

# Camus: the stranger and existentialism



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Existentialism is freedom and choice. It is impossible to define existentialism. We can witness some aspects of existentialism in *The Stranger*.

Existentialists want to direct our attention to our individuality. They force us to think about the existence and nature of God, being a Christian, our values, and our death. Only mankind defines itself through the act of living. First you exist, and then the individual emerges as life decisions are made.

Existentialists also believe the greatest achievement of an individual is to realize the absurdity of life and to accept it. The concepts of existentialism are simple, mankind has free will, and life is a series of choices, which rarely without any consequences. Some things are irrational or absurd, without explanation. If one makes a decision, he or she must follow through. The decisions you make are whom you are, so choose wisely. There are several existential themes displayed in *The Stranger*. One of the themes is freedom. It means that whatever happened prior to now do not influence what your next choice in life will be, we are free to make any choice we want. He displays freedom by treating his Maman's death nothing out of the ordinary, also by not showing any emotion. He shows us free will; by not being influenced of his mother dying effect on what he wants to do. The other themes are existence, the awareness of our choices, and passion, our feelings that we understand before we think. Meursault wants to live his life to in the moment; he is not concerned with the future. Meursault wants the remembrance of his life. Through this thinking Meursault displays Existence and Passion. The following theme is uncertainty. It basically says that life is unpredictable, and unexpected. He shows us exactly how unpredictable life can be. One minute Meursault is just so happy and content with the sun shining on him, when suddenly something unexpected happens and his

happiness is gone. “ I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I’d been happy.” There is also a theme of individuality. All individuals are a unique member of a society. Meursault lives out his individuality when he wants a crowd of people to witness his death, and greet him with cries of hatred. This way he retains his individuality. Begging for forgiveness would just make him a member of society. He also displays reflection, by turning our unawareness into awareness. Meursault leads a pre-reflective life. His daily events are so absorbed in each moment, which he never reflects on. While in prison he sees a reflection of himself, this is when he becomes aware of what he was unaware of. The overall theme though is absurd. The absurd beliefs are that life is meaningless and without purpose. This meaninglessness implies absence of any obvious meaning to our life. Can this be explained? No, no one can explain someone else’s sense of meaning or meaninglessness towards life. Meursault who is sentenced to death after killing an Arab emphasizes the difference between the morals of society and his lack of them, refusing to conform to society’s standards earns him the death sentence. In the end he faintly displays responsibility. Nearing his execution he symbolically shows emotion, as he comes face to face with nothingness and the impossibility of defending his immoral choices. Meursault is an outcast in society; therefore he cannot relate to others because he does not live as they do. He cannot abide by the same morals because he does not grasp them; he is apathetic to events occurring around him. His entire being is unemotional. This distinguishes him from society, whose strict guidelines focus on right and wrong. Meursault has the capability to break down the situation, but not conforming to it as society expects him to. Life, death, the

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in between, is irrelevant. Meursault sees the outcome as inevitable. He cannot perceive any right or wrong in killing the Arab. The killing itself was not out of hatred for the man, he reveals at the trial, “because of the sun.” The sun at the beach, similar to the sun at his mother’s funeral, was beating down on him. The sun represents Meursault emotions. The intense heat and the sun are overwhelming his senses, which he cannot deal with so ends the situation. The death of the Arab in itself doesn’t seal his fate. His destruction comes from his lack of emotion. Meursault has come to conclusion he must create his own meaning in life. That there is no basic meaning in life – it’s entirely based on living itself. Until this conclusion, he’s a stranger to himself as well as to others. Society believes this is unacceptable, and by refusing to conform he must pay the price.

Conforming to society norms doesn’t allow the individual to reach his own decisions; however, it was impossible to restrict oneself from all. The character expresses no feeling about anything. Once in a while he shows a bit of heart, but for the most part, he gives a robotic appearance. Camus conveys his existentialistic philosophy with the death of Mersault’s mother. He is more concerned about the time of death, and not the fact that he just lost a loved one. The lack of compassion at his mother’s funeral is not what society expects of him. This labels him as insensitive, or that he did not love his mother. As an existentialist, he accepts life as it is. An example of existentialism is the murder of the Arab. The absurdity of the murder is what makes it a good portrayal of the concept of existentialism. This shows how Mersault is not only a stranger to his experiences in life, but also to nature. The sun and his sensual pleasures act against him, which cause him to lose

control. Mersault's actions lack true conscious motives. He consciously makes the decision to take a life due to the physical discomfort of his surroundings. To him, it's simple: he committed murder, time to face the consequences.

There are numerous meanings to the title, *The Stranger*, one is that if you live a life different than what society accepts, then you are a stranger; an outcast, and will be punished by the rest of society. His trial proved this to be true. It was all about the way he acted and how different he was. This was used to prove that people who are different are judged by their character over their actions. Society refuses to understand him and to know him, therefore he is a stranger. Being a stranger to himself makes him a stranger to life. In the end he gets the meaning of life. He was able to do so because he was approaching death, death is the only certainty of life. We are responsible for the choices we make; there is no predetermination or higher power which decides morality. After reading "The Stranger" made me look at my life. Some of Meursault's behavior I didn't agree with, but the further I read I understand the reasons for his actions. When I started reading the book for the first time I was quite confused and bored, I had to re-read it to understand it better which gave me a different message each time.

Meursault was an interesting character to read about. His ideas and beliefs seem wrong but also right. I was able to understand what Camus conveyed with his philosophy. In fact, I have never heard of existentialism until I read this book. Meursault is able to accept the fact that everyone dies and realizing this allows you to live a better life. He controls his own life and actions. I can't say that I understand everything about him. Nonetheless, this

character had the most interesting conflicts that kept me reading. The first half of the book was filled with action and there were no direct reasons given for certain actions. In the second half, it is mainly of his self-realization about society and life. I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys thinking after reading a book.

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