

The paper of the absurd: a literary analysis of the stranger



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In Albert Camus' existential novel *The Stranger*, the pointlessness of life and existence is exposed and expounded upon in such a manner that the entire foundation of spirituality is shaken. The concept that drives this novel is one coined by Albert Camus himself, the "absurd". Under the absurd, life is pointless and holds no meaning. One lives merely to fulfill the obligation of living. Also, every possible action conceivable is governed by the static tools of chance and coincidence. The dynamic character, Meursault, is the primary outlet that Camus uses to apply this concept.

He, Meursault, lives out a relatively normal life of indifference until the pivotal climax of the novel changes him. It is at this point that he acknowledges the absurdity of his situation and begins the inevitable acceptance of his own futile existence. Throughout the beginning of the novel, one can't help but to notice the indifference and "listless detachment" (Oxford Companion 101) of Meursault. From the very first page, we begin to realize the depth of his lack of feelings: "Maman died today.

Or Maybe yesterday. I don't know" (Camus 3).

It is obvious that after his own mother dies, he shows no sentiment (Magill 346). Shortly after the funeral is complete, he grabs the hand of a woman he once knew and quickly forgets the incidents of his tragic loss. The depth of his indifference flows throughout the entire novel. "I said I didn't think anything except that it was interesting" (Camus 32), "I told her [Marie] that it didn't mean anything" (Camus 35), "For some reason, I thought of Maman. But I had to get up early the next morning...and I went to bed without any dinner" (Camus 39).

As one can tell, Meursault has an abundance of nothingness as it relates to feelings. He feels nothing for anyone including his loving girlfriend, his only mentioned friend, his own mother, or even himself (Schellinger 1289, Brombert 121). He attempts no thoughts at explaining the universe or anything of the nature. He simply plays the role of man as the personification of “cosmic indifference” (Books Abroad 234). He cares for nothing and expects nothing to care for him. He in his entirety is the perfect example of one in the early stages of the absurd.

He recognizes that life has no meaning but he hasn't reached beyond that point. Thus far, the only true way to describe Meursault is a man of nihilistic beliefs (Girard 519). Behind the scenes of Meursault's life, the tools of chance and coincidence are shaping his future, for the good or bad, one cannot be sure. One series of coincidental happenings proves themselves to be the most devastating of all. Meursault happens to hear the rumors of a man named Raymond. Later that day, he happens to bump into him in the hall. Raymond happens to have food in his apartment and Meursault was a little hungry.

They both went up and ate and Meursault happens to notice the bandage on Raymond's hand. Raymond happens to ask Meursault to write a note that was designed to socially destroy Raymond's cheating mistress. Meursault's indifference prevails and he doesn't mind writing it. The note was a success and these two people happens to become friends. Raymond's friend happens to invite the two for a weekend on the beach and Meursault happened to be free. The three men happens to take a stroll down the beach together and bump into the Arabs that Raymond has a problem with.

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Raymond happens to slip Meursault his gun so he can take the Arab on, man to man. Raymond wins and the Arabs flee, coincidentally down the beach. The three men head home but Meursault happens to want to stay. He happens to forget the gun in his pocket and walks down the beach. He happens to bump into the Arab that Raymond hit. The two stare off, under the abnormally hot sun. The Arab pulls a knife and the sun happens to hit it at an angle that puts a glare into the eye of Meursault. As a result, Meursault mechanically reacts and squeezes the trigger of the gun, firing one shot into the head of the Arab, killing him instantly.

This is the point that chance loses its hold upon Meursault. He, in a sudden thought, realizes the absurdity of the world and that his entire life, as well as existence, is gratuitous and happens on chance (Books Abroad 234).

Meursault then takes the first steps towards a self controlled existence and fires four more shots into the corpse of the Arab (Hunter 26). Now, he has fully acknowledged the presence of the absurd but has yet to accept it. He is still living in his shell of ignorance that can and will prevent him from any intellectual gain. His indifference has yet to lift.

