1942

ALBERT CAMUS’S

THE STRANGER

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Camus, Albert (1913-1960) - Algerian-born French novelist who organized a theatrical group then worked as a journalist before writing the works that made him famous. Camus was awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize in literature.

The Stranger (1942) - A novel that articulates Camus’ concept of the absurd. Meursault, an unemotional young man, relates the events that lead to his committing murder and his refusal to “go along with the system” by telling the little lies that could save him from execution.

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Shortly before his seventeenth birthday, the author of The Stranger suffered a severe attack of tuberculosis. (Though it’s rare today, tuberculosis was a common disease in the early part of the twentieth century.) Up until that time Albert Camus’s greatest pleasures were wandering the streets of the working-class district of Algiers (the capital of Algeria, then a French dependency) where he lived with his mother, swimming at the beaches outside the city, and playing goalkeeper for a soccer team. The severe illness forced him to remain in bed for a long time, and he had to repeat a year in school. Most of all, the experience of being sick deepened his awareness of death, and of the possibility that death could occur at any time. The inevitability of death became a major concern of Camus and permeated his later writing.

Albert Camus often said that all his work came from a few intense images that were deeply embedded in his imagination in early childhood. In contrast to images of death, the warmth of the sun, the pleasures of swimming, and the cool Mediterranean evenings represented positive reasons for existence. The more you know about his life, the more you can see how these responses to physical sensations directly influenced his portrait of Meursault in this book.

Camus was born in 1913 in the Algerian village of Mondovi. When he was a year old, his father was called to fight for France in World War I and died in 1914 at the first battle of the Marne. Obviously, Camus had hardly any direct memo-
ries of his father, but his mother told him that his father had once attended the public execution of a murderer. When the father returned home, he threw himself on the bed and began to weep. Camus’s father never told anyone why he was so upset at witnessing this event, but the story stayed with Camus and it appears in Chapter 5 of Part II, as a memory of Meursault’s while he awaits his own execution.

After the father’s death, Camus’s mother took the family (Camus was the younger of two sons) to the Algerian suburb of Belcourt, where they shared an apartment with her own mother and brothers. It was an industrial district, with crowded apartment buildings and small factories. The apartment was on one of the main thoroughfares of the district, a crowded street where groups of teenagers would stroll in the evening on their way to one of the movie theaters. Both the neighborhood and the street strongly resemble the neighborhood and street that Meursault describes from his balcony in The Stranger.

The population of Belcourt contained a mixture of French, Greeks, Spanish, Italians, and Arabs. As a young boy, Camus spent much of his time roaming the streets. He was an independent child, who knew most of the shopkeepers. Neither Camus’s mother nor his grandmother could read or write. His mother was deaf and rarely spoke. (When he was older, Camus interpreted his mother’s silence as a sign of dignity and honor.) There were no books in the house, not even a magazine or a newspaper. His impoverished homelife didn’t prevent Camus from taking pleasure in his physical surroundings, however, and he spent as much time as
possible swimming at the local beaches and lying in the sun. “In Africa,” he once said, “the sea and the sun cost nothing.”

Under the guidance of a dedicated elementary school teacher, young Camus became a model student and received a scholarship to a high school in Algiers. While he was in high school, in 1930, he underwent the bout with tuberculosis that was to alter his perspective on life. After recovering, and after completing high school, he enrolled at the University of Algiers and continued to study philosophy while supporting himself with odd jobs, His goal was to become a teacher at the university.

One of Camus’s jobs was with the civil service in the French Algerian government. He worked in the section that issued driver permits and auto registrations but was eventually fired because he wouldn’t stick to the administrative writing style that was required. This job also gave him his first taste of what a routine workweek was like, and its monotony, day after day, week after week, made a lasting impression on him.

Camus never received his philosophy degree, because he couldn’t pass the medical exam necessary to qualify. This was another result of his history of tuberculosis. Prospects for earning a living seemed dim. He had formed a theater group and worked in all areas, including directing and acting.

In 1937, Camus’s first book, L’Envers et l’endroit (“The wrong side and the right side”) was published. It included recollections of his childhood in Belcourt. He continued work on a first novel he called La Mort Heureuse (“A happy
death”), which some consider a first version of The Stranger. (The main character is named Patrice Meursault.) Camus kept a journal and at this time his first notes appear for The Stranger, a book about “a man who sought life where it is usually found (marriage, job, etc.) and who describes all at once how much he had been a stranger to his life....” As you read The Stranger, see how well this early summary describes what Camus ended up writing.

In the same year, Camus began work on a second book of essays, Noces ("Weddings"), and took a job at the Institute of Meteorology and Physics of the University of Algiers. His job was to make an inventory of data recorded at some 355 weather stations over a period of 25 years. In his journal during this time there are frequent references to the weather. This increasing attention to the natural world had an important influence on his later writing. In The Stranger, you’ll note several instances where Meursault observes the passage of the clouds and the intensity of the light.

Camus longed to be free of the necessity of working at a dull job. He eventually found a position on a new paper, Alger-Republicain, which believed in Arab equality with Europeans and was against French rule in Algeria. Camus began writing articles about the economic condition of the Arabs. The articles were controversial, and Camus became known as someone who refused to go along with the general anti-Arab sentiment of the majority of Europeans in the country.

Camus was a pied-noir (literally, “black foot”), the term for a Frenchman or European born in Algeria. (Algeria had been ruled by France since 1830.) In the
early part of the twentieth century, the population of Algeria had grown consider-
ably, and the world-wide economic depression of the 1930s had resulted in in-
creased Arab poverty. At the time that Camus was beginning work on The
Stranger, the Arabs of Algeria were seeking to establish their own political and
social identity in a country where they were treated like second-class citizens.
The presence of so many Arabs and Europeans, living side by side, created an air
of tension throughout the country. In The Stranger, Meursault’s outbreak of vio-
lence is against an Arab, and the sequence of events on the beach leading to the
murder are set against a backdrop of Arab-European hostility.

In 1938, Camus met Pierre Galindo, a partner in a grain export company in
the Algerian city of Oran. Camus was intrigued by this tough-looking, silent char-
acter (there were rumors that Galindo once had a violent encounter with some Ar-
abs on a beach) and used him as a model for two characters in The Stranger,
Raymond and Meursault.

As Camus continued to write, he began to develop more fully the notion of
life as “absurd,” which mainly centered on the idea that our awareness of the cer-
tainty and finality of death makes life meaningless. In his journal he wrote:
“There is only one case in which despair is true. It is that of a man sentenced to
die....” In addition to The Stranger, Camus was hard at work on a book of essays,
The Myth of Sisyphus. The title essay- one of his most influential works- de-
scribes a Greek mythological figure, Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods
to spend eternity pushing a rock to the top of a hill, watching it roll down, and
then pushing it up again. How can people condemned to such a meaningless existence find meaning in life? Camus did not believe that religion offered an answer. Nor did he think of suicide as the inevitable solution. One version of his answer to the question of life’s meaning is found in Meursault’s response to his death sentence at the end of The Stranger. Part of the challenge of understanding this book is understanding what this response means.

The publication of The Stranger in 1942 put Camus in touch with many of the leading French writers of the day, among them Andre Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. After the war, he took a job as a reader of manuscripts for the Gallimard publishing company and began work on a second novel, The Plague (1947), based on his experience in the fight against Fascism. During World War II he joined an anti-Nazi Resistance organization in France and became editor of Combat, the movement’s newspaper.

Camus’s days of poverty were over; he was not only internationally famous, but wealthy as well. In his diaries, though, he shows that during this time he was continually haunted by thoughts of dying. Despite his fame, he often thought of himself as a failure. Camus’s later work and thought moved beyond the relatively simple moral ideas and created a rift between him and fellow French thinkers, especially when he repudiated the Communist Party and Marxism and refused to become an activist for Algerian independence. Unlike Meursault in The Stranger, however, Camus was incapable of feeling indifferent toward other people’s criticism.
Shortly after the publication of his third novel, *The Fall* (1957), Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Nevertheless, he became increasingly tormented by the thought that he’d never be able to write another book. His sudden death, in an automobile accident in 1960, was a startling confirmation of his earlier thoughts on death. He was always aware that death could strike at any time.

Camus’s awareness of death gave his life and work personal meaning. It also gave, and continues to give, his readers an important and controversial legacy. His books bridge the gap between philosophy and literature and continue to address our concerns about life’s meaning in the modern, anxiety-ridden world.
THE NOVEL

THE PLOT

The story line of The Stranger is not complicated, but there is considerable debate over what it means. The story concerns Meursault, a man who is rather passive, who does not make judgments about the quality of actions. He does not see patterns in the past or foresee consequences in the future. To act or not to act are one. He seems to care deeply only about the sensations of the fleeting present moment. He drifts into relationships and into actions, and one of these changes his life. It puts him into conflict with the moral ideas of the society around him.

* * *

Meursault, a shipping clerk in the North African city of Algiers, learns of his mother’s death in a nursing home. He attends her funeral without showing the sorrow his society expects of a son or daughter. After the funeral he returns to Algiers.

The next day, Saturday, he goes swimming and meets Marie Cardona, a young woman who formerly worked at his office. They see a comic film together and Marie goes home with Meursault. They make love. On Sunday, Meursault stays by himself in his apartment, watching people on the street below.

The following evening, Meursault meets one of his neighbors, Raymond Sintes, who invites him to dinner. Raymond tells Meursault that his Arab girlfriend
has been unfaithful and that he wants revenge. He asks Meursault to write her a letter (“a real stinker, that’ll get her on the raw,”) that will make her come back to him, so that he can then revile her and throw her out. Meursault agrees to write the letter.

The next weekend, Meursault and Marie go swimming. They return to Meursault’s apartment, make love, and afterward hear the sounds of a quarrel in Raymond’s apartment. A crowd has gathered at Raymond’s door. Meursault refuses to call the police, but another neighbor does and when the policeman arrives, he finds that Raymond has beaten the girl. Meursault agrees to testify to the police on Raymond’s behalf.

The following Sunday, Meursault and Marie are to accompany Raymond on an excursion to the beach, where they’ll spend the day with Masson, a friend of Raymond. Before they leave on the bus, Raymond points out two Arab men near the bus stop; he says that one of them is the brother of the girl he had beaten. Raymond seems worried they will try to harm him for beating the girl.

At the beach, the three have lunch. Then Meursault, Raymond, and Masson go for a walk and meet the Arabs, who apparently have followed them from Algiers. After a brief fight, one of the Arabs pulls a knife and slashes Raymond. The Arabs flee. Raymond is not seriously hurt, and after being treated by a doctor, he insists on returning to the beach. He wants to go alone, but Meursault follows him. They encounter the Arabs again, and Raymond searches for an excuse
to shoot the man who had stabbed him. Meursault talks him out of shooting and takes the gun. As they discuss how to handle the Arabs, the Arabs vanish.

Raymond and Meursault return to Masson’s house, but Meursault does not enter. It is hot and muggy, and, sensitive to the weather, he feels strange and dizzy. He goes down to the beach alone, trying to cool off, and meets one of the Arabs. The two men confront each other once more, and when Meursault advances on him, the Arab pulls a knife. The sun blazes, blinding Meursault. He fires the gun once, killing the Arab. Then he fires four more times into the body.

The killing of the Arab marks the end of Part One of The Stranger. Meursault recognizes that his action will have consequences. He has “shattered the balance of the day.”

As Part Two begins, Meursault is in prison. During the next eleven months he is interviewed repeatedly by the magistrate and by his court-appointed lawyer. The lawyer wants him to express regret for his mother’s death as well as for his crime. The magistrate seems kind at first but becomes furious when Meursault tells him he does not believe in God, Marie visits him once but then, because she’s not his wife, is not permitted to return.

At the trial, Meursault’s lawyer doesn’t let him speak in his own defense; so, except for a brief statement or two, Meursault listens to others talk about his past actions. The subject most often brought up is his behavior at his mother’s funeral. The prosecutor paints a picture of a man incapable of the most basic human feeling, one who is a danger to society. People from his mother’s nursing home are
called to testify, as are many of the characters we have seen earlier in the book. Again and again, Meursault’s passivity and his statements about the flatness of his emotions are turned against him. When asked about his motive for the crime, he replies that he killed the Arab “because of the sun.” The jury finds him guilty, and the judge sentences him to death.

Back in his cell, Meursault thinks about death and about escape. He does not want to see the prison chaplain, but the chaplain visits him anyway and attempts to have him acknowledge his guilt and also the possibility of an afterlife. Meursault flies into a rage and attacks the chaplain in the only outburst of feeling he displays in the book.

The book ends with Meursault’s recognition that the universe is “benign” and “indifferent”- that no one, except himself, really cares whether he lives or dies. His last wish is that a large, hostile crowd attend his execution.

**THE CHARACTERS**

**MEURSAULT**

Meursault, the main character and the narrator of the story, is a 30-year-old shipping clerk who lives an ordinary day-to-day existence. We see him as a son (at his mother’s funeral); as a friend; as a solitary creature pursuing simple experiences from moment to moment; and as a prisoner, first on trial, then awaiting execution. Physical sensations of sun and wind and physical activities such as swimming or running mean a great deal to him. Larger experiences in his life-
death of his mother, a chance for marriage, and a change in job—mean relatively little. We learn almost nothing about his past, though he is a curiously candid person, speaking of experiences in the present that most of us, if we felt them, might keep silent about. He has a detached attitude toward other people. This annoys most people, but some are attracted to him because of his silence and his habit of not offering judgments. The central event in his life, at least as far as it influences others, is killing an Arab. His most intense experience, however, is his attack on a chaplain while in prison.

Many readers see Meursault as a hero and as a martyr for the truth. He refuses to disguise his feelings and by doing so threatens society. He accepts death for the sake of truth rather than play society’s games and conform to what he sees as society’s illusions, lies, and hypocrisies. At the same time, he doesn’t judge other people but attempts to understand why they act and say the things they do.

Some readers note, however, that Meursault occasionally compromises his loyalty to the truth, for example, by writing a letter to Raymond Sintes’s girlfriend. He also lies to the police to win Raymond’s release after he has beaten the girl.

Other readers see Meursault’s feelings as callous, not heroic. For instance, when Raymond is beating an Arab girl, Meursault refuses to send for the police because he dislikes them. His feelings take precedence over the immediate danger to the girl.
Meursault is a complex— in some ways contradictory— character, and one of the most rewarding challenges of reading The Stranger is trying to figure out his personality. You’ll have to sift through a lot of evidence as you try to get a grip on Meursault, and as you do you’ll probably need to rethink some basic assumptions you have about people.

CELESTE

Celeste, the owner of Meursault’s favorite restaurant, usually expresses traditional feelings: “There’s nothing like a mother,” he says when Meursault announces his mother’s death. At the trial, he tries to defend Meursault. He says that he’s sure the killing was an “accident,” which is close to the truth.

DOORKEEPER OF THE NURSING HOME

The doorkeeper shows Meursault around the nursing home and tells him about his mother, her friends, and life at the home. He is more sympathetic toward Meursault than the warden and sits with Meursault during the all-night vigil by the coffin. He offers Meursault coffee in what seems a kind act. At the trial, however, Meursault’s acceptance of the coffee is offered as an example of his lack of proper feeling.

