration of love after a week's acquaintance to be rather shallow. Marriage however does not contradict Meursault's concept of life, rather, it affirms it.

Nevertheless they decide to marry. At Céleste's Meursault notices an old lady who appears to be an obsessive-compulsive, working out her bill in advance and going through the radio guide. When he gets home Salamano comes into his flat and talks about his dog. The next day Meursault and Marie take the bus with Raymond to the beach, and the girl's brother and some other Arabs watch them go. At the *bach* they meet the owner Masson, and his wife. They go for a swim

and Meursault dozes off sunbathing. They have an early lunch, then the men go for a walk on the beach.

Two of the Arabs from earlier are at the other end of the beach. The two groups approach one another, and after a couple of words, Raymond hits the brother, and Masson, on Raymond's command, knocks the other out in the shallow water. Just as Raymond turns to say something to Meursault, the brother lunges at him with a knife, cutting his arm and mouth. The other man goes behind the brother, and they back away, then run off. They go back to the beach and Raymond and Masson go to a doctor's beach nearby.

### 7.1.3 The Killing

Raymond, bandaged, returns and insists on going back to the beach alone, but the other men follow. They find the two Arabs sitting by a spring, one playing a reed. Raymond has a gun in his pocket. He and Meursault discuss what to do, and Meursault convinces him to give him the gun so he can fight the Arab hand to hand.

The sun glinted off Raymond's gun as he handed it to me. But we just stood there motionless, as if everything had closed in around us. [*The Stranger*, 56]

Quand Raymond m'a donné son revolver, le soleil a glissé dessus. Pourtant, nous sommes restés encore immobiles comme si tout s'était renfermé autour de nous. [*E*, 90]

By the way, this is the first time the gun is actually mentioned in the text, despite the fact that the two have already discussed whether or not to shoot. It seems as though Meursault has omitted to mention that Raymond has fetched the gun while being bandaged after the attack, since he was not actually there with him. This underlines the characteristic of the first half that Meursault only reports those things of which he is directly aware, and nothing which requires judgement or interpretation on his part.

When he gives him the gun, though, the Arabs back off and disappear.

They go back to the beach, but Meursault can't face the climb up the steps and the emotion of the women. He turns back to the beach, and heads for the cool spring. The Arab with the knife is there alone. Apparently because of the sun at his back, Meursault moves towards him. The Arab draws his knife, and the sun reflects off it. The sweat on his eyebrows drips onto his eyelids and blinds him. He pulls the trigger. Then he fires four more times at the body.

# Lecture 4

## 7.2 Part Two

As I mentioned in previous lectures, the two parts of the novel represent thematic and stylistic divisions. The first part is broadly concerned with life as it is lived, and as the man, Meursault, experiences it. It tells the reader a great deal about how life can be examined without the input of intellectualization or the filter of social convention. It presents us with apparent dilemmas, but they are, in this first part, only dilemmas in our own minds. We as readers wonder how Meursault can go along with Raymond's plans to avenge himself on his mistress, but Meursault himself does not even pose himself the question. He acts on immediate impulse—he simply does a favour for an acquaintance, who has never done him any harm. In fact, Meursault *does not ask any questions at all*. This is an important point, and shows above all his self-assurance in regard to his attitude to life. He sees the way others live, but he does not wonder about them, knowing that it is his own existence which matters.

The second part concerns how we think about life. As the trial attempts, clumsily, to analyse the events of the protagonist's life since his mother's funeral, Meursault is forced to codify his attitude to life. The harmony and happiness that pervaded his life previous to the killing had not demanded the articulation of this attitude in words, but as Meursault is confronted with the judgements upon his character he is forced to justify himself to himself, and to the reader.