He sits through trial, imprisonment, appeal, and re-imprisonment, all with the detached feeling of uncaring. It will not be until he accepts absurdity that he can force himself to feel anything. The hardest part for Meursault is actually accepting the absurd because of the implications behind it. For him to accept, he would have to fully recognize that life, in fact, has no meaning and never will have any meaning. Also, he'll have to agree that he himself has no purpose other than to live out his life under the assumption that after death, he can live no more.

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This mindset is hard for anyone to grasp, especially for those who spend the majority of their lives trying to rationalize their existence and answer the question, “ Why are we here? ’. For Meursault to accept the absurd, he will have to experience a Cogito-Ergo-Sum-Renee Descartes moment and completely rethink everything he has ever thought before. For this to happen, he must first lift the oppressive curtain of indifference he has been punished to for so long. “ It was at that exact moment that the chaplain came in” (Camus 115). Once again, chance has turned the tables.

Meursault, being an Atheist, refuses to see any chaplain but one randomly walks into the room and attempts to convert our dear Meursault. At first, he brushes off the attempts and sees it as a mere annoyance. Then, the priest gets entirely too persistent and Meursault snaps with the intensity of a nuclear missile. He shouts obscenities. “ I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy” (Camus 120). It is at this point the Meursault actually moves beyond his indifference and into a world of feelings.

After the priest left the cell, Meursault laid on his bed and just thought. It was at this moment that complete acceptance of the absurd set into his mind. At first he accepted the idea that the life of a dog was worth just as much as the life of a woman (Camus 121). And then, he came to the realization that he himself was worth as little as everything else. It was at this moment that he accepted the most controversial segment of the absurd: the notion that existence is futile (Brombert 121).

When one completely accepts the absurd, happiness is sure to follow. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable” (Marino 491). At last, Meursault can rejoice in the freedom of the absurd. He suddenly comes to the realization of why his Maman attempted to live life again: she too accepted the absurd. Now, with happiness and acceptance of the absurd, Meursault is freed from all illusion and has the ability to live life again, committed to the absurdity of life and all it entails (Beacham 4060). For my final point, I would like to analyze the implications behind this novel as they relate to religion.

The fundamental beliefs behind all forms of religion a governing deity or deities, some sort of an afterlife, and a purposeful life. In this novel, the idea of a deity is indirectly and directly obliterated. The idea of the governing deity is replaced with that of chance and gratuity (Books Abroad 234). The belief of an afterlife, either good or bad, is again disowned by Camus in this novel. “ There is no eternity; therefore, all must be done in this life...” (Beetz 4059). With no deity or afterlife, the object of religion is nullified.

The final and most renowned belief of most religions is the idea that life has intrinsic meaning, which usually involves a deity’s plan. This belief is the driving force behind a substantial amount of Christian actions. “...life has no meaning; there is no hope for it to ever have meaning...” (Beetz 4059). With this statement, yet another doctrine of faith is left as ruins to the novel of the absurd. The point I am trying to convey is one that the absurd cannot coexist with religion. It is for this reason that few people will ever actually reach the point of true happiness and acceptance that their life is worth the same as the family pet.

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Sadly, this also means that few people will actually ever reach the point of enlightenment. If only everyone could see the points made in Albert Camus' eye opening novel. To conclude this essay, I offer a recap of the intellectual evolution of man through the interactions of one man. Man first begins with the period of indifference, the point in life in which the well being of others and possibly even himself are unimportant and are thus ignored. Then, he progresses to the stage in which he forgets the cares of others but dwells on the newfound control over his own life as he acknowledges the absurd.

Finally, he reaches a state of bliss as he fully accepts the absurd and commits himself to it. Only when man reaches this final step, however, has he reached the point of enlightenment and pure happiness. Again, the only ideology blocking his path to perfection is religion. When man overcomes this barrier, the possibilities are endless. Meursault was merely a tool of application used by Camus to show the world a mirror image of itself. When the world overcomes its meaningless problems and its futile attempts of peace, it can truly reach the blissful state of serenity.