WARDEN OF THE NURSING HOME

At the nursing home where Meursault’s mother has lived and is now being buried, Meursault is confronted by the doorkeeper and the warden who represent
the social order. The warden’s job is to oversee the last years and the funerals of old people whose families can’t look after them. He generally expresses ordinary sentiments and tries to make Meursault feel guilty for leaving his mother in a home.

**THOMAS PEREZ**

Perez is a close friend of Meursault’s mother. He is referred to as her “fiancé” and, in contrast to Meursault, weeps at her funeral. He reappears as a witness at Meursault’s trial.

**MARIE CARDONA**

A former typist in Meursault’s office, Marie becomes his lover the day after he returns from his mother’s funeral. She, like Meursault, is devoted to sensual pleasures. But her values are rooted in traditional standards, and she wants what most people are said to want: love, marriage, a conventional life. She has an intuitive understanding of Meursault’s character and remains loyal to him after he kills the Arab.

**SALAMANO**

Salamano, one of Meursault’s neighbors, has a dog with which he constantly fights. When Salamano’s wife died, he got the dog for company. He has a sort of love/hate relationship with the animal that is not unlike Raymond’s relationship
with his girlfriend. Salamano loses the dog during the course of the story and turns to Meursault for advice and comfort.

RAYMOND SINTES

At Meursault’s trial, Raymond, another of Meursault’s neighbors, describes himself and Meursault as “the best of pals.” Do you find it hard to believe that Meursault would be involved with such a person? Raymond is not only violent, he’s sadistic as well. But his code of honor is as important to him as religion is to the chaplain or the magistrate. According to the code, if someone treats him badly, he’ll take revenge. Conversely, if someone does him a favor- as Meursault does, by writing a letter to his girlfriend- that person will be his pal.

Raymond tells his neighbors that he works as a warehouse man, but it is implied that he’s really a pimp, living off the earnings of prostitutes. He uses violence to demonstrate his masculinity and is concerned about Meursault’s opinion of him. For example, when he doesn’t challenge the policeman who arrives to break up his quarrel with his girlfriend, he worries that Meursault may think he’s a coward. Raymond doesn’t realize that Meursault is often just passing the time with him- in fact, is barely listening to him. He interprets Meursault’s silence and passivity as a sign of intelligence.

MASSON
Masson is Raymond’s friend the owner of the beach cottage. He takes part in the first scuffle with the Arabs but essentially has a minor role in the story. At the trial, he attempts to create a favorable picture of Meursault.

**MAGISTRATE**

During the trial, Meursault is confronted by several people who each represent an aspect of society and traditional attitudes toward morality and behavior. The magistrate is an authority figure who believes in God and wants criminals to believe and to repent their crimes. During their first interview, Meursault views the magistrate as an amiable and kindly person. At a later interview, however, the magistrate becomes perturbed and excited when Meursault refuses to answer his questions about the murder. He waves a crucifix in Meursault’s face and tries to convince him of the existence of God. You sense that the magistrate is less a truly religious person, who’s found peace within himself, than a person who uses religion as a way of reassuring himself that his life has meaning.

**MEURSAULT’S LAWYER**

Camus purposefully withholds the name of Meursault’s court-appointed lawyer. He’s just a part of the judicial system that society has created, and he has little to gain or lose by the outcome of Meursault’s trial. He’s shocked at Meursault’s indifference toward his mother’s death, and realizing that this will be a key issue, he advises Meursault to remain silent during the trial. Do you get the impression that he thinks Meursault’s case is hopeless from the start?
PROSECUTOR

We see the prosecutor only in a courtroom setting. He interviews each witness and turns even the slightest detail to Meursault’s disadvantage. Meursault is fascinated by the skill with which the prosecutor twists information to create his case. He’s playing the game of justice, and playing it well, but he has no desire to find out why Meursault killed the Arab. He’s obviously interested in the psychological connection between Meursault’s behavior at his mother’s funeral and the murder of the Arab, and it’s on this connection that he rests his case.

CHAPLAIN

After Meursault has refused several times to see him, the chaplain comes to Meursault’s cell while Meursault is awaiting death. He tries to convince Meursault that there’s a life after death. He becomes frustrated by Meursault’s refusal to believe that a God exists, yet he insists, hoping that he’ll eventually wear Meursault down. For Meursault, the chaplain is just the last in a long line of people who have tried to foist their ideas on him. His insistence that Meursault express some belief in God leads to an attack by Meursault.

SETTING

The city of Algiers, the principal setting of The Stranger, almost seems an active participant in the novel. The city is described as bathed in sunlight so intense at times that it makes Meursault feel dizzy; it is surrounded by white-hot beaches and endless expanses of sky and water. The street where Meursault lived was
modeled after the Rue de Lyon—the main artery of Belcourt, the Algerian suburb where Camus grew up. Meursault’s observations from his balcony (Part One, Chapter II) will give you a good sense of the atmosphere in Algiers during the late 1930s—the time when The Stranger was written, and the time that the action in the book, according to most critics, takes place.

Algiers is a city of crowded apartment buildings, where the neighbors and shopkeepers all know one another. The streets are lined with bars and restaurants. Arabs, Europeans, and pieds-noirs—people of European descent born, as Camus himself was, in Algeria—live side by side, but not without tensions and conflicts. The story should be seen against this background of racial mix and unrest. Algiers is also a port city, where ships come and go constantly, leaving fragments of many cultures (the city has been described as a “marriage” of East and West) in their wakes. Camus has depicted the Algerians as a people with “a distaste for stability and a lack of regard for the future, people in a hurry to live.” You can imagine the streets teeming with life, twenty-four hours a day.

More than the city, even, the natural climate of North Africa forms a powerful backdrop to events and shifts of mood—the sun, the heat, the vastness of space and sky have much influence.

THEMES

The following are some of the themes of The Stranger.

1. VERDICT OF DEATH
The conflict between the desire to live and the fact of death is a dominant theme in The Stranger. Most people, Camus is saying, accept the day-to-day events that make up existence without asking themselves: Why am I doing this? The only answer, he says, is that nothing we do has any long-lasting meaning. We die, the universe goes on. Nothing fundamental has changed. Later in his life Camus changed his thinking to add that within this framework, our actions can still be important because we can affect the lives of other persons. We must behave as if life has meaning.

2. BENIGN INDIFFERENCE OF THE UNIVERSE

Our lives are brief compared to the permanence of the universe. Images of sun, water, earth, and sky give pleasure to fleeting moments of our lives. But they can turn dangerous and destructive. The natural forces do not have empathy for us or care. They are neither good nor evil; they are simply there, and they go on being there long after we are gone. To accept this philosophy is to live in a world without God. Meursault can accept this and lives with the sensations, both pleasurable and painful, of sun and wind, of caresses, of smells and sights. Yet his incapacity to look beyond the sensation of the moment leads him into a pattern of action that changes his relationship to all these sensations, and in prison he is deprived of all that has made his life enjoyable.

3. IRRELEVANCE OF SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS, OR PHILOSOPHICAL VALUES
a. Ritual. Meursault is viewed as an outcast because he doesn’t weep at his mother’s funeral or feel guilty because he put her into a nursing home. Society has developed patterns of behavior for given moments in our lives, whether or not we have the requisite feelings. Meursault could have lied about his feelings at any time and made his ordeal easier.

b. Religion. Society also turns against Meursault because he doesn’t believe in God or the possibility of an afterlife. This attitude leaves him open to the charge that he has no basis to deter him from wrong action; it also leaves him without conventional hope.

c. Love. Meursault says that he was “fond” of his mother. He loved her the way people love their mothers. He says to Marie that he does not really love her but will marry her if she wants. Love isn’t important to him. Love, Camus is saying, and its institutionalized symbol, marriage, have been created by society and have nothing to do with how people really feel. Some readers argue that Meursault is incapable of loving anyone, while others claim that Camus is attempting to define love as the physical pleasure one experiences with another person.

There are several kinds of love in this book. Note Salamano’s love for his dog. Look, too, at Raymond’s love for his girlfriend. Are these relationships involved with negative as well as positive feelings? Some readers feel that Meursault refuses to accept the possibility of feeling love because he recognizes the pain involved in such a relationship. (Raymond’s relationship with his girlfriend and Salamano’s with his dog seem to involve more pain than pleasure.) Camus
poses the question whether or not a relationship that involves pain as well as pleasure is worth the trouble. Do you feel that this is an accurate interpretation of love?

d. Justice. During the trial scene in Part Two, everyone participates in some sort of game, except Meursault. He is just a spectator at his trial. We first meet the idea of justice in Part One, as Raymond seeks revenge on his girlfriend for being unfaithful to him. And again, when the Arabs attack Raymond, it is to punish him for beating her up. But during the trial, no one makes any real effort to discover why Meursault has acted the way he did. Ask yourself whether Meursault would have been found guilty of killing the Arab if he’d cried at his mother’s funeral. In his summing up, the prosecutor says that he doesn’t blame Meursault, because he has no soul. But as a pathological killer, he’s a danger to society and must be removed. The fact is that Meursault has killed a man with apparent ease and without remorse. Is the prosecutor right? Is Meursault a dangerous man and is justice served in this trial?

4. COMMITMENT

Meursault is characterized as a person who has no commitment to anyone or to anything except his own small pleasures and the necessities of the moment. He drifts without thought into minor activities- his affair with Marie, his friendship with Raymond, his comforting of Salamano. He finds it easier to say yes than no. Yet, when pushed, he will not lie about his motives, even though to say what is expected of him would clearly make people more sympathetic to his ordeal. As
you read, keep in mind these questions: What is the purpose of acting when you
know you will die? Are you responsible for anyone’s actions other than your
own? How committed are you to your own ideals and to what extent would you
defend your feelings and beliefs?

**STYLE**

Camus’s style is simple, clear, and direct. He’s not writing an intellectual es-
say on a philosophical theme (as he did in The Myth of Sisyphus) but a novel
that deals with his philosophical preoccupations. In order to do this, he has cre-
ated recognizable characters and placed them in realistic situations. The clarity of
style is the perfect instrument to convey the thoughts of the narrator (Meursault),
who is attempting to find order and understanding in a confused and confusing
world.

Some readers point out the overall subdued quality of Camus’s style. Others
compare his vocabulary to that of a child. Notice, also, the brevity of most of the
sentences- which are also childlike- and the absence of complicated grammatical
constructions. Camus describes objects and people but makes no attempt to ana-
lyze them. His attention is always fixed on the concrete nature of things. He uses
words cautiously as if he were somehow suspicious of abstract terms. He also
makes no attempt to analyze concepts such as love and religion, but reveals his
thoughts about them by telling us Meursault’s responses. (Note the conversations
between Meursault and Marie about marriage and the exchange between Meursault and the chaplain about God.)

Occasionally, Camus’s style and use of vocabulary become more complex, more vivid. Notice the scene where Meursault kills the Arab. The stillness of the natural world suddenly explodes; it’s as if the universe has split in two or some other major catastrophe has just taken place. The heat is “pressing” against Meursault’s back and the “cymbals of the sun” are “clashing” on Meursault’s skull. The world begins to vibrate and change, in the same way that Meursault’s own life will change now that he’s finally performed an act for which he must take responsibility.

Camus’s language is often repetitive; the same phrases and images reoccur throughout the novel. Natural images— the sun, sea, and wind— appear in different guises at different times. Before killing the Arab, for instance, Meursault acts as if he’s waging a battle with the sun— the same sun that gave him such pleasure earlier in the day. Phrases like “Having nothing better to do” and “I had nothing to do” are used frequently to establish Meursault’s indifference toward his own experience. As you read, pick out other words and phrases that appear regularly and try to figure out their significance.

The Stranger was originally written in French. The widely read American edition, translated by Stuart Gilbert, is faithful for the most part to the tone of the first-person narrator. Be aware, however, that the translator makes many changes in the original text. For example, in the nursing home scene in the opening chap-
Meursault asks the doorkeeper if he would turn off one of the lamps in the mortuary. Gilbert translates the answer, “Il m’a dit que ce n’était pas possible” (“He told me it wasn’t possible.”) as “Nothing doing,” indicating a direct quote from the doorkeeper, which, however, is not in Camus’s original version. At the end of Part One, while describing Meursault’s reaction to the sun before he kills the Arab, Camus writes, “Tout mon etre s’est tendu” (“My entire being became tense”), which Gilbert translates with considerable latitude as “Every nerve in my body was a steel spring.” In the second paragraph of Part Two, Chapter II, Gilbert translates “...j’ai senti que j’étais chez moi dans ma cellule et que ma vie s’y arretait” as “I realized that this cell was my last home, a dead end, so to speak.” A more literal translation would read, “I felt that my cell was my home and that my life had stopped there.” Gilbert also takes considerable liberty with Camus’s sentence structure and paragraphing.

**VIEW**

All the events of The Stranger are seen through the eyes of the narrator, Meursault. The story is told in the first person and traces the evolution of the narrator’s attitude toward both himself and the rest of the world. At first, Meursault makes references to his inability to understand what’s happening around him, but often what he tells us seems the result of his own laziness or indifference. He’s frequently inattentive to his surroundings. His mind wanders in the middle of conversations. Only rarely does he make value judgments or express opinions about what he or the other characters are doing. You learn that he doesn’t like police-
men or brothels, but otherwise he seems to accept experiences without differentiating among them.

At the trial, in Part Two, you learn what the other characters think of Meursault. Yet even these testimonies are filtered through Meursault’s observations, and sometimes you have the impression that he’s barely listening.

Some readers think the book would have been more successful if it had been told in the third person by an omniscient narrator. The characters, they argue, are merely fragments of what people are really like, and it’s difficult for readers to sympathize or identify with people about whose past they know so little. (Of the characters whom Meursault encounters, only Salamano’s past is revealed in some depth.) Other critics feel that the past of the characters are irrelevant and that Camus’s main purpose would be lost if the story were told in any other way. The Stranger, they argue, is the unfolding of one person’s way of viewing his surroundings, more than a study in relationships between people.

As you read, ask yourself whether it was wise for Camus to tell the story through Meursault’s eyes and why he chose to do so. Don’t assume that Camus and Meursault are interchangeable; remember that Meursault—though he sometimes seems to be the mouthpiece of the author’s view of the world—is a fictional character and must be interpreted accordingly.

**FORM**

The Stranger consists of two parts.
Part One deals with approximately three weeks in Meursault’s life, and ends with his killing of an Arab. In this part, we see Meursault at his mother’s funeral, at his job, puttering around his small apartment. He begins an affair with Marie and drifts into a relationship with his neighbor, Raymond Sintes. Then he commits the murder that will result in a sentence of death.

Part Two picks up directly following the murder and ends eleven months later. We see Meursault in his prison cell and during his trial, and are introduced to the various functionaries of the state: the lawyer, the magistrate, the prosecutor, and the chaplain. Meursault compares his life in prison with his former life, and we watch how his attitudes evolve. Does he change? Or does he simply become crystalized in his old pattern? If the climax of Part One is the murder of the Arab, what do you think is the climax of Part Two? Is it the verdict at the end of the trial or Meursault’s outburst when the chaplain visits him in jail? Are there other possibilities?

The two parts of The Stranger can be seen as forming a kind of duality. Part One is principally a narrative, while Part Two is mainly Meursault’s commentary on his life in which he attempts to understand the reasons for existence. In Part One, Meursault walks through the world largely unaware of the effect of his actions on others; in Part Two he is conscious of every aspect of his experience, both past and present.

