

Symbolism in albert camus' the stranger



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Albert Camus' *The Stranger* is a literary classic renowned for its display of the philosophy of absurdism. In order to convey this concept, many literary techniques were used, but in particular, Camus made great use of the sun and heat as symbols of belligerence and frustration and of darkness as a symbol of comfort and peace. Furthermore, the sun also functions as a symbol of society's efforts to exert its control over those who do not conform to its ideals. Though the sun is often used as a representation of vividness and life, while darkness is used to represent concepts like fear and hostility, Camus utilized them to create an opposite effect. Through his departure from stereotypical usages of the sun and darkness, Camus is efficiently able to convey his absurdist beliefs.

Throughout several sections of *The Stranger*, Camus utilizes the sun and heat as representations of hostility and vexation. We see this early in the novel, during Maman's funeral, where "the sun [was] bearing down, making the whole landscape shimmer with heat" (15). Camus' usage of imagery helps establish the sun's deleteriousness, depicting it as an ensnaring force to Meursault. He feels that "the glare from the sky was unbearable" and it "[makes] it hard for [him] to see or think straight" (16-17). Here, Camus illustrates the scorching heat in a negative light by making it physically impairing to Meursault.

Furthermore, Camus makes several comments which lead us to believe that Meursault finds comfort in darkness and shadows — both opposites of sunlight. For instance, after the funeral, Meursault remarks, "The passing clouds had left a hint of rain hanging over the street, which made it look darker. I sat there for a long time and watched the sky" (23). Camus implies

here that Meursault is peaceful in the dark, which completely contrasts his composure while victim to the sun's hostility.

The next instance where Meursault makes comment of the blazing sun is moments before and during his encounter with the Arab. "By now the sun was overpowering. It shattered into little pieces on the sand and water" Meursault notices (55). Camus' description of the sun once again calls to mind images of extreme discomfort: The sun was starting to burn my cheeks, and I could feel drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows. The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman, and like then, my forehead was especially hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin. It was this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward (*The Stranger*, 59).

Additionally, Meursault's reason for shooting the Arab stems from a physical consequence of the intense heat. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire. My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave.

.. " (59). Thus, Meursault, as a direct physical result of the sun's antagonizing heat, shoots the Arab once, followed by four more shots while under the sun's harmful influence.

Metaphorically, however, the sun is also responsible for Meursault's murder of the Arab. Ironically, the sun, the ultimate symbol of life, has most powerfully exerted its influence on Meursault during times of death: first, at his mother's funeral, and now during the Arab's murder. More importantly, both of these times are when society also attempts to exert its influence.

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Society expects Meursault to feel remorse over his mother's death, and similarly to feel guilty for his recent actions.

So, Meursault's killing of the Arab can also be seen as an attempt to break free, albeit momentarily, of societal rule. Camus once more conveys the sun negatively during Meursault's trial. As with his mother's funeral and his altercation with the Arab, this, too, is an instance where societal influence is strong. During the trial, Meursault remarks, " But it went on much longer.

.. o long, in fact, that all I was aware of was how hot a morning it was," and, " My head was spinning with heat and astonishment" (101, 102). The trial, thus, functions as a symbol of society, always searching for logic and meaning behind every action. When they can find no such things in Meursault's morally ambiguous persona, they deem him a threat, and seek to eliminate him.

The judge rules that, "[Meursault] has no place in a society whose most fundamental rules [he] ignored and that [he] could not appeal to the same human heart whose elementary response [he] knew nothing of" (102).

Because Meursault is amoral - he is neither moral nor immoral, but rather chooses to base his actions on his physical needs and desires - he feels overwhelmed by the scathing heat - society's judgment - in the courtroom.

While in his jail cell, contrastingly, the sun and heat are absent. Though at the jail, Meursault notices "...

the sound of the voices echoing off the room's high, bare walls and harsh light pouring out of the sky onto the windows," he points out that "[his] cell was quieter and darker" (73). This is because while in his cell, societal

influence over him is minimal. Here, he is not judged for the motives of his actions. Unlike his mother's funeral, his confrontation with the Arab, and during his trial, while he is in his jail cell he is essentially free from society's confining ideals.

Camus' representation of darkness in a positive manner once more illustrates the sun's detrimental authority over Meursault, for it is only when he is away from the sun and heat that he is tranquil. While in jail, Meursault is able to live life according to his absurdist philosophy, and is content at being able to base his actions once more on his physical needs, such as when he feels "tormented by [his] desire for a woman" (77). With no attempts to govern his ethics and actions, Meursault feels comforted by his isolation. The sun makes one more appearance in the novel, right before Meursault's execution when the chaplain ineffectively attempts to help Meursault find religious salvation through God. Throughout the chaplain's visit, Meursault felt annoyed and frustrated, and he comments, "I turned away and went and stood under the skylight" because once more, futile attempts to make him conform to society are made (118).

When Meursault finally snaps and chokes the chaplain for his judgmental comments, Meursault muses, "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 living" (121). In this passage, Camus utilizes images of darkness and wind to represent Meursault's complete characterization. Whereas Meursault had previously lived a happy, albeit passive, life, he now fully understands

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and accepts the absurdity of his life. Through Meursault's loathing of the sun and heat, and appreciation toward darkness, we now fully comprehend that Meursault is neither a good nor bad person. Instead, he merely bases his life and actions on tangible desires.

Society, unable to comprehend his indifferent character, immediately labels him a threat, and thus seeks to get rid of him. Though society ultimately succeeds, Meursault sees his execution "in the dark hour before dawn" as comforting, and happily escapes the boundaries society has created in the form of rationality and order (122). Using sunlight and heat as symbols of societal hostility and darkness as a comforting ally, Camus is able to convey his absurdist notions. Camus illustrates the sun as a representation of confinement and hostility, and uses darkness to represent tranquility. By doing so, he has successfully managed to make us question established norms, a theme primarily conveyed through his character Meursault.

Through his usage of symbolism, we, unlike the society depicted in the novel, are coerced into understanding the ideas of absurdism before we are able to place judgment.