### 7.2.1 Prison and the investigation

The second part, as we've seen, concerns the trial and the investigation which precedes it. He is questioned by an examining magistrate (juge d'instruction), and assigned a lawyer (avocat). The lawyer asks about the funeral, and if he loved his mother. He replies "probably" (sans doute (102)) and a strange phrase which offers one of a number of perceptive insights which we meet in the novel: "Tous les êtres sains avaient plus ou moins souhaité la mort de ceux qu'ils aimaient" [*E*, 102]. At the next questioning from the magistrate, he is asked why he hesitated after the first shot. He doesn't know how to answer, and is silent. Then the magistrate asks if he believes in God, to which he answers no. When he becomes enraged, he feigns agreement, but again says he doesn't believe. The magistrate declares that he has never known an "âme aussi endurcie" [*E*, 109] (a soul as hardened) as his. Later he refers to him jokingly as "monsieur l'Antéchrist" [*E*, 111] (an apparent reference to Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*, a condemnation of Christianity's influence on the west, especially the elevation of pity as a virtuous feeling). He is questioned regularly with his lawyer after that.

In relation to this part of the trial, King sees parallels between Meursault's story and Christ's crucifixion. This brings a kind of resolution to the philosophical dilemma with which the protagonist grapples in the second part, the dilemma of accepting his approaching death while at the same time living moment-to-moment. Meursault is "wit-

nessing to a true relationship between man and the world” [King, 54].

Meursault refuses three times to tell the examining magistrate why he fired four shots into the dead body on the beach; later, he refuses three times to see the prison chaplain. These refusals to compromise with society and religion are analogous to Christ’s three refusals to be tempted by Satan. Meursault’s silence at the trial might be compared to Christ’s silence before Pilate. [King, 54]

This idea is fleshed out more completely in the last chapter, in the episode with the priest, and is reflected in the Preface where Camus talks of Meursault as “the only Christ we deserve”.

During his time in prison he is kept first in a cell with other prisoners, then alone. Marie comes to visit, and he meets her in a long room with an empty space separated by grates. There are many other people there also. We have already looked at this episode as a type of foreshadowing of the execution, which itself is not part of the novel. Later Meursault deals with his thoughts of freedom, gets used to his confinement, and goes over his memories of his life. He learns to kill time. He reads a newspaper article left behind in his cell about a Czech man who is murdered by his family after returning from a long absence. In the next lecture we will examine the parallels between this story and the situation of Meursault, and how this reflects upon the theme of judgement in the novel.

After some months he becomes aware that he has been talking to

himself. This gives us some indication of the extent to which Meursault is not accustomed to intellectualizing his life. In this second part of the novel, the deprivation of liberty and the solitude of his cell seem to force out his articulation of his attitude to life through the pathological medium of unconsciously talking to himself. In other words, where before he *just lived*, his boredom is forcing him to *just think*, and because he is totally unused to this negative mode of existence, he finds himself speaking, without realising it. This provides the germ of the priest's forcing out of the his entire philosophy, of you like, at the close of the novel.

### 7.2.2 The Czech story (Euro)

An interesting aspect of the episode of the newspaper article discovered in the prison cell, in terms of the present course, is the unlikely connection with Milan Kundera. Grenier tells us that the story of the murdered Czech man is lifted directly from a pair of newspaper articles that appeared in separate Algiers newspapers on the same day in 1935. A few details were changed in Camus' retelling:

Camus a simplement préféré situer l'histoire en Tchécoslovaquie, sans doute parce qu'il ne connaissait pas la Yougoslavie, mais avait fait un voyage à Prague, en 1936 ... Peut-être aussi par une intuition géniale. L'œuvre de Milan Kundera nous a enseigné depuis que la plaisanterie qui tourne mal est une spécialité tchèque. [Grenier, 345]

### 7.2.3 The Trial

Sometime in June his case goes the Assizes Court (la cour d'assises). The courtroom is very hot. There is a parricide case after his. A policeman points out to him where the press are sitting, and he sees the jury and the spectators. He talks to a reporter (journaliste). His lawyer arrives and tells him to make his answers brief. The prosecutor (procureur) arrives and the bailiff (huissier (131)) "annonce la cour" ("all rise"). Three judges enter, and one announces that the court is in session (l'audience était ouverte (132)). One journalist looks at Meursault particularly intently.