CAMUS’S PHILOSOPHY
Albert Camus was not what we would usually consider a philosopher- a person who sets forth views in a systematic, orderly fashion. Camus was, however, very concerned with some of the same questions as philosophers. Since he did not state his ideas systematically and unambiguously, it is difficult to summarize them, and there have been conflicting interpretations of his outlook.

The Stranger was published early in Camus’s career, in 1942, when he was primarily concerned with what he called the “absurdity” of the human condition. People want, and need, a basis for their lives and values, but the world offers them none, Camus believed. Because there is no overarching value system, a person can’t make everyday value judgments, but is adrift in a meaningless world. The inevitability and finality of death adds to the absurdity of life, in Camus’s view.

Camus’s outlook was in part a reflection of his inability to accept the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church (a major underpinning of French culture), which provided a firm support for life on earth. Nonreligious in a traditional sense, Camus, like many others, was cast adrift, feeling that life had no significance as well as no meaning.

Meursault may be seen as an embodiment of Camus’s outlook. Life for him has little meaning on a deeper level, and he is not concerned about making value judgments or assessing right and wrong. Yet at the end of The Stranger, Meursault draws some order out of life. In an impassioned speech to a chaplain, who has been trying to convince him of the validity of the traditional Christian out-
look, Meursault says life may have no deeper meaning but he indicates that he feels close to others who share life’s predicament. Through this feeling of solidarity, Meursault seems to gain strength, and seems to come to terms, at least partially, with the absurdity of life.
PART ONE
CHAPTER I

Meursault, a shipping clerk in the North African city of Algiers, receives a telegram informing him that his mother has died. He expresses no sorrow when he hears the news, but only a vague interest in knowing the exact time of her death—whether it occurred “today” or “yesterday.”

He asks his employer for permission to take two days off in order to attend the funeral. The boss looks annoyed—though he obviously can’t refuse the request—and Meursault tries to excuse himself by saying that his mother’s death wasn’t his fault. It then occurs to Meursault that he has no reason to apologize and that it’s up to his boss to express condolences about his mother’s death.

NOTE: The Stranger is written in the first person. All the events in the story are seen or experienced from the point of view of one person, Meursault, What we know about the events in the novel and about the other characters is based on his interpretation. In the opening scenes, notice how Meursault emphasizes the external aspects of his environment, and how little you learn about his inner feelings and thoughts.

Meursault eats lunch at his favorite restaurant, Celeste’s, and catches a bus to the nursing home. On the ride, he’s affected by “the glare off the road and from
the sky” and “the reek of gasoline,” an indication that his moods are strongly in-
fluenced by immediate physical sensations. Eventually, he dozes off. He arrives
at the home and the doorkeeper takes him to the warden’s office. Meursault has
the feeling, in the course of their conversation, that the warden blames him for
sending his mother to the home.

The warden leads Meursault to the mortuary and leaves him alone beside his
mother’s coffin. The doorkeeper appears and begins to unscrew the lid of the cof-
fin so that Meursault can view his mother one last time. Meursault stops him. He
can’t explain why, but it isn’t important for him to see his mother’s body. At first
Meursault feels uneasy in the presence of the doorkeeper. To ease the tension, he
strikes up a conversation. For most people a funeral is a traumatic experience, but
Meursault isn’t like everyone else. His conversation with the doorkeeper could
be taking place anywhere- they might be two strangers meeting in an elevator or
on a train. As night falls, the doorkeeper offers to bring Meursault a mug of cafe
au lait- coffee with milk. Meursault accepts the offer, and the two men continue
their vigil beside the coffin.

As you read further, you’ll learn that Meursault’s attitude toward his mother’s
death- his apparent lack of intense emotion- is one of the most important ele-
ments of the novel. Would you be surprised by a person who didn’t cry at a close
relative’s funeral? What reasons could you attribute to such an attitude?

In preparation for the customary all-night vigil, the doorkeeper arranges a
number of chairs around the coffin. Meursault, “feeling very comfortable,” dozes
off again. When he wakes up he has the sensation “that the light had grown even stronger than before.”

NOTE: Pay close attention to the way Camus interweaves and emphasizes certain details, most notably the image of light—both natural sunlight and electric light. In this first chapter, Meursault is affected, first, by the glare of the sun as he runs for the bus and, later, by the glare of the light as he sits beside his mother’s coffin. You will find many more references to light throughout the story.

The dead woman’s friends file into the mortuary. They stare at Meursault, but none of them says anything or addresses him directly. Why would his mother’s friends ignore him in this way? Do you have the impression they are trying to make him feel guilty? They nod their heads and suck their toothless gums. One of the old women at the vigil weeps, and the doorkeeper tells Meursault that his mother had been her closest friend. “Now she’s all alone,” he explains. As the night progresses, Meursault grows tired and becomes aware of a pain in his legs. At dawn, all the old people shake hands with Meursault and leave.

Many critics have described Meursault’s behavior at the funeral as antisocial, as an inability to relate to other people regardless of the circumstances. The people in the nursing home were his mother’s friends, yet Meursault makes no attempt to communicate with them, to find out from them what his mother’s last
years were like. Other readers have interpreted Meursault’s behavior as part of his overall reaction to his mother’s death and as indicative of the philosophical stance of someone who refuses to be anything but completely honest with himself. Meursault tells us that when he and his mother lived together they “hardly ever talked”; “during the last year,” he says, “I seldom went to see her.” For Meursault, the reality of his relationship with his mother was not primarily that they were mother and son, but that they were two people who had very little in common and didn’t even enjoy each other’s company. As you read, you’ll want to form your own conclusion about why Meursault acts the way he does.

Meursault is never formally introduced to his mother’s friend, Thomas Perez, the only resident of the nursing home who’s allowed to attend the funeral. Yet Meursault sees him with brilliant clarity—particularly his “pendulous, scarlet ears that showed up like blobs of sealing wax on the pallor of his cheeks....” His impressions of Perez indicate Meursault’s interest in the physical nature of people and things. Yet he has a hard time staying interested in anything for very long. His mind seems to work like an instant camera; after he takes the picture, however, he throws it away. To him, no one picture is much more important or carries much more weight than any other.

Meursault experiences the funeral as a series of physical sensations. He smells the hot leather and the horse dung from the hearse and feels exhausted as a result of staying awake most of the night. He has a bad headache and can barely drag himself along to the cemetery. Perez’s tearstained face catches his attention,
as do the church and the graves surrounded by red geraniums. But mostly, he can’t wait for the funeral to end so that he can return to Algiers, to the comfort of his small apartment where he can sleep “twelve hours at a stretch.”

NOTE: Camus once described the most significant kind of novel as being, in his view, “philosophy expressed in images.” He claimed that “the great novelists are philosopher-novelists” who “write in images instead of using arguments.” Philosophical questioning is constantly implied in The Stranger. As you read the novel, see how Camus conveys his philosophy in terms of human testimony, experience, and description— not analysis.

In this chapter, you’ve observed that Meursault acted with disregard for others’ feelings and expectations. But he was true to his own feelings. Given Meursault’s general feeling of indifference, are you surprised that he even bothered to attend his mother’s funeral? Why do you think he did?
CHAPTER II

It’s the day after his mother’s funeral. For Meursault, it’s like any other Saturday. The previous day’s experience has tired him, however, and he decides to go for a swim. At the pool near the harbor he meets Marie Cardona, a former typist in his office. Meursault and Marie swim together, frolicking happily in the water like children. Meursault obviously enjoys swimming; it’s one of the few activities that seem to give him pleasure. Meursault and Marie doze off on a raft, his head upon her lap.

NOTE: WATER IMAGERY  Some readers interpret Meursault’s desire to go swimming the day after his mother’s funeral as an attempt to unite himself with his mother and to the prebirth state. For others, the image of bathing is a symbol of the state of innocence, the way you feel when you’re a young child. Others argue that what Meursault wants most is to cleanse himself of the previous day’s events- to wash the aroma of death and old age from his body. Meursault himself states that “a swim would do me good,” indicating that he just wants to distract himself and relax after the events of the previous day. As you read, note all the ways in which Camus uses the image of water. You might compare the water imagery to the images of sunlight which also occur frequently throughout the book.
What is Marie’s reaction when Meursault tells her that his mother died the day before? She seems shocked, briefly, but doesn’t really let it bother her. Ask yourself how you would have reacted if you were Marie. Would you have been shocked at Meursault’s confession that his mother just died? Many people in Western cultures observe a period of mourning after a close relative has passed away or wear black as a sign that someone close to them has died. Yet Meursault shows no indication that his mother’s death has altered his habits. He mentions his mother’s death to Marie as casually as he might say that yesterday, he went to a ballgame or the opening of a play. Perhaps that is why Marie is not deeply affected by the news of the death.

That evening, Marie and Meursault go to the movies to see a comedy starring the French actor Fernandel. Then they return to Meursault’s apartment and make love.

On Sunday morning, Meursault awakens to find Marie gone. In a rare moment when he reveals an opinion about something, he confesses that he’s never cared for Sundays. Is it because he prefers the regimented life of the work week to the freedom of the weekend, when he must make his own choices about what to do? He sniffs the smell of Marie’s hair on his pillow and lies in bed till noon, smoking cigarettes.

After lunch, he wanders restlessly around his apartment. Finally, “for want of anything better to do,” he cuts an advertisement out of an old newspaper and pastes it in an album where he keeps things that amuse him. You get the feeling
that Meursault is just killing time, waiting for Monday and the routine of going to work.

Meursault isn’t the type of person who minds being alone. His meeting with Marie at the pool was purely accidental. It didn’t seem to make much difference to him whether he met someone there or not. Whatever encounters he has with people take place by chance. He doesn’t go out of his way to make things happen.

Some readers have suggested that Camus’s description of Meursault as a person who loves bathing and lying in the sun, yet who lives in a tiny, claustrophobic apartment, is a direct parallel to the “external” and “internal” sides of all human beings. Does Meursault’s desire to be alone contradict his love of the outdoors? Don’t both feelings— the desire for company and the need for solitude—coexist in most human beings? As you read, ask yourself what makes Meursault different or stand out from other people.

He spends most of the day on the balcony of his apartment. From that vantage point, he observes a family going for their Sunday walk, the local teenagers on their way to the movies, the tobacconist across the street sitting outside his shop. Eventually, the streetlights come on, and Meursault decides it’s time to fix dinner. It’s been a typical Sunday. Most people would probably be bored with this routine, but Meursault seems content just to exist. Sunday or Monday, life or death— it seems to be all the same. He notices “a corner of [his] table with [his] spirit lamp and some bits of bread beside it” reflected in the mirror. Does this imply that, for Meursault, these trivial details are as meaningful to him as his
mother’s death? In his indifferent way, he comments, “Really, nothing in my life [has] changed.”

NOTE: Camus placed great emphasis on the routine nature of Meursault’s life. He believed that the weariness that resulted from the acts of a mechanical life— a life that continued, unchanging, from week to week— was the condition necessary to give birth to the feeling of absurdity in an individual. The understanding that life was finite, and that the events of one’s life were meaningless, given the fact that one must die, was one of the key principles of the philosophy of the absurd.
CHAPTER III

The weekend is over and Meursault returns to his job. His employer greets him warmly, asks Meursault if he was tired out by the events of the weekend, and inquires about Meursault’s mother’s age. Realizing that he doesn’t know his mother’s exact age, Meursault answers vaguely that she was “round about sixty.” He can’t understand why his employer should be interested.

You learn little about Meursault’s job as a shipping clerk. But you are told that the simple physical act of washing his hands during the day gives him pleasure. At night when he’s leaving work, however, he says that washing his hands is less pleasurable, since the roller towel is “sopping wet.” In his juxtaposition of small details, is Camus attempting to show that the wet towel, which relates directly to Meursault’s physical comforts, is more important to Meursault than his mother’s age?

Meursault eats lunch at Celeste’s restaurant. Then he returns to his apartment for a nap and later goes back to the office. This is his daily routine.

Why do you think Camus spends so little time describing what Meursault does at work? Some readers feel that the author’s intention is to show that all jobs are equally meaningless and that nothing one does will have any effect on the nature of the universe. Others feel that the ritual of going to work is more important to Camus than the work itself.
After work Meursault walks home along the harbor, feeling the coolness of the evening air on his face. On the steps of his apartment he meets an elderly man, Salamano, who lives with his dog on the same floor as Meursault. The man and the dog have lived together for eight years. They’ve been inseparable all this time, much like a married couple; in fact, they’ve even begun to resemble one another. But Salamano regularly beats the dog, and the dog, in turn, irritates his master, by pulling on the leash when they walk down the street.

Before reaching his apartment, Meursault greets another neighbor, Raymond Sintes, who invites him into his room for dinner. Meursault accepts the offer, not because he feels particularly friendly toward Raymond, but because it means he doesn’t have to prepare his own dinner. Meursault notices that Raymond has a bandage wrapped around his hand, and Raymond explains that he hurt his hand in a fight with his girlfriend’s brother. During dinner, Raymond asks Meursault for advice about how to deal with the woman, who’s been unfaithful to him, He’s already beaten her but wants to punish her further. (Raymond describes himself as “a bit short-tempered,” but you get the impression that he derives pleasure from hurting others. Though he tells people he works in a warehouse, he is reputed to be a pimp.)

NOTE: Camus named several characters in The Stranger after members of his own family. His mother’s maiden name was Sintes. His grandmother’s name was Catherine Marie Cardona. Some readers
think that the similarities in the names seem to indicate that Camus wanted to call attention to the autobiographical elements in the novel and to indicate that much of the book was inspired by his childhood experiences.

Meursault listens to Raymond’s story without offering an opinion. When Raymond asks if Meursault has any advice, Meursault says, in his usual noncommittal way, that he found the story “interesting,” but that “one could never be quite sure how to act in such cases.”

NOTE: Meursault’s character, whether he’s dealing with the warden at his mother’s nursing home or with Raymond Sintes, never wavers. He listens with interest because he’s curious about the concerns of other human beings. But why Salamano beats his dog or Raymond beats his girlfriend is a mystery to him. He’s unable to understand why people act as they do and doesn’t really care, so he spends very little time wondering.

Raymond’s plan is to write his girlfriend a letter that will make her feel remorse for being unfaithful to him. She’ll return to him, he’ll take her to bed, and in the midst of their lovemaking he’ll throw her out. Meursault agrees that this is
probably as good a plan as any an consents, at Raymond’s request, to write the letter for him.

Camus has described Meursault as a person who “refuses to lie.” Yet his writing of the letter, to many readers, seems like an overt act of deception. From what you know of Meursault, do you think he’s compromising his values by getting involved? Or can Meursault now be viewed as a lonely person who’s desperately attempting to make contact with other human beings? Does this interpretation contradict his antisocial behavior at the nursing home?

The writing of the letter creates, from Raymond’s point of view, a bond between them. “So now we’re pals, ain’t we?” he says, slapping Meursault on the back. Meursault is as surprised by Raymond’s display of friendship as he was by Perez’s grief at his mother’s funeral.

Some readers feel that Meursault’s willingness to help Raymond is a way of breaking the monotony of his daily routine, a chance to do something different. Others feel that Meursault is just drifting, as always, from one chance encounter to another. He can be Raymond’s friend, without feeling friendship, as easily as he can be Marie’s lover, without feeling love. As you read, ask yourself why Meursault feels and acts the way he does. Do you think of him as an honest person? Or is he just acting selfishly? As you read further, you’ll see how the simple act of writing the letter for Raymond takes on enormous importance.
As Meursault leaves the apartment, Raymond offers sympathy for his mother’s death. “You mustn’t let things get you down,” he says, adding that death is something that happens to everyone.

