

The significance of institutions: nadja, the stranger, and waiting for godot



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Our human society is ruled by institutions. We cannot even fathom a life without them. We might think we have freedom, but there is only a certain amount of freedom we are granted before we are labeled as crazy or insane and put somewhere where society cannot see us. In André Breton's novella *Nadja*, Nadja herself was put into an insane asylum. In Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Meursault was sentenced to death by the French justice system. In the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett there is a complete lack of institution, that absence of a system makes the play very circular and based on free will. In all three works, institutions play a key role throughout the different stories - from the resistance of the institution in *Nadja*, the acceptance of institution in *The Stranger*, and the complete lack of institution in *Waiting for Godot*.

In *Nadja*, towards the conclusion of the novel, Nadja is placed in an insane asylum. Breton makes it clear that Nadja was institutionalized because of her social condition and of her atypical attitude: "Nadja was poor, which in our time is enough to condemn her, once she decided not to behave according to the imbecile code of good sense and good manners" (142). In this quote Breton touches on the idea that one can only act with a limited amount of leeway of their actions before they are treated like they are psychotic or maniacal. We might think we are free to do as we please, but we will never have true freedom. If one truly does what they please they will get ridiculed by society and be classified as "not normal" and is subject to even more ridicule by the public. This relates back to *Nadja* because towards the end of the novel Breton comes to the realization that he and Nadja never truly

understood each other: “ For some time, I had stopped understanding Nadja. Actually, perhaps we have never understood one another, at least about our way of dealing with the simple matters of existence. She had decided once and for all to take no account on them, to withdraw from the present moment, to make no difference from the trifling remarks which she happened to make and those others which meant so much to me, to ignore my momentary mood and my considerable difficulty in forgiving her worst fits of abstraction.” (130) When people do not truly understand each other, they get frightened and push away from them and make sure that they know they are different. This detached side of Nadja turns off Breton because she is supposed to be this enigma, at least in Breton's eyes.

In Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger*, the protagonist is portrayed as a figure who is disconnected from everything in his life, even the death of his mother. Meursault gives off a sense of emotionlessness to the reader as soon as the novel begins. Throughout *The Stranger*, Meursault shows little to no emotion towards any event whatsoever. He focuses on necessities, like food, housing, and a job, instead of actually living and feeling things. Any person our society would consider normal would outwardly show emotions and would want to live their life, not just go through the motions of their life. The main disconnect we see from Meursault is during his hearing for the murder of an Arab man. We are given no reasoning as to why Meursault kills the Arab man, which is why his actions are hard to classify. Because there is no logical justification for why Meursault kills that man, the judge and the people in the jury try to construct an explanation of their own. The people in authoritative positions base their explanations on false assumptions. By

imposing a rational order on logically unrelated events, the authorities make Meursault appear to be a worse character than he is. The jury and judge in Meursault's trial make a story of what happened for him, based on other, unrelated events. The jury feels that he has to have a reason for killing the Arab man and that if Meursault didn't provide a reason for committing the murder, then the court would make one for him. All the witnesses discuss Meursault, but they offer differing visions of his character. In each testimony, the meaning is constructed exclusively by the witness and Meursault has nothing to do with it. At the end of the day, when Meursault is sentenced to death and he is taken out of the courtroom, he is detached as ever: "It seemed to me then that I could interpret the look on the faces of those present; it was one of almost respectful sympathy. The lawyer placed his hand on my wrist. I had stopped thinking altogether. I heard the Judge's voice asking if I had anything more to say. After thinking for a moment, I answered, "No." Then the policemen led me out." Camus illumination of the injustices of the justice system in *The Stranger*, makes the reader think about how unfair the justice system is in the present day.

In *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett the lack of an institution leads to the play having no control or direction. In the sense of plot, there really is none, and in terms of character development, we are not offered that either.

Beckett does not give the reader any previous knowledge or backstory of the characters. If he did, the play could possibly make more sense. Since there is a lack of institutions for the characters to abide by, lines get repeated and the plot never really goes anywhere. This is significant because without any rules or laws to abide by the characters are not forced to do anything,

causing the characters to have the same conversation over and over.

Waiting for Godot consists of two men, Vladimir and Estragon, unable to do anything significant while they wait for a mysterious man, Godot. The characters do not see waiting for Godot as a choice, but they see it more as a necessary part of their day. Even when they manage to make a conscious decision, they can't translate that mental choice into a physical act. They often "decide" to leave the stage, only to find that they are unable to move: "Estragon: Then adieu Pozzo: Adieu Vladimir: Adieu [Silence. No one moves] Vladimir: Adieu Pozzo: Adieu Estragon: Adieu [Silence]" Such inactivity leads to stagnancy and repetition in what seems like an endless cycle of their lives. The cause of this endless cycle is the lack of rules to follow, they have nothing to do but wait for this man whom they do not even know exists. If they were in a society with other, complex, individuals, then they might have gotten ridiculed for their behavior and been outcasted from wherever they were. But here, under the tree where the play is set, anything goes because nothing is stopping them from doing anything they want, even hanging themselves.

The role of institutions, or lack thereof, play a large role in all three texts. From using mental institutions to classify and separate people we think are different, to illustrating the defects of the justice system, and the use of free will when there are no limitations on one's behavior. Institutions are important because they govern the behavior of a set of individuals within a given community. Institutions are identified with a social purpose, transforming an individual and their intentions by mediating the rules that dictate suitable actions by societal standards.