The jury is selected and the charges read. The bailiff reads the names of the witnesses, and they are taken out through a side door. A woman from Céleste's restaurant also watches him intently. After the presiding judge (le président) going through the events of the crime with Meursault, the prosecutor asks him (in the third person) whether he had gone back intending to kill the Arab. Meursault replies no, and he asks why he was armed and why he went back there, and Meursault replies it was chance "le hasard". There is a recess for lunch, and Meursault is taken back to the prison before being returned to the court. We see in this first opportunity to speak in the courtroom that Meursault only sticks to the facts, and doesn't take up the opportunity to present himself as an innocent man. He doesn't provide a legitimate motive for his actions, or express false regret (eg. by calling it "malheur" instead of "hasard").

The first witness is the director of the home (directeur de l'asile). He comments on his mother's complaints about being put there and Meursault's calm demeanour at the funeral, and his ignorance of her age. The next is the caretaker (le concierge). The prosecutor makes a lot of the fact that Meursault smoked and drank coffee during the vigil. Then it's Pérez' turn. The prosecutor has him state that he didn't see Meursault cry, and his lawyer counters by having him admit he didn't see him not cry either. At this point we see the theme of the trial as farce, of the arbitrariness of the judgements that are made and the logic that leads to those judgements. Céleste testifies next, and announces that Meursault is "un homme", that he "ne parlai[t] pas pour ne rien dire", and that the crime was "un malheur" (142) (bad luck [*The Stranger*, 92]). This identification of Meursault as a man gives succinct expression to Camus' idea of the quintessential Algerian man, the lover of physical life which is foreign to intellectualization and social convention. This is the man who is described in his earlier stories in the collection *Noces* (nuptials) (cf. Meursault's acceptance of the marriage proposal), especially *L'Été à Alger* [*Noces*, 33–52], where Camus says of a friend of his, "Il boit quand il a soif, s'il désire une femme cherche à coucher avec" [*Noces*, 37]. It is undoubtedly this uncomplicatedness, straightforwardness and unpretentiousness in Meursault's character which Céleste sums up in the simple word "homme".

Then Marie is questioned. The prosecutor has her recount the first day of her affair with Meursault. He makes a great show of the fact that the film they saw was a comedy, and that the swimming and the

affair happened the day after his mother's death (actually her funeral). She cries at the insinuation on his character and is led away.

After this, Masson and Salamano testify briefly in favour of his character, and Raymond declared that he is innocent. Under questioning he says that the victim hated him because he had hit his sister, that it was chance (le hasard (146)) that Meursault was at the beach, and that he had written the letter to the victim's sister. The prosecutor points out that he also did nothing when Raymond beat his mistress, that he testified in his favour. He then tells the court that Raymond is a procuror (souteneur), and has the two men affirm that they are friends. His lawyer asks if Meursault is "accusé d'avoir enterré sa mère ou d'avoir tué un homme" [*E*, 148]. The prosecutor replies that he has buried his mother "avec un cœur de criminel" [*E*, 148]. Meursault is taken back to the prison.

Later in court he reflects on the prosecutor's argument, which he finds satisfactory. But he doesn't understand why he is being attacked by him. The prosecutor accuses him of being intelligent, and showing no remorse, and Meursault reflects that he never has for any reason. The prosecutor makes a parallel between this case and the parricide which is to be heard next. Meursault is "morally guilty of killing his mother" [*The Stranger*, 101–02] "tuait moralement sa mère" [*E*, 156] and has no soul, as far as the prosecutor can see.

The judge asks Meursault if he wants to say anything. He stands and says that he never intended to kill the Arab. On further questioning from the judge, embarrassed, he can only get out that "c'était

à cause du soleil” [*E*, 158]. During the summing-up, Meursault notices that his lawyer is speaking about his acts in the first person (“I”). He appeals to the jury based on his character also, calling him a “travailleur régulier . . . aimé de tous”, but Meursault notices that he omits to mention his mother’s burial. He asks the jury to find for extenuating circumstances (circonstances atténuantes (161)). Meursault catches Marie’s eye and realizes that it’s the first time during the trial.