In this chapter Meursault has committed an action that sets in motion the drama—he’s written the letter for Raymond. He has done this, disregarding the possible consequences, especially to the girl.
A week passes. Raymond has dropped by to say he’d mailed the letter to his girlfriend. Meursault and his coworker, Emmanuel, have seen two movies, but we are not told the names of the movies. (Why do you think Meursault tells you about the roller towel at work, yet neglects to give details about other aspects of his life?) You can assume that this is a typical week in Meursault’s life.

On Saturday, Marie and Meursault go to the beach. Her physical presence stirs him out of his normal lethargy. He takes pleasure in just being with her, staring at her, enjoying her beauty and sensuality. At the beach they swim together on their backs. They fill their mouths with the foamy spray from the waves and “spout it out against the sky.” Afterwards, they embrace and hurry back to Meursault’s apartment, where they make love under the open window.

The next morning Marie asks Meursault whether he loves her. Meursault says that the question has no meaning to him, but that he supposes he doesn’t. Marie appears upset at first by Meursault’s response but manages to shrug off her disappointment.

NOTE: MEURSAULT’S ATTRACTION Recall Marie’s reaction when she first met Meursault and learned of his mother’s death two days before: “By evening [she] had forgotten all about it.” It’s possible
that Meursault’s indifference to human emotions like love and grief attracts Marie to him, as if she, too, feels there is something insincere about these feelings as defined by society. Or maybe his spontaneity and impulsiveness, and his unwillingness to conform, are what appeal to her most. Meursault’s elusiveness—his unwillingness to commit himself emotionally to another human being—might also be a source of her interest.

A moment of tenderness between Meursault and Marie is shattered by the sounds of a violent quarrel between Raymond and his girlfriend. Meursault and Marie join the crowd in front of Raymond’s apartment and can hear Raymond beating the woman. Marie suggests that Meursault call a policeman, but he responds that he doesn’t like policemen.

This is another of the rare instances in which Meursault expresses an opinion. (Previously, he has indicated that he doesn’t like Sundays.) Some readers feel his dislike of the police indicates a dislike of authority in general. Others think that the reference to the police is a way of foreshadowing events in the second part of the novel. Is Meursault’s response to this situation selfish? Apparently, it doesn’t matter to him that someone may be getting hurt, or that Raymond, for whom he’s just done a favor, beats women. What’s important to him are his own feelings— in this case, his dislike of the police.
Another tenant in the building arrives with a policeman. Raymond, a cigarette dangling between his lips, finally opens the door. The policeman orders Raymond to take the cigarette out of his mouth. After a glance at Meursault (for approval?) Raymond defiantly continues smoking, and the policeman smacks him in the face. The policeman accuses Raymond of being too drunk to stand up steadily, but Raymond isn’t drunk at all- he’s trembling with anger.

NOTE: Camus used the term “anti-hero” to define a person who accepts the meaninglessness of life, yet who continues living as if life has meaning. In his essay The Myth of Sisyphus, written about the same time as The Stranger, Camus posed the question whether to commit suicide when one is faced with the utter indifference of the universe. To the anti-hero, suicide is not a solution. Instead, the anti-hero accepts his state of being, concentrating on experiencing the pleasures of the moment.

Meursault and Marie return to his apartment, but the scene at Raymond’s has upset her and she leaves. After she goes, Meursault takes a nap. It seems he’s capable of going to sleep at any given moment. You should note other places in the novel when Meursault sleeps after upsetting scenes or circumstances.

Later in the day, Raymond knocks on Meursault’s door. He’s worried about Meursault’s reaction to his confrontation with the policeman. Had Meursault,
Raymond wants to know, expected him to defend himself against the policeman? Meursault tells him that he hadn’t expected anything. Questions about proving one’s masculinity according to the traditional codes of society play as small a part in Meursault’s way of thinking as questions about grief or love.

Raymond asks Meursault if he’ll testify to the police, that the woman had been unfaithful to him. Meursault, always willing to go along with the spirit of the moment, even if he doesn’t understand how his testimony will be of any value, agrees. Do you feel that Meursault’s behavior is inconsistent? Some readers think that getting involved with Raymond is Meursault’s way of testing his relationships to society. Others feel that he’s acting against his principles by letting himself get involved with Raymond’s problems. As the story unfolds, consider the consequences of Meursault’s relationship with him.

The two men go drinking in a cafe. Raymond proposes that they visit a brothel, but Meursault declines. On their way home they meet Salamano, who is frantically looking for his dog. Raymond tries to reassure Salamano by telling anecdotes about dogs that have returned to their masters, but Salamano is afraid that the police will find and destroy the dog. Meursault says that Salamano should inquire at the pound where stray dogs are taken: and that for a small charge the dog will be returned to him. At the idea of paying money in exchange for his dog, Salamano flies into a rage and begins cursing the lost animal.
A few minutes after Meursault returns to his room, Salamano knocks, his hands trembling, and asks Meursault to reassure him once again that the police won’t take away his dog.

NOTE: MEURSAULT’S EMOTIONS Salamano and Raymond are both caught up in love-hate relations: Salamano with his dog, Raymond with his girlfriend. Both men are controlled by their emotions. Compared to the erratic behavior of Raymond and Salamano, Meursault’s passivity and his apparent indifference to life seem almost like virtues. His self-control impresses people like Raymond and Salamano. Since he rarely expresses opinions, people feel that he’s not judging them. Salamano and Raymond seek his advice because they’re attracted to his nonemotional way of viewing the world.

Why do you think the visit from Salamano makes Meursault think of his mother? Does he envy Salamano’s ability to feel emotion for his dog? Does Meursault, at this moment, want to be like everyone else?
Raymond calls Meursault at work and invites him to spend the following Sunday at a friend’s bungalow outside Algiers. He assures Meursault that Marie can come along as well. Raymond also says that he thinks some Arabs, including the brother of his girlfriend, are following him. He asks Meursault to be on the lookout for any Arabs hanging around the house.

Meursault’s boss calls him into his office. Meursault is certain that he’s going to be scolded for talking on the phone, but instead his boss offers him a job at a proposed branch office in Paris. Meursault’s employer assumes that anyone would jump at the chance to move to Paris, but Meursault couldn’t care less. When his boss suggests that “a change of life” might be good for him, Meursault answers that he’s comfortable in his present situation, and has no particular interest in or reason for making a move.

Some readers feel that Meursault’s unwillingness to accept the job in Paris relates directly to the title of the book. If he were to move to Paris, they argue, he would truly be a stranger, out of place, forced to focus on the minute details of merely surviving. The irony of this interpretation lies in the fact that Meursault already acts as if he were a foreigner, unaware of the customs of the world in which he presently exists, a world where a display of emotion at the death of your mother is expected of you, and where lack of ambition- turning down a bet-
ter job— is frowned upon. Others feel that Meursault’s actions indicate a conscious rebellion against the norms of society, on all levels.

Meursault’s boss is surprised at his lack of ambition. When Meursault returns to his desk, he gives us a brief glimpse of his past. “As a student,” he says, “I’d had plenty of ambition.” Then he was forced to give up his studies (you are not told why) and began to realize that ambition, like everything else, was pointless, and could only lead to disappointment.

NOTE: As you read, refer to “The Author and His Times” and see how often Camus incorporates events from his own life into the book. For example, when he was 17, he suffered a bout of tuberculosis. Just as Meursault had to give up his studies, so Camus was forced to abandon his dreams of becoming a teacher.

Marie visits Meursault that evening and asks him to marry her. He says that he doesn’t “mind,” and if it will give her pleasure, he’ll marry her. When she asks if he loves her, he again replies that the question means nothing, but that he supposes he doesn’t. Marie then asks whether he’d consent to marry any other girl he liked who asked him, and Meursault answers, “Naturally,” not concerned that he might be hurting Marie’s feelings. But his answer does hurt her and makes her wonder whether she really loves Meursault. She tells him that he’s a “queer fellow” but that that was probably the reason she loved him. “But maybe,” she adds
mysteriously, “that’s why one day I’ll come to hate you.” What do you think she has in mind?

Yet nothing Meursault says bothers Marie for very long. Sensing that marriage is important to her, Meursault agrees to marry her whenever she wants. He tells her about the possibility of moving to Paris, and we learn that he once lived there. In his eyes, however, it’s “a dingy sort of town,” with “masses of pigeons and dark courtyards.”

NOTE: Remember that you’re reading a translation from the French. Stuart Gilbert, the translator, has Meursault describe Paris as “a dingy sort of town,” whereas in the French, Camus simply writes “C’est sale” (“It’s dirty”). In a book such as The Stranger, where the language a character uses is important in order to understand motivation, one must take into consideration such changes in the text.

Meursault suggests to Marie that they dine together at Celeste’s. Coyly, she answers that she’s already “booked” for the evening, implying a date with someone else. Not surprisingly, Meursault doesn’t think of asking what she’s doing. It’s only, when Marie asks if he’s not curious that he mentions he did want to know.

At Celeste’s, an “odd-looking little woman” asks Meursault if she might join him at his table. As you may have noticed, Meursault observes the people around
him with great clarity and with an almost photographic precision, as if each person were a specimen under a lens. Once this woman joins Meursault, she takes no notice of him; but he watches her intently. The way she moves reminds Meursault of a robot. She takes off her jacket and studies the menu, then adds up the bill in advance and places the exact amount- plus tip- on the table, before she’s even eaten!

Readers have interpreted the function of the robot-woman in the novel in a number of ways. Some feel that she epitomizes a machinelike, antihuman aspect of the world- rigid, inflexible, out of touch with the rhythms of the universe. Other readers feel that Meursault identifies with her in some way; like him, they argue, she’s a stranger, alone, lost in her own world. Remember that part of the tension of the novel hinges on the dualism between a structured world, in which people go to work at the same time every day and return home at the same time each evening, and a world that’s less structured, where events flow easily and haphazardly into one another. In what ways does Meursault’s own life embody both these qualities?

At the door of his house Meursault meets Salamano, who tells him that the dog is definitely lost. Meursault invites Salamano into his apartment and suggests that he find another dog to replace the lost one. Meursault isn’t really interested in Salamano’s problems, or so he confesses to us, but he has nothing better to do and, for a change, doesn’t feel like going to sleep. You might want to contrast
Salamano’s unhappiness at the loss of his dog with Meursault’s indifference at the death of his mother.

NOTE: Uncertainty surrounds virtually all the relationships in The Stranger. Salamano doesn’t know for certain that his dog is lost. Meursault doesn’t know whether he loves Marie. He also doesn’t know the exact age of his mother when she died. Most people, according to Camus, live in fear of what’s going to happen to them next. Camus believed that acceptance of the inevitability of one’s own death was the only way to exist in an uncertain and indifferent universe.

Salamano tells Meursault how, as a young man, he’d wanted to be an actor, but eventually turned to a job on the railroad. (His life, like Meursault’s, is another case of thwarted ambition.) He admits that he and his wife had never gotten along well but that when she died he’d felt lonely. A friend offered him a puppy, whom Salamano treated like a baby, feeding it first from a bottle. Meursault, in one of his few attempts to please someone else, tells Salamano that his dog appeared to be “well-bred.” From the conversation, you can see that Salamano, despite the fights he had with his dog, obviously had a serious emotional investment in the relationship.

Before leaving, Salamano informs Meursault that some neighbors had been critical of him for sending his mother to the nursing home. Salamano assures
Meursault that he knew how much the latter was devoted to his mother, but, nevertheless, the criticism surprises Meursault. He doesn’t understand why people should think badly of him for his treatment of his mother. He explains that he hadn’t been able to afford keeping her with him and that for years they’d never talked to one another. Going to the home, where she could make friends, was the best thing for her, he feels.
CHAPTER VI

On Sunday, the day of the outing with Raymond and his friends, Meursault wakes up feeling “under the weather.” His head is aching, his first cigarette tastes bitter, and he has trouble getting out of bed. Although Meursault loves to go swimming, we get the impression he’d be just as happy staying at home doing nothing. (Recall how he spent the Sunday after his mother’s funeral.)

This Sunday will be one of the most important days in Meursault’s life. His bad mood on waking seems to foreshadow the events to come. Perhaps his mood is a warning that he should stay home.

Marie, on the other hand, is excited about the excursion. Ironically, she tells Meursault that he looks like “a mourner at a funeral.” More than two weeks have passed since his mother’s funeral. Some people think that Marie is being thoughtless when she tells Meursault that he resembles a mourner. Others think that if Meursault had truly been in mourning over his mother’s death, she would have been more sensitive to his feelings.

NOTE: ON FREEDOM  Real freedom, on Meursault’s terms, is the freedom to be indifferent- the freedom not to love, not to feel ambition or grief. Some readers think that by becoming so involved with Marie and Raymond, Meursault is compromising his sense of freedom.
Others feel that his headache, on the day of the outing, is a signal that his involvement with other people is becoming too much for him to handle. Still others claim that his involvement with Marie and Raymond has changed his attitude toward himself. He is no longer free to concern himself solely with his own physical comforts.

Marie and Meursault wait outside for Raymond. In the street, however, the glare of the sun hits Meursault in the eyes “like a clenched fist.” Marie is anxious to have a good time and doesn’t pay much attention to Meursault. (Does it surprise you that Marie- so involved in ideas of love and marriage- shows so little sensitivity to her lover’s feelings?) instead, she keeps exclaiming, “What a heavenly day!” When Raymond finally appears, his straw hat makes her giggle, but Meursault is put off by Raymond’s high spirits and his outfit.

The previous evening, Meursault tells us, he went to the police station, where he told the police that Raymond had been justified in beating his girlfriend. The police gave Raymond a warning and dismissed the case without even bothering to check Meursault’s statement. What has happened to Meursault’s honesty? Is there a connection between this hypocrisy on his part and his bad mood?

As they walk toward the bus stop, they notice some Arab men leaning against the tobacconist’s window. One of the men, according to Raymond, is the brother of his girlfriend. Meursault observes the way the Arabs are staring at them- “as if [they] were blocks of stone or dead trees.” Meursault tells Marie that one of the
Arabs holds a grudge against Raymond, and she insists that they hurry off to the bus stop.

On the bus ride Meursault notices that Raymond is attracted to Marie. Occasionally Marie gives Meursault reassuring looks, as if worried that he might be feeling jealous. Why do you think that Marie doesn’t bring up Raymond’s fight with his girlfriend, an incident that affected her so disagreeably?

The beach is on the outskirts of Algiers. As they walk to the water, Marie innocently swings her bag against the petals of the flowers. Her carefree nature is muted by Meursault’s observations of the “half-hidden” houses on the edge of the beach and the “metallic glint” of the sky. In contrast to Marie’s feeling that the day is heavenly, for Meursault it has become hellish and foreboding, like a nightmare.

Raymond introduces Meursault and Marie to Masson and his wife, who live in a small bungalow near the beach. Meursault compliments Masson on his house and notices that Marie and Masson’s wife are getting along. For the first time, he tells us, he “seriously considers” the possibility of marrying her.

