

Irony of the stranger



“ Society is a masked ball, where every one hides his real character, and reveals it in hiding.”-Ralph Waldo Emerson A society constrained to specific social standards reprimands those who do not conform to such principles. In the process, a supreme truth is revealed unveiling the ‘ rights’ and ‘ wrongs’ of societal ideology. Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* exhibits Meursault as a passive nonconformist who will not “ play the game” society has chosen for him, and is thus condemned for an inability to meet society’s social expectations. Through irony, Camus reveals how the outcast, Meursault, is condemned because of his nonconformist beliefs. Meursault’s nonconformist character is one that does not concern itself with expressing emotion. Camus uses the first-person point of view, making the reader expect the narrator’s personal response to events within the plot. Ironically, the prose is void of such content. Meursault’s life is reflected upon with utmost objectivity: a reflection of how he himself sees it. He ‘ catalogs’ the events of his life, going out of his way to avoid the conveying of any emotion. “ Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know” (9). As part of a telegram, the details that he does discuss only concern his uncertainty of the date; he does not mention anything of the telegram’s effect on him. Furthermore, during his mother’s funeral, he “ hadn’t cried once and [he]’d left straight after the funeral without paying [his] respects at her grave” (86). This is not to say Meursault lacks emotion – he simply does not feel it is essential to express it. Nevertheless, society expects certain emotions to be linked to specific events, namely, a physical representation of grief at his mother’s funeral. Meursault cannot accept this social obligation imposed upon his life; he is an outsider to the society in which he lives. Further representative of Meursault’s adamancy to not concern himself with expressing emotion is his <https://assignbuster.com/irony-of-the-stranger/>

relationship with Marie. When inquired about marriage, Meursault indifferently responds that he would if “ she wanted to”. Additionally, when asked if he loves her, he replies, “ that it didn’t mean anything but that [he] probably didn’t” (44). As traditionally viewed in society, marriage is a bond of love and affection; yet this prospective one is marked physically by indifference and apathy on his part. In retrospect, Meursault serves as a vessel dispensing a truth to the environment with which he lives in. Contradicting its strong emphasis within society, he reveals that emotion need not be represented exteriorly, for genuine emotion comes from within and does not need public recognition. However, society is immediately threatened by this truth, with which “ no triumph over the self or over the world will ever be possible” (119). Ironically, although he is not impassive, Meursault’s indifference to physically convey emotion is considered to be a lack of emotion within his society, highlighting him as a true stranger. Accordingly, lack of concern to display emotion during occurrences traditionally attached to specific emotional responses function to provide a validation to condemn him. Meursault’s nonconformist character is further delineated through the absurdity of his life. Indifferent, Meursault will make a decision because he sees no rationale not to act in a certain way though he does not see a reason to either. This indifference deems the chronology of events within his life independent of each other, with no one necessarily leading to the next. Ironically, the reader and Meursault’s society both attempt to create a meaning of the events within his life: a fruitless effort when applied to an absurd existence. “ On the day after the death of his mother, this man was swimming in the sea, entering into an irregular liaison and laughing at a Fernandel film” (91). The reader attempts to rationalize

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Meursault's actions by deeming them a possible means of alleviating the pain and suffering of his mother's death. Contrastingly, in the courtroom, the prosecutor announces that he will expose "the dark workings of this criminal soul, retracing the series of events which led this man to kill, in full consciousness of his actions" (97). The prosecutor uses Meursault's previous actions which seemed merely unconventional as evidence of a monstrous personality which does not exist. In reality, neither the reader nor the characters within the novel can justify Meursault's actions. Through the eyes of Meursault, his life is absurd and meaningless, thus lacking a need for reason and justification. With this, Meursault functions as a mirror revealing to society the futility of using something from the past to justify the present: a sentiment echoed in other works of Camus. "It is likewise idealism, and of the worse kind, to end up by hanging all action and all truth on a meaning of history that is not implicit in events. Would it therefore be realism to take as the laws of history the future? To tell the truth, far from being romantic, I believe in the necessity of a rule and an order" (The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays, 208). Through his actions, Meursault implores society to live in the realm of the now, disregarding the use of the past to explain the present and the future. Because of its inability to do so, however, society stains Meursault with condemnation because of his nonconformity to societal values and expectations. Camus further distances his protagonist from the society in which he lives in through his lack of faith. Society imposes religion upon its subjects, making it the prime reason for human existence. In other words, without submission to faith, one's life is devoid of meaning and fulfillment: a conception which Meursault will not acknowledge, thus making him a stranger within his own environment. Ironically, religion for him

appends even more senselessness to an already absurd life. Faith subverts the few strands of meaning present in Meursault's life, which paradoxically contradicts society's intent for its employment. His secularism is exhibited through examples of conflict. In a tense dialogue between him and the magistrate regarding the existence of a supreme deity, Meursault replies no. " He told me that it was impossible, that all men believed in God, even those who wouldn't face up to Him. That was his belief, and if he should ever doubt it, his life would become meaningless" (68). Furthermore, in his last moments of life, where the priest implores Meursault to submit to God, he explains that he " didn't have much time left" and that he " didn't want to waste it on God" (114). For Meursault, religion suppresses his free spirit. All that remains of an absurd yet gratifying life is time – too precious to waste on such an abstract ideal. Accordingly, Meursault again becomes a reflection of truth, denouncing the practice of organized religion. He presents society with the notion that nothing divine or absolute exists and that many people use faith as a crutch to avoid living and taking responsibility for their lives. Life is absurd: not ' controlled, monitored, or rewarded'. To live a full life, one must face the absurdity of death leading to nothingness instead of focusing one's energies on an intangible and unlikely concept. Society, however, remains in a state of denial, exceedingly threatened by this truth. Consequently, the solution is to cast out Meursault, condemning him for his unconventional beliefs. Albert Camus's *The Stranger* explores the life of a man condemned because of a failure to meet society's social expectations. Through the use of irony, Camus gives light to society's validation for his protagonist's ostracism – in doing so, revealing a supreme reality. Meursault becomes a mirror reflecting truths that threaten the very foundation of

society's most endeared principles. To stifle nonconformity and conceal a threat to societal stability, Meursault, the man who would not "play the game", is condemned to death.