The jury gives its verdict to the court, which appears to be: guilty of premeditated murder, with extenuating circumstances. Meursault is taken to a side room and brought back in 45 minutes later to hear the judge’s sentence: decapitation.

#### **7.2.4 The Chaplain**

The last chapter concerns thoughts and his encounter with the prison chaplain (l’aumônier) before the execution (not part of the novel). The narrative once again includes the present tense (“Je n’ai rien à lui dire” [*E*, 165]), as it did in the first chapter. Meursault considers his chances of avoiding the death sentence. He tells about his father, whom he didn’t know, going to an execution and being ill. He decides that the certainty of the execution should be changed to allow the condemned some hope, that the guillotine (le couperet (169)) was too efficient. He remembers from a photo he has seen that the modern guillotine is on ground level, not up a scaffold (échafaud (170)). He thinks about his appeal (pourvoi), and he listens at dawn for footsteps, because he

knows they come at dawn for an execution. He imagines being pardoned (*gracié* (174)).

The chaplain comes in unannounced. He asks why Meursault has been refusing to see him. He replies that he doesn't believe in God [*E*, 176]. He asks if he speaks from despair, and Meursault says that he is only afraid, not desperate. The chaplain asks: “vivez-vous avec la pensée que vous allez mourir tout entier?” [*E*, 178]and he replies yes. Then the priest starts babbling about Meursault beng asked to see a divine face in the stone walls of his cell, he replies that he's tried to see Marie's face there. The chaplain wants to hug Meursault, but he refuses. Meursault says he has no more time to talk about God, and the chaplain says he will pray for him. Meursault cracks and lets out a stream of insults and emotion (a kind of commentary on the novel (182–84), and has to be pulled away by the guards.

### 7.2.5 Before the end

When he is alone, he thinks about his mother, and realizes that he is happy: “Je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde” [*E*, 186]. This shows his final acceptance of the absurd. Here we have the lyrical counterpart to Sisyphus' “happiness” which we are called upon to imagine in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: he reaches the final point in his maturing attitude to absurd existence. The fact that it is thinking of his mother at this point (“Pour la première fois depuis bien longtemps, j'ai pensé à maman. ... je comprenais pourquoi ... elle



avait joué à recommencer” [*E*, 185]) gives the lie once again to the arguments of the prosecution. This reinforces the idea that the justice expressed by the word “la justice” (the court) in the novel is not capable of getting at the truth with regard to Meursault’s character, while Meursault’s thoughts acknowledge his humanity in subtle, unprepared and unaffected ways. Also unsaid, but implicit in the timing of this statement, is Meursault’s realization that he now shares his mother’s fate.

We notice that there is no description of Meursault receiving news about any of the possibilities he has reflected on in this time: his appeal, a possible pardon, the day he is to be executed. The reader is left with the (perhaps illusory) possibility that Meursault may have had time meanwhile to write this account, despite the inconsistencies of tense throughout. We can draw several conclusions. One is that in general, it is never really possible to prepare for death, as the various religions attempt to allow us to, and which the chaplain tries to bring Meursault to do—the human instinct is always to seek to avoid it, and to make peace with the world; that is, with life. Therefore Meursault doesn’t deal with his coming death in a fatalistic way, he thinks of it in terms of a defiance of the waking death of the chaplain and the crowd at his execution. Other interpretations are also possible.