Some readers feel that Meursault knows instinctively that his life is about to change. Like Masson, Meursault would like to have a house at the beach where he could go with Marie on weekends. But the instinct to rebel against all the trappings of a conventional life—marriage, a house at the shore—is too much a part of Meursault’s personality to ever change. Can you imagine Meursault working overtime to save money to buy a house?
As usual, Meursault begins to feel better with the combination of warm sunlight and cold, refreshing water. He and Marie take a long swim together. He notes how their “movements matched” and how they “were both in the same mood, enjoying every moment.” A little later, they return to the bungalow, where Meursault eats and drinks with great appetite, so much so that he begins to feel “slightly muzzy.” Meursault, Masson, and Raymond, in the spirit of the moment, discuss the possibility of spending all of August on the beach together, sharing expenses. Marie announces that it’s only 11:30, which surprises everyone. Why do you think time is important here? Remember that the novel begins with a question of time- when Meursault’s mother died, whether it was yesterday or today. Some readers feel that the element of time- of knowing the exact time is one way of creating order in an unstable universe.

After lunch, Meursault, Masson, and Raymond head back to the beach. Once outside, Meursault observes that “the glare from the water sear[s] one’s eyes.” Recall his mention, earlier in the chapter, of the glare of the sun, how it “hit [him] in the eyes like a clenched fist.” Recall also that, as part of Camus’s outlook when he wrote The Stranger, nature- and the universe in general- is indifferent to the plight of human beings. Many readers feel that in this scene Meursault becomes a victim of the natural elements. His ability to appreciate the pleasures of the physical world- lying in the sun, bathing- backfires. The sun, once a symbol of peace and pleasure, becomes a demonic force from which Meursault, as if hypnotized, is unable to escape.
The three men walk along the shore. While Masson and Raymond talk about people whom Meursault doesn’t know, Meursault is concerned only with the sun beating on his bare head. Once again, he feels groggy, paralyzed, half-asleep.

Meursault notices two Arabs coming toward them from the other end of the beach. Raymond quickly discovers that one of them is his girlfriend’s brother. The two groups of men confront one another on the sand, which Meursault observes is as “hot as fire.” Raymond approaches one of the Arabs, who lowers his head, as if to butt Raymond in the chest. Raymond lashes out at the man and calls to Masson for help. Masson attacks the second Arab and knocks him into the water. As Raymond turns to Meursault and shouts out with bravado, “I ain’t finished with him yet,” the Arab quickly pulls a knife and cuts Raymond on the arm and mouth.

The Arabs back away, one holding the knife in front of him, then race off down the beach. Masson and Meursault help Raymond, who appears to be badly wounded, back to the bungalow. Raymond decides that the wounds aren’t serious, but Masson, just to be sure, takes him to a nearby doctor. Meursault stays behind with Marie and Madame Masson, both of whom are upset by the incident. Meursault doesn’t like the idea of having to explain what happened. Instead, he stares Meditatively at the sea.

Raymond returns from the doctor in a bad mood and insists on going for a walk by himself on the beach. Despite his insistence that he wants to go (can you think why he might want to?) Meursault follows him.
The two men walk to the end of the beach and come upon the two Arabs lying on the sand. One of them is playing the same three notes over and over again on a reed flute. The other Arab stares at them without saying anything. Raymond reaches into his pocket as if to pull out a revolver and unexpectedly asks Meursault if he should shoot one of the Arabs. Meursault, who usually responds “without thinking” to what people say to him, weighs his response briefly. Then he advises Raymond not to do anything unless the Arab threatens or insults him. “If he doesn’t get out his knife,” Meursault tells his companion, “you’ve no business to fire.”

Meursault suggests that Raymond give him the revolver. This is a crucial moment, and you should consider Meursault’s motive for taking the weapon from Raymond. Some readers feel that he’s taking it as a precautionary measure, that he’s less likely to use the gun than Raymond. Others think that he wants the gun so that he can be more fully involved in the episode. Still others hold that Meursault subconsciously wants to do something that will alter his life and that possessing the gun is a way of taking control of his destiny.

As the men continue to eye one another, Meursault thinks that it makes no difference whether one fires the gun or not. “It would come to absolutely the same thing,” he observes to himself. What do you think he means by this?

Then, suddenly, the two Arabs leave, and Meursault and Raymond return to the bungalow. Raymond is in a better mood, perhaps because he feels he’s redeemed himself “as a man” in Meursault’s eyes. (Do you remember the incident
between Raymond and the policeman earlier in the novel?) But once back at the bungalow, Meursault can’t make the effort to climb the steps to go inside and be sociable. The sunlight is too blinding, too strong, and once again the feeling that nothing matters, that “to stay, or to make a move- it [comes] to much the same,” takes over.

Meursault returns to the beach. He walks now like a shell-shocked veteran returning to the scene of battle. But he isn’t thinking of the Arabs. Instead, his conflict is with the red, glaring sun, which presses itself on him from all sides. His temples are throbbing. He’s sensitive to every vivid reflection of light on the hot sand. He clenches his fists in his pockets and grits his teeth, determined to ignore the sun and the “dark befuddlement” it’s causing in him. His goal is to return to the cool stream and the shade of the rock where he and Raymond encountered the Arabs on their last walk. But when he reaches his destination he discovers that one of the Arabs- Raymond’s antagonist- has also returned.

When Meursault sees the Arab, he’s shocked. He thought that the incident between Raymond and the Arab was closed. Not once on his walk from the bungalow to the rock did he think of meeting the Arabs. For a moment, Meursault realizes that he has the freedom to walk away, that the situation between Raymond and the Arab doesn’t involve him directly. But, writes Camus, “the whole beach, pulsing with heat, [is] pressing on [his] back.” It’s too difficult even to turn around. He takes some more steps toward the stream. Is it possible he is still
thinking only of the cool water, rather than of a confrontation with the Arab? The intensity of the heat reminds him of the heat at his mother’s funeral.

NOTE: As Meursault confronts the Arab, the language he uses to describe the scene becomes more intense than in any previous section of the novel: “becalmed in a sea of molten steel” and “gouging into my eyeballs.” Is Camus deliberately matching the intensity of the language with the action? You might want to compare the translation with the French original to make sure the translator is not subtly altering Camus’s wording.

Almost as if he is trying to get out of the scorching sun, Meursault again steps forward, knowing that it’s probably a foolish thing to do. At that, the Arab takes out his knife. As the light shoots upward from the blade, the sweat pours down over Meursault’s face and eyes, blinding him. He hears the “cymbals of the sun clashing on [his] skull.” He senses a “fiery gust” rise from the sea, the sky crack in two, and a sheet of flames pour through the crack. He seems- as he presses down on the trigger of the gun in his pocket- like a man possessed. It is not even certain, as he fires a shot at the Arab, that he has done so deliberately: “The trigger gave....” But, with the sound of the gun he knows “all [begins].” He’s shattered the balance of the day and the peacefulness of the beach. Then he
fires four more times at the body of the Arab but he does not tell us why he does this. Is it the action of someone temporarily insane?

Some readers compare Meursault’s killing of the Arab to the outbreak of a war, where the peacefulness of a beautiful landscape is shattered by violent action. The death of one person, these readers say, is as important as the hundreds of thousands of deaths that occur during a war. For Camus, all forms of violence are equally meaningless; nothing can justify the killing of another person.

Other readers interpret the murder of the Arab as an indication of the violent impulse inherent in all people. Up to this point, Meursault doesn’t seem like the type of person who would commit murder. These readers feel that his act is a reflection of the violence brewing beneath the surface; it exposes the naked violence in the most apparently harmless of people. The acts of violence in the book so far- Salamano beating his dog and Raymond beating his girlfriend and fighting her brother- have arisen out of passion. How does Meursault’s indifference lead to violence?

Camus believed that most people don’t realize the absurdity and meaningfulness of their lives. The recognition of the absurd occurs when the routine that characterizes each life has been destroyed. Ask yourself, as you read Part Two, whether killing the Arab, and the consequent disruption of Meursault’s routine, has altered Meursault’s way of looking at the world.
PART TWO
CHAPTER I

Does killing the Arab really change Meursault’s life? Obviously, he’s no longer free to follow his impulses: to go to the beach when he wants, to live for the pleasures of the moment. Yet in the first chapter of Part Two the tone he uses to describe his experiences is similar to the tone in Part One. He’s still trying to make sense of the world. Only now he’s involved in an area of society—prison, the law, the courts—where he’s truly a stranger. Let’s see how the restrictions of prison life and his dealings with the judicial procedure affect his attitude toward the world.

During his first interviews with the police, Meursault has the feeling that no one is particularly interested in him or his case. (This is in direct contrast to the circumstances surrounding his mother’s death, when everyone—even people who didn’t know her—was concerned about Meursault’s feelings.) The police, and later the magistrate, all ask him the same questions: name, address, occupation, date and place of birth. The magistrate, however, does seem curious about him (as you read further you’ll find out why) and asks whether he’s hired a lawyer. Meursault answers that he has no lawyer and that it has never occurred to him to get one. He doesn’t seem particularly concerned that he’s about to go on trial for murder. He assumes his case is “simple” and that a lawyer isn’t necessary.

The magistrate explains that, in keeping with the law, the court will appoint a lawyer to defend him. Meursault’s attention shifts from what the magistrate is
telling him to the physical surroundings. He notices the angle of the light from
the lamp on the magistrate’s desk, the armchair, and the curtained windows.
You’ve seen this happen before: whenever Meursault begins to lose interest in
the person he’s talking to, he begins to take note of his surroundings. During the
interview, he gets a close look at the magistrate’s face and observes that the man
has a nervous tic at the side of his mouth. The magistrate seems intelligent, al-
most likeable, and Meursault is even tempted to shake his hand on leaving.

The next day a lawyer arrives at Meursault’s cell. Apparently, the case isn’t
as simple as Meursault thinks. According to the lawyer, the police have been in-
vestigating his private life and have learned that he showed “great callousness” at
his mother’s funeral. He asks Meursault whether he felt unhappy on the occasion
of his mother’s death. Meursault answers by saying that he’d been fond of his
mother, but that “all normal people,” at various times, have desired the death of
those they loved.

Meursault obviously includes himself among the “normal people,” yet you
know that his attitude toward the world is anything but normal. Do you think that
his response to the lawyer’s question is honest? Is he wise to have answered so
bluntly?

The lawyer is shocked by Meursault’s response. He makes Meursault promise
not to express any negative sentiments about his mother to the magistrate or at
the trial. Meursault agrees, he tells us, but only “to satisfy” the lawyer. Recall
how earlier in the book Meursault agrees to marry Marie to satisfy her and how
he writes the letter for Raymond to satisfy him. What does this willingness to please tell us about Meursault’s personality? Is he being honest with himself when he gives in so easily to other people’s wishes?

Meursault explains to the lawyer that his feelings are influenced by his physical state at any given moment. When he was at his mother’s funeral, he was in a state of near exhaustion and “hardly took stock of what was happening.” This is one of the rare instances in the book that Meursault seems aware of why he acts and feels the way he does.

Meursault refuses to lie and explain his actions at the funeral by saying, as the lawyer suggests, that he had kept his emotions under control. He can’t understand the connection between his behavior at his mother’s funeral and the murder of the Arab. The lawyer is perplexed and irritated by Meursault’s attitude. In his eyes, Meursault is being naive. He tells Meursault that the warden of the home and other members of the staff will undoubtedly testify at the trial, and that their description of Meursault’s behavior on the day of the funeral will be used against him. The lawyer knows that the prosecutor will use anything he can to find Meursault guilty, and that the basis of the case will be his behavior at his mother’s funeral.

Until his period of imprisonment, Meursault has not felt particularly alienated from society. Recall his surprise in Part One when Salamano told him of his neighbor’s harsh criticisms. He has been vaguely aware that people like Marie and his boss thought he was odd because of the way he reacted to his mother’s
death, but otherwise he has had no sense that he is living his life in an unusual way. Only when he is confronted by the religious and judicial branches of society does he feel like an outsider.

NOTE: Camus has described Meursault as a person who “doesn’t play the game” of society. In these initial interviews with the lawyer, you see a man who will not compromise his notion of the truth to save his own life. His mother’s death is more of an annoyance to him than a source of real regret, and it’s this shade of meaning that ultimately condemns him.

Later that day, Meursault has another interview with the magistrate. The first thing that strikes him when he enters the magistrate’s office is that the room is flooded with light and is extremely hot. You know by now how sensitive he is to light and heat, and how frequently his present physical state determines the things he says and does. The magistrate tells him that his lawyer won’t be present for the interview and that Meursault isn’t required to answer any questions. But Meursault is indifferent about his lawyer’s not being present.

The magistrate begins to probe into Meursault’s personality. “What really interests me,” he tells Meursault, “is— you!” At the magistrate’s request, Meursault recounts the story of the day on the beach, leading up to the death of the Arab. The magistrate listens intently and, after Meursault finishes, tells him that he has
a special interest in the case and that he’ll try to be of help. But first Meursault has to answer a few more questions. Like the lawyer, the magistrate brings up the issue of Meursault’s mother. Did he love her? Meursault answers, “Yes, like everybody else.”

Readers have commented on the presence of the clerk-typist who is recording the conversation between Meursault and the magistrate. When Meursault responds to the magistrate’s question about his mother, the typist goes back and crosses something out. Meursault notes that the clerk probably hit the wrong keys, but most readers feel that he probably typed in Meursault’s answer before Meursault said anything, an indication that Meursault’s actual responses (in the eyes of society) were unexpected, or unconventional.

Why, the magistrate continues, did Meursault fire five consecutive shots into the body of the Arab? Meursault waits for a moment, then corrects the magistrate. No, he says, the shots weren’t consecutive. After his first shot he paused. But why, the magistrate asks, did he pause? Meursault returns in his mind to the scene of that hot afternoon on the beach. But he doesn’t answer the question. The magistrate again asks why: “I insist on your telling me.” But Meursault says nothing.

Many readers have pointed out how difficult it is for Meursault to respond to a question with more than a few words. His brief responses to the magistrate’s questions are almost childlike. As you read, ask yourself how Meursault’s vo-
cabulary and syntax contribute to the sense of alienation that is one of the novel’s major themes.

What effect does Meursault’s silence have on the magistrate? Remember, during their first interview, that Meursault thought the magistrate seemed like an “intelligent man.” Now, this previously reasonable person takes a crucifix out of a filing cabinet and waves it in Meursault’s face. (Recall how the Arab displayed his knife to Meursault when they were alone on the beach.) He rants about his belief in God and how even the worst sinners—presumably he believes that Meursault is one of them—could obtain God’s forgiveness, if only they would repent.

Meursault begins blocking out the magistrate’s remarks. It’s too hot in the office, big flies are buzzing around and lighting on his cheeks, and, anyway, the magistrate’s behavior has become alarming. What does all this talk about religion have to do with the case? Meursault concludes to himself that the only real complication, from the magistrate’s point of view, is why Meursault paused before firing four more shots.

Meursault wants to explain that it doesn’t make any difference why he paused, but before he can speak, the magistrate asks if he believes in God. Meursault, without thinking twice, answers no, but the magistrate refuses to accept this. The foundation of the magistrate’s understanding of life is that everyone believes in God. If he ever came to doubt the existence of God, the magistrate tells Meursault, his life would have no meaning. Doesn’t Meursault believe that Christ
suffered for his sake? he asks. Meursault is anxious for the interview to end and pretends to agree. But when the magistrate asks once more whether he believes in God, Meursault can’t prevent himself from shaking his head no.

