

The effectiveness of violence in the stranger



Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* is an extremely explicit work describing violent acts witnessed by a narrator who seems to be wholly unaffected by their brutality. The novel begins with death - "Mamman died today" (3) - and ends with the presumed demise of Meursault, the main character. The body of the work contains numerous bloody acts: the premeditated abuse of an ex-girlfriend, gratuitous cruelty towards a pet dog, a street fight, and a disagreement that ultimately climaxes with a murder on an Algerian beach. *The Stranger* presents a startling look at what it means to be a human, to live, and to have the ability to take another's life. Camus's steadfast depiction of violence reveals the inner attitudes of his characters towards life and death. *The Stranger* is categorically absurdist: Camus conveys the view that human existence is without order, and his work criticizes a culture that seeks to find meaning in a meaningless world. Camus reveals two contrasting views of human life: society's and Meursault's. Society seeks to find explanations for unanswerable questions. In the microcosmic courtroom of Meursault's trial, for example, the jurors and the lawyers continually focus on why Meursault killed the Arab, and why he is so indifferent about his mother's death. "Why?" the magistrate demands, "You must tell me-why?" (68) Meursault, knowing that he can offer no true answer, provides an absurd explanation simply to abate the flow of probing questioners: "it was," he says, "because of the sun" (103). If society represents the quest for what is "normal" and "correct", then Meursault stands for the absurd. Meursault is different from the other characters in the novel (he is, in fact, "a stranger") in that he is extremely removed from reality. He delights in the corporeal, such as food and sex, but does not seem to feel as others do. In contrast to society's faith in the value of a human life, Meursault argues, "everybody

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knows life isn't worth living" (114) and "one life is as good as another" (41). When his mother passes away, he shows little regret or loss – save for his physical discomfort from the heat and sun. Camus juxtaposes two contrasting ideals – one that judges life as good, wholesome, and meaningful; another that classifies human existence as pointless, absurd, and chaotic. It is because of this theme – of trivial nothingness vs. validity and worth – that Camus's utilization of violence is so effective. The way in which the characters react to violence reveals their inner thoughts and views of life. Meursault, for example, is a "detached" character. There are several instances in *The Stranger* that echo the idea of estrangement and apathy about human life, especially with regards to violence. When Raymond asks Meursault to help him carry out a plan to humiliate and assault his ex-girlfriend, Meursault does it "because [he] didn't have any reason not to please [Raymond]" (32). During another incident, Meursault alludes to the abuse of his neighbor's dog, but fails to indicate any emotion, either for or against the violence. Raymond is another detached character; he freely beats a woman and then shows no regret. He seems to share Meursault's remoteness from violence and death. Raymond nonchalantly remarks upon the passing of Meursault's mother that "it's one of those things that was bound to happen sooner or later" (33) – a statement with which Meursault agrees. In contrast, Marie is a character who views life as meritorious. She is very affected by the beating of Raymond's ex-girlfriend, so much so that she cannot eat afterwards during her lunch with Meursault. Meursault, however, "[eats] almost everything" (37). During the trial, Marie testifies that she was disturbed and upset when Meursault freely fraternized with her so soon after his mother's funeral. The chaplain – who is a staunch believer in God, human

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worth, and salvation – provides one more contrast to the absurdist view of humanity, whose crucifix is symbolic of God’s overwhelming guidance in the world and the existence of reason and order. During scenes of violence or unease, Camus does not allow the reader to undermine the importance of the physical realm. From the very beginning of *The Stranger*, Camus urges his audience to experience death and violence through color. Countless references to red shades pique the reader’s psyche and denote a certain frenzied sense of displacement and detachment. When Meursault murders the Arab on the beach, he notes the crimson hues of the sky and the sand: “the fiery air” (58), “dazzling red glare” (56), and “blazing red sand” (53). Camus employs the use of color to detract from the emotional outcomes of violence and move the focus towards the physical. Therefore, the reader becomes further aligned with Meursault’s logic and can more easily understand why he does the things that he does. *The Stranger* tackles complex issues regarding the value of human existence. Camus’s use of violence unmask his characters’ perception of individual worth. The novel seeks to dethrone traditional beliefs that deem life as wholesome, important, and meaningful. Indeed, this is a disturbing work that spares no costs to deliver a raw and candid example of what Camus termed “the nakedness of man faced with the absurd.”