# Lecture 5

### 7.3 Details

What is missing from this analysis of the plot is Meursault's constant and detailed observations of what is going on around him. More than any other aspect of the work, this testifies to his absolute conscious presence in this life. Right up until the last few pages he notices outside his jail cell:

Des bruits de campagne montaient jusqu'à moi. Des odeurs de nuit, de terre et de sel rafraîchissaient mes tempes... A ce moment, et à la limite de la nuit, des sirènes ont hurlé.  
[E, 185]

The persistent attention to detail supports the interpretation which Camus would like us to apply to the character of Meursault, despite the objections of many critics. That is, that

Meursault was conscious, from the very beginning of the book, of the nature and value of the attitude he represented. Meursault was not, in his view, to be seen solely as the ideal Algerian hero, but also as one of the 'absurd men' whose fuller description is to be found in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. He confirmed that the phrase in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* stating that 'a temporary employee at the Post Office is the equal of a conqueror if they both have the same consciousness of their fate' applied exactly to Meursault, and remarked that he had intended Meursault to be seen as having gone through

the experience of discovering and reacting to the problem of the absurdity of life before the story began. [Thody, 37]

Note that this seems to contradict our earlier observation that Meursault “codifies his system of belief” (page 24) during the second half. It is necessary to distinguish being conscious and codifying: in the first part as well as the second, he is consciously living, consciously aware of the inevitability of his death—only in the second does he codify in his mind this way of living and this reaction to this realization.

These tiny observations, then, are part of Meursault’s conscious attitude to life. Even after the passing of his sentence, he knows that the world is indifferent, and he can find no meaning in life “la vie ne vaut la peine d’être vécu” [*E*, 173], but he observes it and is aware that he is part of it. He knows that it will go on without him, that others will continue living: “d’autres hommes et d’autres femmes vivront, et cela pendant des milliers d’années” [*E*, 173], but that does not stop him from being alive in this moment, feeling the sun, hearing the sounds of the town and recalling the life he has led, right until the end.

# Chapter 8

## Characterization

### 8.1 Meursault

Readers of *L'Étranger* who happen to be New Zealanders are lucky. This might seem like a strange thing to say with regard to a French text but nevertheless it is true. New Zealanders who read this work will identify more closely with what Camus was trying to say about the main character, Meursault, because—if I may risk another counter-intuitive statement—New Zealand is a lot more like Algeria in the first half of the 20th century than France is or was.

The following quote from a 1946 interview with Camus will make these statements clear:

Camus ... remarked ... that most critics had failed to see *'la présence physique et l'expérience charnelle'* which for him were the essence of Meursault's character. 'The men in Algeria,' he told Gaëton Picon, 'live like my hero, in an abso-

lutely simple manner. Naturally, you can understand Meursault, but an Algerian will understand him more easily and more deeply.' What Camus meant by this was that Meursault had the same concern for the physical side of life and the same indifference towards both Christianity and bourgeois morality which characterised the Algerians described in *Noces*. [Thody, 30]

As Thody interprets Camus here, the Algerian male of his time seems to resemble the New Zealand or Australian male much more closely than the French. New Zealanders do not have to look far to find examples of literary works which embody a male archetype similar to Meursault in a similar setting. The male characters in the recent film *Rain*, by director Christine Jeffs, (especially the yacht-dwelling photographer) spring to mind as an example.

In short, we will in any way truly identify with Meursault, if we have grown up in an environment where the sea is a part of their daily life, where the sun represents not just the hope for plenty but also the forced suppression of thought and reasoned action. Where "the gods inhabit the earth" [*Noces*] and not distant heaven or the institutions of the state. Where, for better or worse, physical prowess and resourcefulness count more than social status.

## Chapter 9

### Judgement

When we examine the plight of Meursault in the novel, we are conscious, as a reader, of the problems of judging him, and struck by the indifference of the court to his identity as an individual. This court instead casts him in an inaccurate caricature. We may choose to take Meursault's side, to sympathize with him as the underdog against the powerful forces which judge him. Unfortunately Camus makes this option difficult for us, and it seems that we are to be prevented from taking this easy option. In particular, Meursault provides a basis for judging him unfavourably by his own standards, by means of the parable in the form of a newspaper story which he finds left behind in his cell.

The article tells of a man in Czechoslovakia who returns to his home town after making his fortune, and chooses to surprise his mother by taking a room at her hotel, leaving his new wife and child at another hotel. The mother and his sister kill him in the night for his

money, later committing suicide when they find out the truth [*E*, 124–25][*The Stranger*, 79–80]. Meursault judges at the end that: “le voyageur l’avait un peu mérité et qu’il ne faut jamais jouer” [*E*, 125] (“I thought the traveler pretty much deserved what he got and that you should never play games”) [*The Stranger*, 80].