NOTE: Do you feel that the magistrate is being sincere? Is his performance with the crucifix, which Camus later implies he’s repeated many times before, a way of seeking reassurance that his own beliefs are valid? The magistrate seems to view Meursault’s unwillingness to play his game as an attempt on Meursault’s part to undermine the meaning of life he’s found for himself.

The magistrate tells Meursault that until now he’s never known a criminal who didn’t weep when he brought out the crucifix. In his eyes, Meursault is the most hardened criminal he’s ever met. But do you think that Meursault, who didn’t weep at his mother’s funeral, is about to begin weeping now? Though Meursault is willing to agree with other people in some instances, he refuses to budge when his religious beliefs are questioned. Why do you think this issue is so important to him?

The interview ends with a final question: did Meursault regret killing the Arab? Meursault takes his time answering. No, he didn’t feel regret, but “a kind of vexation.” The magistrate doesn’t understand what he means.
Over the next 11 months, Meursault, accompanied by his lawyer, has numerous interviews with the magistrate. Sometimes the lawyer and the magistrate ignore Meursault. At other times, they allow him to take part in the conversation. Never once, Meursault tells us, do they express hostility toward him. Camus doesn’t tell us what’s being discussed during these interviews, but you can almost imagine the two talking openly about Meursault in his presence. The magistrate never again mentions religion, except to address Meursault as “Mr. Antichrist” at the end of each interview. Meursault feels so comfortable at these hearings that he has the “absurd impression” of being “one of the family.” As you read, note how frequently Camus refers to the absurdity of a particular situation, especially in Meursault’s encounters with his lawyer, the magistrate, and the chaplain.

In his role as an anonymous officer worker, Meursault could limit and control his encounters with the world. But in his encounters with the legal system, he is forced, time and again, into situations where his “otherness”- his difference from the socially accepted norm- is particularly noticeable.
In this chapter, Meursault tells us what it's like for him in prison. At the end of the previous chapter, we learned that the examinations with the magistrate had gone on for 11 months. Now you will see whether the experience of being in jail for almost a year has affected Meursault or whether he’s still the same person he was before he killed the Arab.

When Meursault first enters prison, he never imagines talking to anyone of his experiences there. Gradually, as time passes, this reluctance fades away. He tells us that during the first few days he was hardly conscious on where he was; he had the vague hope that something would happen to alter his circumstances. He credits the subsequent change in his attitude to the knowledge that Marie would not be allowed to visit him again, since the authorities have discovered she isn’t his wife. When he learns this, he realizes that his prison cell is his home- his last home, possibly- and that he’ll never have the pleasure of being with her again. On his first day in prison, he’s put into a big cell with other prisoners, mostly Arabs. When asked the nature of his crime, he tells them, in his usual straightforward way, and without thought of repercussion, that he’s in prison for killing an Arab. This is another example of Meursault’s refusal to lie, regardless of the circumstances.
Some days later, he’s moved into a small prison cell, with a plank bed and latrine bucket. From the small window, he tells us, he can view the sea, and “the sunlight playing on the waves.”

One day Marie visits him, asks if he has everything he wants, and extends greetings from Raymond. The noise of the other prisoners and their visitors in the visiting room makes it hard for Meursault to concentrate on her. The people’s voices are filled with anxiety, and Meursault and Marie have to shout at each other to make themselves heard. As Marie presses up against the rail that separates them, Meursault feels a great desire to reach out and squeeze her shoulders. Marie tries to reassure him by saying that “it’ll all come right” and that when he gets out of prison they’ll be able to get married and go swimming on Sundays. When the meeting ends, Marie blows him a kiss, while pressing her face to the rails and trying to smile.

NOTE: The image of sunlight is used here in various ways. Meursault notes its playful quality, as he stares from the window of his cell; yet during Marie’s visit the sunlight creates “a harsh white glare” and makes him feel dizzy. In the visitor’s room, the sunlight seems to be “surging up against the window” and “smearing the faces of the people... with... yellow oil.” Most readers feel that the image of the sun, as it’s used here, carries both positive and negative overtones, and reflects the instability and precariousness of modern life.
Soon after, Marie writes Meursault and says that she’s not going to be allowed to visit again. Meursault now realizes that he has to change his way of thinking. His memories of what his life was like as “a free man” torment him, and he longs to go swimming. But eventually he realizes that he must adjust to life in prison and begins to look forward to the daily walks in the courtyard and the visits from his lawyer. His ability to make this adjustment gives him strength. If he can adjust to prison life, he can get used to anything.

Meursault passes the time thinking of all his old lovers. He makes friends with the chief jailer, who tells him that lack of sex is the subject prisoners complain about most. At first, Meursault doesn’t understand why he should be deprived of sex. The jailer explains that sending people to prison is a way of depriving them of their liberty, Otherwise, Meursault finally realizes, jail wouldn’t be a punishment.

Meursault also has a hard time going without cigarettes, but by the time he realizes that this form of deprivation is also a punishment, he’s lost the craving.

The main problem, he tells us, is passing the time. His chief occupation is remembering all the objects in his former apartment. As a person who observes life from the outside, rather than participating in it fully, Meursault has an uncanny ability to notice the precise details of objects and people. This ability serves him well in prison. He spends hours listing and describing from memory the objects in his former bedroom. He concludes that, after a single day’s experience in the
outside world, a person could easily spend a hundred years in prison, because he’d have “enough memories never to be bored.”

Sleep is also a way of passing the time. Meursault admits that after a few months in prison he’s able to sleep 16 to 18 hours a night. That leaves approximately six hours to fill by eating and remembering.

The one unusual event that occurs during his stay in prison is the discovery of a newspaper clipping beneath the mattress. The clipping tells the story of a crime that took place in a village in Czechoslovakia. One of the villagers leaves home to seek his fortunes abroad. Twenty-five years later, a rich man, he returns to the village with his wife and child. He decides to surprise his mother and sister, who are now running a small hotel. Leaving his wife and child at another hotel, he takes a room, under an assumed name, at his mother’s. Neither his mother nor his sister recognizes him. During the night, the two women murder their guest for his money. When the dead man’s wife arrives the next morning and reveals his identity, the mother hangs herself and the sister throws herself into a well.

NOTE: Camus used the subject of this clipping as the basis for his play, The Misunderstanding, first produced in 1944. By presenting the story to us here, he gives us the circumstances surrounding another murder, and poses the question of why and how such an act takes place. The mother and sister are motivated by greed, and this blinds them (much the same way the sun blinds Meursault) to the identity of their
victim. The story of the clipping echoes the parricide trial directly following Meursault’s, and alludes to Meursault’s own trial, during which the prosecutor attempts to condemn Meursault for not crying at his mother’s funeral. (By his showing no emotion at his mother’s death, it could be inferred that Meursault hated his mother, or wanted to kill her.)

Meursault rereads this story “thousands of times.” Why do you think he finds it so fascinating?

The days slip by. Time, which in the past gave Meursault’s life some semblance of meaning and order, is no longer important. Only the concepts of “yesterday” and “tomorrow” still have meaning. The most difficult time of day, for Meursault, is the early evening, when the sun disappears and the sounds begin “creeping up from all the floors of the prison in a sort of stealthy procession.” Meursault stares at his reflection in his tin pannikin, or platter, and notes that his expression has become more serious, mournful, and tense. He hears a voice and realizes that it’s his own voice, that he’s begun talking to himself. Though he has found ways to occupy himself in prison, he obviously longs for the pleasures of his former life, for the freedom to act impulsively, and to live in the moment.

Some readers feel that killing the Arab had a positive effect on Meursault’s attitude toward the world. His imprisonment, they say, made him realize that life was worth living. Others feel that Meursault had already come to terms with the
outside world before the murder, and could be considered a reasonably well-adjusted person. Life in prison, according to these readers, deprived Meursault of a way of life that was basically healthy, and forced him to rely on his memories to stay sane. As you read, ask yourself whether Meursault has changed for the better or the worse.
CHAPTER III

A year has passed since Meursault murdered the Arab. On a day “of brilliant sunshine” the trial is finally about to begin.

Meursault’s lawyer assures him that the trial won’t last more than two or three days. He explains that Meursault’s case isn’t the most important on the courtroom agenda, The case immediately following Meursault’s—a case of paricide, where a son is being tried for killing his father—is much more controversial and will take more time.

What is Meursault’s attitude toward his trial? Notice how he compares the sounds in the courtroom to those of a small-town “social,” or dance following a concert. Meursault tells one of the policemen that the prospect of witnessing a trial “rather” interests him, indicating a sense of detachment, as if someone else were being tried and he was merely in attendance as a spectator.

In the courtroom he notices the light filtering through the venetian blinds. The heat in the room is stifling. He’s aware of the jury members, who stare at him in the hope of detecting signs that will prove he’s a criminal. He looks around the crowded courtroom but doesn’t see anyone he knows. He can’t understand why so many people have come to the court on his account. When he mentions to a policeman his surprise at the size of the crowd, the policeman tells him that it’s the fault of the press. One of the journalists, a friend of the policeman, comes over to Meursault’s table. He tells Meursault that during the summer,
when there wasn’t much other news to write about, the newspaper he works for has been featuring stories about Meursault’s murder of the Arab. Most of the journalists, however, are present to cover the trial of the parricide; and Meursault has the feeling that, despite the crowds, his own trial isn’t very important.

Almost all the people in the court seem to know one another, and Meursault has the distinct feeling of being a “gate-crasher,” a stranger who doesn’t belong. Do you think this would make Meursault feel more or less apprehensive about the outcome?

Meursault’s lawyer arrives, followed by the public prosecutor. Then the three judges enter the court. Meursault notices that all the journalists are sitting at attention, their pens raised, except for one. This particular journalist seems younger than the others and has his eyes directly fixed on Meursault. The journalist’s face is emotionless, and for a moment, as Meursault stares back, Meursault has the impression of “being scrutinized by [him]self.”

Meursault has a hard time following the opening phases of the court procedure and doesn’t pay careful attention until the court clerk reads off the list of witnesses. Then, one by one, as their names are called, the witnesses rise: Raymond, Masson, Salamano, the doorkeeper at the nursing home, Perez, Marie, and Celeste. Meursault notices that the robotlike woman who sat at his table in the restaurant is also present in the courtroom.

The main judge begins the proceedings. The judge describes himself “as a sort of umpire.” The courtroom is his arena: the lawyer, the prosecutor, the jury,
and the witnesses are participants in the game. The journalists are the spectators. But it’s a game, you will find, that Meursault refuses to play. Whether a jury finds him guilty or innocent isn’t particularly important to him.

The examination begins. Meursault is forced to answer the same questions he’s already answered a hundred times: name, occupation, residence. Though he admits he’s sick of the formality of all these questions, he realizes it’s important for him to identify himself, if only because it would be terrible for the court to be trying the wrong man. Notice, as you read, how much of Meursault’s personality—his naivete, the shortness of his attention span—resembles that of a young child. You can see his concentration shift, even as the judge begins asking him these questions. His focus drifts to the spectators in the courtroom, to the journalists, and to the jury.

The judge shifts the line of questioning to the subject of Meursault’s relationship with his mother. Why did Meursault send his mother to the nursing home? Did the parting cause Meursault unhappiness? Meursault tries to explain that neither he nor his mother expected much from each other and that both of them easily adjusted to the change.

It’s the prosecutor’s turn now. He asks Meursault whether he’d returned to the stream with the intention of killing the Arab. Meursault answers no but makes no attempt to explain himself further. In response to another question about why he was carrying a revolver and why he had gone back to the precise spot, Meursault observes that it was simply a matter of chance. The prosecutor dismisses Meur-
sault abruptly and with disdain, as if the simplicity of Meursault’s answers is somehow proof of his guilt.

NOTE: Some readers feel that Camus uses the trial as a way of examining the hypocrisy and cynicism of judicial procedures. The prosecutor isn’t interested in finding out the truth; he just wants to win the case. Meursault’s loyalty to the truth, however, prevents him from playing the courtroom game. He refuses to tell the prosecutor, the judge, or even his own lawyer what they want to hear.

After a short adjournment, the warden from the nursing home is called to the stand. In response to the judge’s questions, the warden states that Meursault’s mother had frequently complained about her son’s treatment of her. He notes that Meursault showed no interest in seeing his mother’s body and that he hadn’t cried at the funeral.

The judge asks the prosecutor if he has any questions to pose to the warden. The prosecutor bellows triumphantly, “I have all I want,” and glowers at Meursault, who has a sudden impulse to burst into tears. For the first time, Meursault realizes how much “all these people” hate him. Based on what you know about Meursault, does this sudden rush of emotion seem out of character?

The next witness is the doorkeeper at the home. He states that Meursault smoked cigarettes, drank coffee, slept, and showed no interest in seeing his
mother’s body. Meursault’s lawyer tries to win a point with the jury by establishing the fact that it was the doorkeeper who offered Meursault a cup of coffee. The prosecutor, however, makes light of this fact; if offered coffee, Meursault should have refused, out of respect for his dead mother.

Thomas Perez, Meursault’s mother’s companion at the home, takes the witness stand. He tells the court he was too preoccupied with his own feelings to take much notice of what Meursault was doing during the funeral. He’s fairly certain, however, that Meursault didn’t cry.

Perez is followed by Celeste, the restaurant owner. He describes Meursault as a person who wasn’t “one to waste his breath,” but he doesn’t think Meursault was particularly secretive. He offers his opinion of the murder as “just an accident, or a stroke of bad luck.” (Is Camus relating this to the newspaper clipping in Meursault’s cell, in which a man is “accidentally” murdered by his mother and sister?) When the judge cuts Celeste short with the comment that the purpose of the trial “is to try such accidents,” Celeste feels embarrassed at not being able to help Meursault more. For his well-intentioned effort, Meursault has the impulse to kiss him.

Marie is the next witness. Not surprisingly, the prosecutor’s questions involve the day Meursault and Marie first slept together. The prosecutor observes that their affair began on the day after Meursault’s mother’s funeral. Not only did they sleep together, but they went to the movies to see-a comedy! A stunned silence fills the courtroom. The prosecutor turns to the jury and repeats this damning bit
of evidence. Marie bursts into tears, claiming that the prosecutor misunderstood her statement and that she was certain Meursault hadn’t done anything wrong. But no one is listening. The court officer leads her away and the trial continues.

Masson and Salamano are the next witnesses. Their testimony, although favorable to Meursault, seems to make no impression on the jury.

Raymond is the last witness. He tries to explain that it was he, not Meursault, who had an argument with the Arab, and that Meursault’s presence on the beach was merely a coincidence. But didn’t Meursault, the prosecutor asks, write the letter to Raymond’s girlfriend? Raymond answers that this also was due to chance. Was it also by chance, the prosecutor goes on, that Meursault did not intervene when Raymond was beating up his mistress? And that Meursault testified on Raymond’s behalf at the police station? The prosecutor attempts to depict Raymond as a man who “lived on the immoral earnings of women.” At the prosecutor’s prodding, Raymond admits that he and Meursault are “the best of pals.” Consequently, the prosecutor claims, Meursault killed the Arab “in pursuance of some sordid vendetta in the underworld of prostitutes and pimps.” In the prosecutor’s eyes, Meursault is “an inhuman monster, wholly without a moral sense.”

