

Albert camus the stranger: existentialism and absurdism



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Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts. This philosophy is essentially the crux of the novel *The Stranger* and not only serves as one of the themes but probably the main reason Albert Camus wrote the book altogether. Presented in first person narration through the eyes of Meursault, the indifferent and apathetic main character, the novel serves to evoke the creed of existentialism through the embodiment of the philosophy in a person.

Meursault's speech, thought, and actions are what Camus believed a person who innately possessed the tenets of existentialism would have.

Existentialism, what it represents, the results of its embodiment in a person, and the validity of the doctrine altogether are all important aspects explored in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus.

"Maman died today or yesterday maybe, I don't know".

These opening lines of the novel serve not only to introduce the novel but to summarize it as well. Rather than focusing on what is important-his mother's death-Meursault is focused on when exactly she died; whether it was yesterday or today, since the telegraph only stated the funeral would be tomorrow. Right away, within the very first sentence, the reader is introduced to existentialism incarnate. Meursault exhibits a complete and utter indifference to life manifested by a profound lack of emotion. He doesn't care when his mother died, in fact the fact that he has to attend the

funeral altogether is the most troubling part of this whole ordeal to him.

When he finally gets to the funeral, he couldn't care less about his mother-as he rejects the offer to open the casket-but is utterly consumed by the days heat. Camus does a great job in the first part of the novel of demonstrating to the reader not only the philosophy of existentialism, but a corporal representation of it as well.

This corporal representation of existentialism is what makes *The Stranger* the unique book it is. As opposed to the multitude of books and manifestos approaching existentialism from an academic perspective, *The Stranger* approaches the philosophy by detailing a character with the belief innately in him and showing how someone like this might behave. Neither the external world in which Meursault lives nor the internal world of his thoughts and attitudes possesses any rational order.

Meursault has no discernable reason for his actions, such as his decision to marry Marie and his decision to kill the Arab. The book, narrated by Meursault, is basically life detailed superficially by him. He talks about the weather, the food he's eating, about the things he did that day rather than how he feels or thinks of other people, places and things. This is how a person consumed with existentialism would behave and think-indifferently and apathetically. Meursault passes no judgment on people and is ultimately executed for killing an Arab for no apparent reason.

The philosophy or theory of Existentialism is somewhat controversial, but nonetheless in many respects it has some notable and legitimate points. If one were to truly take a look at the universe, it would seem purposeless. And

humans do in fact possess the innate desire, or rather compulsion, to explain things and have things figured out-thus explaining their need to associate a purpose with the universe, even when it doesn't necessarily exist. But what made this theory come about in the 19th century when it could have been realized centuries before? The reason is the tragedy and devastation the world saw at this time-several world wars in specific. If we take a look at the life of Albert Camus himself, it's hard to deny the fact that there is a connection between the existentialism's inception and personal tragedy.

In 1914, Camus' Father was drafted into WWI and killed in France. In 1934 he Married Simone Hié, but divorced her two years later. In 1939 he volunteered for service in WWII, but was rejected due to illness. In 1940 he wrote an essay on the state of Muslims in Algeria causing him to lose his job and move to Paris. In 1941 he joined the French resistance against the Nazis and became an editor of Combat, an underground newspaper. These, as well as many other incidents and events in Camus' life influenced him in the sense that they formed in him a bleak, pessimistic view of life. This perspective undoubtedly set the foundation for his adoption of the theory of existentialism.

" If there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life." The point illuminated in this quote by Camus is that although some consider viewing life with despair to be wrong, or sinful, in reality hoping for an after life, " another life", or living a life of implacable grandeur is the real sin. Camus held strong to the belief of Absurdism, or the belief that humanity's effort to find meaning in the universe will ultimately fail-thus it is

absurd to try to find meaning or to live as though there is a meaning because no such meaning exists. While Absurdism might seem like a synonym for Existentialism, the two are slightly different. Existentialism makes the point that there is no purpose or meaning in the universe. Absurdism goes a step further to say that not only is life purposeless, but any attempt at finding meaning is utterly absurd. Albert Camus, being the polarized man that he was, held more firmly to the belief of Absurdism than existentialism.

In writing *The Stranger*, Albert Camus championed the idea of existentialism, a philosophy he truly believed in it. But the philosophy of existentialism is not free of criticism. Herbert Marcuse criticized existentialism, especially in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, for projecting certain features of living in a modern, oppressive society, such as anxiety and meaninglessness, onto the nature of existence itself: "In so far as Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine, it remains an idealistic doctrine: it hypothesizes specific historical conditions of human existence into ontological and metaphysical characteristics. Existentialism thus becomes part of the very ideology which it attacks, and its radicalism is illusory" What Marcuse is saying here is that existentialism makes the mistake of thinking that just because human conditions are tragic and seem to lack a purpose, that they in fact do. Whether or not there is purpose to the universe is an ontological and metaphysical subject, not one that can be realized through historical events.

Existentialism and its brother philosophy Absurdism are philosophies that emphasize the uniqueness and isolation of the individual in a hostile and indifferent world, and stress the fact the universe has no discernable

purpose. This philosophy is essentially the crux of the novel *The Stranger* as Meursault, the indifferent and apathetic main character, embodies the tenets of existentialism intrinsically. Existentialism, what it represents, the results of its embodiment in a person, and the validity of the doctrine altogether are all important aspects explored in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus.

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