Now the parallels between the story which Meursault retells and his own case are strikingly obvious. But what is more impressive is the summary nature of his judgement. First let’s sketch the similarities. Nothing obliged the traveller to play the trick on his mother, to enter the scene of the crime. He had no business being incognito in the hotel room, when his mother owned the hotel, although he can be forgiven for thinking that anyone might be entitled to take a room at the hotel anonymously. Meursault too transgresses onto territory which he imagines is public, free for all to wander. But in his case too circumstances advise a more cautious course of action. He knows the Arabs are probably still on the beach and still armed. Nevertheless he decides on the spur of the moment to return to the beach, just as, being unrecognized at the hotel, the traveller decides on the spur of the moment to surprise his mother the next day. In both cases there are a victim and an assailant who have in some way unwittingly contributed to the crime.

There is a further parallel in the imagery of the symbolic catalyst of the crime: in Meursault’s case the Arab’s knife, in the traveller’s case the money he shows off. The brandishing of both of these objects lead to doom for the victims. We might also note that the episode sheds more



light on the leitmotif of the mother throughout the work. Meursault is “guilty” merely for putting his mother in a home, as the prosecution suggests during the trial, as the traveller is guilty of leaving his mother for twenty-five years.

So is Meursault also guilty of “playing games”? If the traveller is guilty for showing off his money and failing to identify himself to his mother, how much more guilty must Meursault be for returning to the scene of a violent confrontation, armed and alone, while the attackers are still abroad?

It is up to the reader to decide whether in fact Meursault condemns himself in this episode. But we must approach this question with constant recourse to the absurd knowledge that we humans are all condemned to die, and nothing in the world leads us to think that this death is not final. We might ask, for example, whether everything we do in our life condemns us in the same way that Meursault’s actions or lack of actions do. What difference does it make if four extra shots bring about his execution, or if he steps in front of a bus on the way to work, as any of us might? In this context, is Meursault’s revolt against the indifference of the world successful, or is his revolt crushed by his execution?

## 9.1 Kafka’s influence (Euro)

In case the theme of judgement gives rise to any suspicions about Camus’ motives in relation to Kafka’s *The Trial*, here is a short quote

where Camus deals with this question directly. It comes from a letter to Jean Grenier (his philosophy professor, a writer, linked to the publisher *Nouveau roman français*) written after the latter had commented on the manuscript of *L'Étranger*.

... l'influence de Kafka. Je me suis posé cette question avant d'écrire *L'Étranger*. Je me suis demandé si j'avais raison de prendre de thème du procès. Il s'éloignait de Kafka dans mon esprit, mais non dans l'apparence. Cependant, il s'agissait là d'une expérience que je connaissais bien, que j'avais éprouvée avec intensité (vous savez que j'ai suivi beaucoup de procès et quelques-uns très grands, en cour d'assises). [Grenier, (cited in) 27]

# Chapter 10

## Conclusion

Analysis shows the novel to be far more complex than on first reading, but we should not forget that the prose is spare and much is implied rather than stated. This has the effect of making the themes of the novel generally applicable, and of confronting the reader with a number of open questions: how do we act? How do we think about our actions? How might we judge the actions of others? Our own actions? How much do we really know about the other person? How difficult is it to know ourselves? Camus has created a robust framework on which to examine these fundamental questions of human existence.

# Chapter 11

## Key passages

1. “Le ciel . . . inhumain et déprimant.”

I, 1. [*E*, 26–27]

Foreshadowing of the day of the killing. Primal effect of the sun’s presence. Impatience, discomfort with trappings of the ceremony, eg. clothes inappropriate to the weather etc. Bare generalization “je comprenais maman” foreshadows final understanding of his fate (185). “Trêve mélancolique” possible metaphor for separation from mother as “melancholy truce” after their unhappy cohabitation.