Meursault’s lawyer leaps up to defend his client. Meursault is on trial for murdering an Arab, he claims, not for the way he acted at his mother’s funeral. The prosecutor can’t believe that Meursault’s lawyer doesn’t see the connection between these two aspects of the case. A man who didn’t cry at his mother’s funeral—according to the prosecutor—is surely “a criminal at heart.”
Is there anything that could be said in Meursault’s favor at this point? Why doesn’t Meursault’s lawyer argue that his client killed the Arab in self-defense? Some readers feel that if Meursault is guilty because he didn’t cry at his mother’s funeral, then others are guilty as well: Marie, for suggesting they see the Fernandel movie; the doorkeeper, for offering Meursault a cup of coffee; Raymond, for asking Meursault to write the letter to his girlfriend. But in each of these instances, Meursault had the chance to refuse. This trial could be regarded as the consequence of his indifference.

The court adjourns for the day. Returning to his cell, Meursault remembers what it felt like on other summer evenings when he would sit outdoors and watch the sky change color. The evening is a special time for him, and all the sounds of the town- the cries of sandwich vendors, the bird calls, the shouts of the newspaper boys- have a special meaning. He realizes that, previously, he’d been truly content with his life, but in a way he never really appreciated it. Now he realizes that all these small pleasures have been taken away from him forever. Instead of a night of dreamless sleep, he can only look forward to “a night haunted by forebodings of the coming day.”
CHAPTER IV

As the trial progresses, Meursault feels more detached than ever. He’s tempted, at times, to try to speak up; but he can’t seem to do it. At first, he finds it interesting to hear himself being talked about, but after a while that, too, wears thin.

NOTE: In 1939, when he was writing The Stranger, Camus wrote and published essays on Franz Kafka, the noted author of The Trial and The Castle. In The Trial, the main character, Joseph K., is arrested and tried for a crime that is never revealed to him. It might be interesting for you to read The Trial and to pick out any similarities between Kafka’s book and The Stranger.

First the prosecutor and then Meursault’s lawyer deliver their closing speeches to the jury. The prosecutor repeats most of the evidence against Meursault. In his eyes, the case is “as clear as daylight.” Notice the way the image of “light” is used in this context. Daylight, after all, was as much a “cause” of the crime as anything else, and Meursault’s relation to light is anything but clear.

The prosecutor’s speech bores Meursault. It is only his flamboyant gestures that catch Meursault’s attention at all. The prosecutor stresses the notion that the
murder of the Arab was premeditated. He describes Meursault as “an educated man” who knew exactly what he was doing when he killed the Arab. Not once, the prosecutor continues, has Meursault shown signs of remorse “for his most odious crime.” In his own defense, Meursault is tempted to say that he’s never felt remorse for anything in his entire life. He’s been too preoccupied with the present and the immediate future to mull over things he’s done in the past.

The prosecutor tells the jury that he’s made a close study of the prisoner’s soul and found it to be a complete blank. Thus Meursault, according to the prosecutor, can’t be blamed for lacking a conscience, since he had no power to acquire one. Nonetheless, a man who is unable to feel regret for what he’s done must be considered “a menace to society.” As he ends his speech, the prosecutor refers to the case of parricide that directly follows Meursault’s case on the court agenda. He implies that Meursault is not only morally guilty of the death of his own mother, but indirectly responsible for the second crime - the murder of a father by his son - as well, by having “set a precedent.” The prosecutor begs the jury to find Meursault guilty and to sentence him to death.

The judge asks Meursault if he has anything to say. Meursault, who feels overcome by the heat as well as amazed at the prosecutor’s statements, answers that he had no intention of killing the Arab. He tries to explain that the killing occurred “because of the sun,” but of course no one in the court understands what he means. His lawyer merely shrugs and asks the judge to adjourn the court until the following afternoon.
The next day, the trial continues. In the heavy air, Meursault can barely pay attention to his lawyer’s closing speech. He feels even more excluded from what’s going on when he realizes that the lawyer is using “I” when referring to Meursault. He also realizes that his lawyer is much less talented than the prosecutor. The lawyer rehashes all the positive points about Meursault, but fails to say anything about Meursault’s reason for killing the Arab. The lawyer also fails to call to the jury’s attention that Meursault is on trial for murder, not for his actions toward his mother or with his friends. If you were Meursault’s lawyer, what would you have done differently? It’s possible, as some readers point out, that the killing of the Arab could be justified as self-defense. Remember that Meursault only fired after he saw the Arab’s knife. But the lawyer mentions nothing about this. Instead, he tries to establish some connection between Meursault’s soul and the excellence of government-financed nursing homes. He describes Meursault as a “steady, conscientious worker” who was “popular with everyone and sympathetic in others’ troubles.”

NOTE: Camus’s description of the trial is an attempt to define the nature of truth and justice. Meursault’s sense of detachment at his own trial may seem extreme, but Camus makes it clear that Meursault, given his own code of ethics, cannot participate in the trial without being untrue to himself. The trial is a game with a specific set of rules
that have nothing to do with finding the truth, and Meursault refuses to play by any rules other than his own.

Toward the end of the lawyer’s speech, Meursault is momentarily mesmerized by the sound of an ice cream vendor’s horn in the street. The sound embodies all the pleasurable memories from his past and makes him realize the futility of everything that’s going on in the courtroom. He feels like vomiting. All he wants to do is return to his cell and sleep.

While waiting for the verdict, Meursault looks around the courtroom. Celeste, Raymond, Marie— they are all still there. Meursault realizes that he hasn’t thought much about Marie during the trial, and when she waves at him, smiling, he can’t bring himself to smile back. He admits that his heart has “turned to stone.” Some readers think that Meursault is acting callously when he doesn’t return Marie’s wave at this point, while others feel that he’s just steeling himself against the verdict that will soon be delivered against him. By now we know that all of Meursault’s responses have a number of possible meanings. When you’re out of step with the rest of the world, Camus seems to be saying, nothing is clear.

The judge announces the verdict, “‘In the name of the French people,’” he says, Meursault is “to be decapitated in some public place.” No specific date is announced for the execution. Are you surprised at the verdict? Is the punishment justified? Do you think that if Meursault had “played the game”— if he’d shown some remorse at the trial— the jury would have been more sympathetic?
Meursault notices that everyone around him, now that they know he’s going to die, treats him with “respectful sympathy.” Meursault, however, shows no visible reaction. As he leaves the courtroom, he admits only that he’s stopped thinking.

NOTE: The fact that Meursault is sentenced to death for murdering an Arab has been criticized as unrealistic. Although a European in that era might have been condemned for such an act, it is unlikely that he would have been sentenced to death under these circumstances. Most readers feel that Camus cast the victim as an Arab so that the full absurdity of the judicial system, rather than the crime itself, could be emphasized. Meursault is sentenced mainly for not conforming to the rules of society, rather than for murdering someone. The death of an Arab meant little to the jury. But a European victim could not so easily have been dismissed. Notice that during the trial, no Arab witnesses are called to describe the murder.
CHAPTER V

Some time has passed since the end of the trial. Meursault tells us that he’s just refused to see the prison chaplain for the third time. He’s been transferred to a different cell, where, lying on his back, he can see the sky. He spends his days fantasizing about escaping. He blames himself for not having paid more attention to stories of public executions. Possibly, he reasons, he would have come across at least one story where—at the last minute—the prisoner escapes. He knows, realistically, that even if he did make a desperate attempt to escape, he’d most likely be shot down before he got too far.

Meursault cannot “stomach this brutal attitude.” He knows that the effects of the verdict are as certain as the wall of his cell, but this knowledge, more than anything else, triggers a part of his imagination that been relatively dormant until this time. He can no longer live for the pleasures of the moment, so he retreats into a fantasy world where anything is possible.

He remembers a story his mother used to tell him about his father. This is the first mention of Meursault’s father in the book, and Meursault admits that he never set eyes on him. Apparently, Meursault’s father witnessed the execution of a murderer, and the experience made him violently ill. Meursault tells us that at the time he thought his father’s reaction “disgusting,” but that now he realizes “nothing was more important than an execution.” Some readers feel that Meursault’s feelings about executions, and the reference to his father, is an attempt, on
Meursault’s part, to relate to his family, and to the father he never knew. Meursault, these critics think, would like to witness an execution in an attempt to prove that he could experience this event without becoming ill. Other readers feel that Meursault’s desire to attend an execution indicates his hope that his own execution will be well-attended.

Just the thought of his own freedom, however, frightens Meursault, and he begins trembling. To imagine freedom, while condemned to death, has become a form of self-torture to him. Yet what else can he do? Does his desire to be free indicate that his attitude toward the world has changed?

NOTE: Camus’s father dies when Camus was an infant. One of the few things Camus knew about him was that he’d witnessed an execution and had become sick afterwards. Reread “The Author and His Times” and note how much Meursault’s relationship with his parents resembles Camus’s relationship with his.

When he first heard the verdict, in the previous chapter, Meursault told us he “stopped thinking.” Yet now, in the privacy of his cell, his thoughts occur so rapidly it’s hard to keep track of them, His thoughts have become the “events” in his life.

He remembers once seeing a picture of a guillotine and how shiny it seemed, like “some laboratory instrument.” Previously he had imagined that the criminal
had to climb up steps to be guillotined. But in the picture “the machine is on the same level as the man.” His attempt at imagining what his own execution will be like is a way of creating order and of giving these final moments of his life some meaning.

He knows that “they” will come for him at dawn. But which dawn? He gets into the habit of sleeping during the day and staying up all night, so he’ll be ready when “they” arrive. With the passing of each dawn, he realizes he has another twenty-four hours to live.

He argues with himself about whether life is worth living. What difference does it make if you die when you are thirty or when you are seventy? Yet this argument gives him little consolation. He wants to go on living. Even if he had to spend the rest of his days in a prison cell, staring up at the sky, he would still have his thoughts, his dreams, and his memories. He fantasizes about the possibility that his appeal might be successful. But the thought that he might one day be a free man again makes him overexcited, and he reminds himself of the importance of keeping his thoughts under control.

He thinks also of Marie, and wonders why she hasn’t written him in such a long time. Probably, he guesses, she grew tired of being the mistress of a condemned murderer. It occurs to him that she might be ill, or even dead. He realizes that if Marie were dead, that it would be pointless for him to even think about her. In Meursault’s way of thinking, only the living matter. (Relate this to his feel-
ings about his mother when he learns of her death.) He realizes, too, that after he dies everyone will forget him.

The chaplain arrives, unannounced, interrupting Meursault’s train of thought. He assures Meursault that he’s just making a friendly visit and asks Meursault to sit beside him. Meursault refuses, although he has nothing against the man and, in fact, finds him amiable and mild. After a long silence, the chaplain asks Meursault why he hasn’t allowed him to visit previously. Meursault explains that he doesn’t believe in God. The chaplain, much like the magistrate in an earlier chapter, refuses to accept Meursault’s answer. He asks whether Meursault’s lack of spirituality is due to a feeling of desperation. Meursault corrects him: he isn’t feeling despair, only fear. The chaplain insists that everyone in a similar position has turned to God, but Meursault isn’t interested. He doesn’t have the time to enter into a conversation about God.

The chaplain tries to convince Meursault about the inevitability of dying and asks Meursault how he’ll face death when it arrives. Meursault responds, brusquely, that he’ll face it as he’s facing lit now. Has the chaplain forgotten that Meursault has been sentenced to die? In an attempt to intimidate Meursault, the chaplain stands and stares him straight in the eyes. He asks if Meursault really thinks there’s no life after death, and when Meursault, undaunted, says yes, the chaplain sits down again.

Meursault begins to lose interest in the chaplain’s endless questions. His attention returns, however, when he realizes that the chaplain is becoming truly up-
set. The chaplain says that he’s certain Meursault’s appeal will succeed but that in his view “man’s justice [is] a vain thing; only God’s justice matter[s].” Meursault must appeal to God to free himself of the burden of guilt for sinning. Meursault insists that he hasn’t committed any sin. He’s been found guilty of committing a criminal offense— a murder— and is paying the penalty.

NOTE: The chaplain (like the magistrate, the prosecutor, and the warden of the nursing home) attempts to persuade Meursault to fall into line, to respond in a way the chaplain feels is in conformity with society. These men treat Meursault like a child who needs the guidance of a father. Despite the chaplain’s assertion that his visit to Meursault’s cell is informal rather than official, his dress underscores his identity as a representative of the Church. He attempts to divert Meursault’s attention from the earthly to the mystical, but Meursault can only acknowledge what he knows physically. Rather than seeing a divine image in his cell, Meursault sees “a sun-gold face, lit up with desire—Marie’s face.”

At the start of the visit, the chaplain appeared calm and self-possessed. At this point he becomes a little frantic, as if he’s used up all his best arguments and doesn’t know what to say next. He stubbornly refuses to believe that Meursault doesn’t wish for a life after death. Meursault answers that the question has no
more meaning to him than wishing to be rich. Finally, Meursault begins to lose control of his own feelings and shouts at the chaplain that his only image of the afterlife is “a life in which I can remember this life on earth.” He tries to explain that he doesn’t want to waste his last days on earth thinking about God.

The chaplain puts his hand on Meursault’s shoulder and tells him that he’s going to pray for him, no matter what Meursault says. At this point, Meursault can’t control himself any longer. He grabs the chaplain by his cassock and “in a sort of ecstasy of joy and rage” pours out the thoughts that have been simmering for so long in his brain. The chaplain has acted so “cocksure,” but it’s really Meursault who is sure of himself. What difference does it make how people choose to live their lives? Nothing has any meaning; life is finite. All people are privileged just by the fact that they are alive, but all people are also condemned to die. It doesn’t matter whether he was condemned because he refused to cry at his mother’s funeral or condemned because he committed a crime. Some readers see an important change in Meursault here. He no longer is so detached from other people but makes a very important connection with others, who, with him, share the predicament of an absurd life on earth.

NOTE: Camus believed that the anti-hero must be in continual revolt against the absurdity of the world. Meursault’s outburst against the chaplain is his first show of outward rebellion against the forces in society (as symbolized by the chaplain) that control human beings.
Until this point, he has acted passively in relation to these forces. His striking out against the chaplain parallels his act of violence against the Arab. In the earlier instance, he is controlled by the forces of nature. In the second instance, he is controlled by the man-made conventions that rule the world. For Camus, both nature and society are ultimately indifferent to the plight of the individual.