2. “Les derniers trams . . . que c’était intéressant.”

I, 3. [*E*, 52–53]

Testing reader’s ability to judge Meursault separately from *his* judgements of others. Raymond’s reprehensible ideas seem to be met with indifference—the reader tends not to notice that we hear what Meursault says to Raymond about it but not what he actu-

ally thinks. However, his declaration that it is “interesting” accords with our Meursault’s passive fascination with the details of what happens around him.

3. “Elle a appelé Céleste . . . de la semaine.”

I, 5. [*E*, 71–72]

Minute observations of human life. Methodicalness appears foreign to Meursault’s mind.

4. Puis il a voulu savoir . . . la loi était bien faite.”

II, 1. [*E*, 99–100]

Difficulty of perceiving himself in a role (of accused criminal). Clarity of acts in own mind takes no account of prejudices and images in minds of others.

5. “Cependant, . . . Ceci n’est pas assez.’ ”

II, 1. [*E*, 102]

Meursault lives in the moment, elements effect his feelings directly. Foreshadows judgement of court based solely on the perception of his indifference. He expresses the fundamental desire of a mourner that the death not have happened, but in an unconventional way. This nuance condemns him.

6. “Moi, je suis chrétien. . . sur son fauteuil.”

II, 1. [*E*, 108]

Magistrate’s use of “tu” seems to appeal somewhat to Meursault, reflecting his (misplaced) desire to dispense with formalities and

relate to other characters in a natural friendly way. His feigned agreement is the only moment when he compromises his authenticity, and he finds that it does not bring relief (the priest goes on shouting). Reinforces his commitment to the truth.

7. “Dans la nuit . . . faut jamais jouer.”

II, 2. [*E*, 124–25]

Meursault here able to judge. Seems to contrast traveller’s deception with his own honesty (but see Lecture 5).

8. “Enfin, est-il accusé . . . pas bien pour moi.”

II, 3. [*E*, 148]

Meursault disconnected from proceedings, late realization of bad state of affairs. Prosecutor’s empty statement is turning point of trial. Farcical, arbitrary nature of proceedings.

9. Il était malade . . . montait au cœur.

II, 5. [*E*, 168]

(Follows thoughts in reforming executions to give a chance of escape.) Reflections on certainty of death—Meursault’s and in general—makes executions compelling. Sickness of his father reflects “joie empoisonné” because of realization that vomiting paradoxically implies being alive, and watching another’s death implies freedom. Preoccupation with physicality, even with regard to intellectual realizations.

# Chapter 12

## Essay Questions

1. “The central question for an understanding of *L’Etranger* is whether Meursault is an unconscious hero or the absurd hero of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*” [King, 49]. What kind of hero is Meursault? How does this question help our understanding of *L’Etranger*?
2. “Meursault has opted for the earth, for the immediate course of events, and for the use of his intelligence only within those limited areas where he can find certainty” [King, 51]. How is this statement demonstrated in the text of *L’Etranger*? What are the implications of this choice for Meursault?
3. “The novel is a concrete image of what Camus terms the absurd confrontation between man’s desires and the indifference of the universe” [King, 54]. How do the events described in the novel support this assertion?
4. “The universe is the ultimate force against which Meursault re-

volts, and which crushes him, but this force acts through a social order which is comically portrayed” [King, 57]. Examine this portrayal of the social order. What are the implications of this order representing the universe in the novel?

5. Camus wrote in a preface to the American edition of his *L'Étranger*, “Il m’est arrivé de dire aussi, et toujours paradoxalement, que j’avais essayé de figurer dans mon personnage [Meursault] le seul christ que nous méritions” [Grenier, (cited in) 22]. What do you think he meant by this? Who is “nous” in this sentence?
6. According to Nathalie Sarraute, the “attitude” of Meursault “était un parti pris résolu et hautain, un refus désespéré et lucide, un exemple et peut-être une leçon. . .” [Grenier, (cited in) 26]. Explain this statement with reference to Meursault’s thoughts in the novel.



# Chapter 13

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