The jailers enter the cell and rescue the chaplain from Meursault’s grasp. Meursault falls asleep, exhausted. When he wakes, he hears the sounds of the countryside and feels the cool night air. At dawn, he hears the sound of a steamer’s siren, and he thinks of all the people starting on journeys, living their lives in ways that no longer concern him. He thinks for the first time in a long while about his mother and understands now why she chose to have a “fiance” at the end of her life. He realizes that she probably felt happy in the face of death, and that there was no reason for him, or anyone else, to cry for her. And Meursault, as well, feels happy with the knowledge that he’s lived his life according to his own rules. Society has condemned him for not being obedient to its values, but Meursault no longer cares. “For the first time, the first, [he says] his heart open to the benign indifference of the universe.” He understands how intensely his way of being provokes other people. He imagines the day of his execution and hopes that, as he approaches the guillotine, a huge crowd will greet him with cries of hatred.
Readers have interpreted this last sentiment as expressing a wish, on Meursault’s part, for some kind of recognition from the world. Others feel that it’s a sign of repentance on Meursault’s part, that he feels he deserves condemnation for not appreciating his life before killing the Arab. Still others feel that his wish to be greeted with cries of hatred is a final act of defiance on Meursault’s part.
A STEP BEYOND: TESTS AND ANSWERS

TEST 1

_____ 1. Thomas Perez serves as a foil to Meursault by
A. representing age versus youth
B. grieving for Meursault’s mother
C. getting lost on the way to the funeral

_____ 2. Meursault is criticized by his neighbors and later by the court for
A. having seen a comic film the day after his mother was buried
B. having written a nasty letter to Raymond’s girlfriend
C. saying he doesn’t love Marie

_____ 3. The prosecutor depicts Meursault as
A. a religious fanatic
B. a dangerous killer who is a threat to society
C. an insane man who should be locked up

_____ 4. Meursault’s lack of enthusiasm about a job offer in Paris
A. pleases his boss, because Meursault is showing loyalty
B. makes Marie happy, because she’s sure if he stays he’ll marry her
C. illustrates Meursault’s different values

5. Meursault takes Raymond’s revolver because he
   A. plans to kill the Arab
   B. thinks about suicide
   C. thinks Raymond is going to use it

6. Meursault agrees to marry Marie even though he doesn’t love her because
   A. everybody he knows is getting married
   B. she wants to get married and at the moment he wants to please her
   C. he is afraid of what the neighbors will say about their affair

7. Meursault writes a letter to Raymond’s girlfriend because
   A. he thinks she deserves punishment
   B. Raymond won’t be his friend if he refuses
8. In the courtroom, Meursault says he killed the Arab
   A. because he was drunk
   B. because of the sun
   C. in self-defense

9. The major theme of The Stranger concerns the
   A. consequences of living in an absurd world
   B. nature of Arab-French relations
   C. irrationality of human nature

10. Meursault is obsessed with
    A. the physical experiences of the present moment
    B. his relationship with his parents
    C. his friendship with Raymond

11. Write about Camus’s use of water and sunlight, and discuss the effect that these natural elements have on Meursault.
12. What influence did Camus’s North African background have on the ideas he expressed in The Stranger?

13. Discuss the evolution (or lack thereof) of Meursault’s personality, with special emphasis on how his prison experiences may have affected his attitude toward life.

TEST 2

_____ 1. Meursault’s lawyer advises him
A. to deny that he went to the movies with Marie
B. not to speak out in his own defense at the trial
C. to admit that he killed the Arab

_____ 2. Camus compares the environment in the courtroom to a
A. small-town social
B. bad dream
C. football stadium

_____ 3. The magistrate tries to convince Meursault
A. that he was wrong for killing the Arab
B. of the existence of God
C. to plead self-defense

4. In Part One, Meursault goes to the police station to
A. complain about the Arabs
B. see whether there are any charges against him
C. testify in Raymond’s defense

5. Meursault describes Paris to Marie as
A. a place to go to after they’re married
B. no different from Algiers
C. a dingy sort of town

6. Meursault initially accepts Raymond’s offer to go to his apartment because
A. he’s interested in his neighbor’s problems
B. it will save him from having to prepare his own dinner
C. he wants to meet Raymond’s girlfriend

7. Meursault’s “strangeness” is based on
A. his willingness to do what other people tell him
B. the manner in which he dresses
C. his inability to conform to other people’s expectations

_____ 8. The chaplain tries to convince Meursault to
A. appeal the case
B. marry Marie
C. atone for his sin

_____ 9. While in prison, Meursault
A. contemplates suicide
B. thinks about his life
C. helps to prepare his own defense

_____ 10. For Meursault, the “nameless hour” is
A. dawn
B. midnight
C. early evening

11. Describe the concept of justice as it’s depicted in the novel.
12. Meursault refuses to “play the game” of society. In that respect, discuss the characters of the chaplain, the lawyer, and the magistrate. What games are they playing?

13. In the last sentence of the book, why does Meursault wish for a crowd of angry spectators to appear at his execution?

ANSWERS: TEST 1

8. B  9. A  10. A

1. Water and sunlight are symbols of the real world, the world of the present. You can describe the pleasure Meursault takes in swimming and in feeling the sun on his face, and how the same sun later is harsh and blinding. He says he killed the Arab “because of the sun.” Discuss Meursault’s relationship to water-swimming and washing his hands. You might feel that Meursault’s relationship to water and sunlight is a form of religion; if so, explain why. You can point out that all the other characters in the book are so engrossed in playing the games-religion, justice, love that society has created for them that, except for Marie, these people have little relation to the natural world. Describe Meursault’s devotion to the natural universe, and tell whether his way of seeing the world is more, or less, valid than any other.
12. Camus’s memories of his early childhood had important influence on his writings (see “The Author and His Times” section in this guide). Being born in North Africa exposed him to a culture that was in sharp contrast to the European culture with which he’s also usually associated. Explain how the blend of the two cultures gave his writing an added dimension and allowed him to view European thought from a unique perspective. Discuss the North African setting and how the intense physical environment may have affected Camus’s idea of living solely for the present moment. Write about how the sensuality of the environment- and the natural beauty- probably influenced his sense of love and freedom. You might point out that, for Camus, the beauty of the natural environment was always viewed in direct contrast to the poverty of the North African people.

13. If you feel Meursault’s personality changes in the course of the novel, you might note the following points. In Part One, Meursault is seen as a relatively passive person who cares about little else than the pleasures of the moment. He doesn’t care whether he does one thing or another; and everything that happens to him- meeting Marie, becoming involved with Raymond, killing the Arab- is the result of “chance”. In Part Two, however, Meursault gains perspective on his old life and experiences feelings of deprivation. Before, it didn’t seem to matter to him whether he lived or died, but now he realizes that all his former pleasures were truly important to him. You can still take pleasure in life and seek happiness, he decides, even though you know that ultimately you’re going to die. You
may want to say that in prison Meursault finds solidarity with others who share the predicament of life’s absurdity.

If you feel Meursault’s personality remains constant during the novel, you should note similarities in his behavior in Parts One and Two. You may want to argue that Meursault may undergo superficial change, but that in essence his personality remains the same.

**TEST 2**


11. According to Camus, justice is one of the games society plays. Neither the lawyer nor the magistrate seems to be particularly interested in the truth or in justice; what they want is to convince Meursault that he has to conform to society’s rules. Write about the methods of Meursault’s lawyer in handling the case. Justice, on Camus’s terms, seems to depend principally on the skillfulness of the party putting forth the argument; it has little to do with the truth. You can explain how the prosecutor develops his case and how he interprets the testimony of the witnesses to get his point across. Compare the closing speeches of both the prosecutor and Meursault’s lawyer. Write about the judge’s description of himself as an “umpire” and how that relates to the notion that the participants in the trial are merely involved in playing a game. Discuss whether you think Meursault should
be allowed to defend himself, or whether he’s right to take the lawyer’s advice and say nothing.

12. The “games” of society, according to Camus, are the social institutions people adhere to blindly, without questioning their true worth. The chaplain’s “game” is religion. Write about whether you think his argument with Meursault is sincere, and whether he believes what he says.

The lawyer’s “game” is law. He advises Meursault to remain silent during the trial for fear that he might say something to antagonize the jury. He makes no attempt to plead self-defense, on Meursault’s behalf, and seems resigned to the fact that Meursault will be found guilty unless he shows some emotion on the death of his mother. Meursault’s explanation of his relationship to his mother makes no sense to him.

The magistrate, the final dispenser of justice, is playing two “games”: law and religion. He seems to need reassurance from Meursault in order to confirm his own religious beliefs; he acts as if Meursault is letting him down, in a personal way, by refusing to believe in God.

All three men claim they believe, with absolute certainty, in their ideals; yet they seem threatened by Meursault’s belief in himself.

13. After the emotional scene with the chaplain, Meursault experiences a wave of calmness and serenity. He falls asleep, then wakes to the siren of a steamer in the distance. He realizes that the outside world no longer concerns
him. Discuss how his physical separation from the world (as a prisoner) is similar to the way he felt as a free man, and how his beliefs and sense of honesty tended to isolate him from society. He identifies with his mother and understands why she took on a “fiancé” shortly before her death. At this point, Meursault realizes he wants to begin his life anew. He’s accepted the fact that life is meaningless and that the universe is benign and indifferent. He has remained true to himself and to his own ideals, and that has allowed him to reach a point of ultimate freedom. He hopes that at his execution, he will be greeted with “howls of execration”- or denunciation. You might discuss this last wish as a desire for recognition on Meursault’s part, a sign of repentance, or a last act of defiance by Meursault.

TERM PAPER IDEAS AND OTHER TOPICS FOR WRITING MEURSAULT

1. Discuss Camus’s idea of absurdity and how it applies to Meursault.
2. Compare Meursault, the free man, in Part One to Meursault, the prisoner, in Part Two.
3. Identify and analyze aspects of Meursault’s life that are based on Camus’s own experiences.
4. Describe Meursault’s behavior at the funeral, focusing on his impressions of the residents of the nursing home, the warden, and the doorkeeper.
5. Discuss the religious arguments of the magistrate and the chaplain and Meursault’s reactions.

6. Examine Meursault’s idea of happiness.

7. Discuss why Meursault declines the offer of a job in Paris. Explain the concept of “ambition” as it occurs in the novel.

8. Analyze Meursault’s feelings toward his mother, focusing on what their life was like when they lived together and the reasons he sent her to the nursing home.

9. At the trial Meursault claimed he killed the Arab “because of the sun.” Discuss what he means and why you think he committed the murder.

**OTHER CHARACTERS**

1. Discuss the role of the character Salamano in the novel. Compare Salamano’s relationship to his dog to Raymond’s relationship to his girlfriend.

2. Examine the significance of the robot woman who joins Meursault at the table at Celeste’s.

3. Discuss why Meursault’s lawyer remains nameless. Does he do his job adequately?

4. Analyze Marie’s reaction when Meursault tells her his mother has died.

5. Examine the ways the magistrate, the lawyer, and the chaplain play the “game” of society in The Stranger.
6. Discuss Raymond Sintes’s “code of honor” and how it affects his relationship with Meursault.

LITERARY TOPICS

1. Discuss the images of light and water in The Stranger. What is their significance?

2. Analyze the relationship between Camus’s essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” and The Stranger?

3. Discuss how the setting affects events in The Stranger. Could the book have been set anywhere, or does Algiers- and Mediterranean culture in general—have a specific influence on the lives of the characters?
GLOSSARY

ACOLYTE Person who assists a priest in the celebration of the Mass.

ASSIZE COURT Superior court in Europe and England in which sessions are held periodically for the purpose of administering civil and criminal justice.

AU REVOIR French for good-bye.

BABE Confusion of sounds, voices, or languages.

BIER Platform or portable framework on which a coffin is placed.

BILL OF LADING Document listing and acknowledging receipt of goods for shipment.

BLACK PUDDING Sausage made of blood and suet, sometimes with the addition of flour or meal.

CAFE AU LAIT Coffee served with hot milk; also called “white” coffee.

DE TROP French phrase meaning “in excess” and, thus, unnecessary.

FACTOTUM Employee or assistant who serves in a wide range of capacities.

FERNANDEL (1903-1971) French comic actor and movie star.

FLAT Apartment or suite of rooms on one floor of a building.

FRANC Monetary unit of France and its dependencies.
GRILLE  Metal grating used as a screen, divider, or decorative element in a window or gateway.

GUILLOTINE  Instrument for beheading, consisting of a heavy blade dropped between two grooved uprights. Named after Joseph Guillotin, who urged its use during the French Revolution.

HORS D’OEUVRE  Appetizer served before a meal.

MAGISTRATE  Civil officer empowered to enforce the law.

MOOR  Member of a Muslim people of mixed Arab and Berber descent, living in north Africa.

PANAMA  Straw hat.

PANNIKIN  Small pan or metal cup.

PARRICIDE  Person who murders either or both of his or her parents; the act itself.

REFECTORY  Dining hall in an institution, particularly in a monastery or convent.

ROSETTE  Ribboned ornament in the shape of a rose. Worn in the buttonhole by veterans to indicate the possession of medals such as the Legion of Honor.

SPIRIT LAMP  Lamp using alcohol or other liquid fuel.

TO TRENCH  To dig into a subject and cover it thoroughly.
TRESTLE  Frame consisting of a horizontal beam fastened to two pairs of spreading legs, used to form a table.

VENDETTA  Blood feud in which the relatives of a murdered or injured person seek revenge on the murderer or members of his or her family.
CRITICS

REACTIONS TO THE STRANGER

The Stranger was wholly the product of Camus’ experiences, and the Parisian reader could not have shared them. All he could do was to recognize that a new dimension was being added to his literature, ushered in by a frightening gong: “four short blows that I struck at the gate of misfortune.” In the first major review of The Stranger, Sartre would recognize its existential quality, a historian would see it as the symbol of the Algerian Frenchman isolated in his Moslem milieu. Much later, a hostile Algerian would decide that in killing the Arab, Camus (or his hero) subconsciously acted out the dream of the pied noir who loved Algeria but without Moslem Algerians. A Finnish economic geographer would tell the author of this book that he saw in the beach scene, when sunstruck Meursault pulled the trigger, a textbook example of the effect of climate on population.

Herbert R. Lottman, Albert Camus, 1979

CAMUS ON THE ABSURD

Camus claims that the feeling of the absurd is something of which we find evidence not only in literature but in daily conversation and ordinary contacts with other people. The absurd may be experienced quite spontaneously without preparation of the mind or senses. Its revelation of itself to certain individuals is as arbitrary as the operation of divine grace for a believer in predestination. Gen-
erally, however, a sense of the absurd is most likely to arise in one or more of four different ways. Firstly, the mechanical nature of many individuals’ lives, the deadening routine that marks them, may one day cause some of these individuals to question the value and purpose of their existence. Awareness of the absurd finds its second possible source in an acute sense of time passing— a sense of time as the destructive element. Thirdly, the absurd arises from that sense of dereliction in an alien world which people feel in varying degrees. Lastly, we may possibly experience the absurd through an acute sense of our fundamental isolation from other human beings.

John Cruickshank, Albert Camus and
the Literature of Revolt, 1960

MEURSAULT AND THE NATURAL WORLD
Meursault’s awareness of the colors, lights and sensations of the external world is so acute as to recall at times a mystical experience. Objects exist for him in their absolute newness as they exist for the illuminate. He delights in existence such as he finds it, and each detail is for him infinitely important. This importance of physical existence is, in The Stranger, part of the expression of the absurdity of the world. When no emotions or ideas have any significance, physical events alone are capable of influencing a man and making him act. It is not hatred, envy, greed, revenge, or honor which makes Meursault kill the Arab, but simply the effect of the sun. This is the only explanation which he can give of his
act, and since he is not very good at expressing himself, it is one which society cannot understand or accept.

Philip Thody, Albert Camus, 1959

CAMUS ON RELIGION

We come to understand the thought of Albert Camus only after we have probed the full significance of his optimism about and his pessimism about human destiny. For this throws us back to the abiding evidence of evil in human existence. For the Christian the ultimate character of the universe is good, and in this he finds his hope and the ability to transcend and accept, to a degree, the evil in the world. But what, at this point, has become clear about the thought of Camus is that for him the ultimate character of the universe is evil and that consequently men are always uncertain and always threatened; whatever goodness there be in life, it is in men, and this goodness is created only in the struggle of men to preserve and enlarge this area of goodness which they alone know and which they alone can guarantee.


CAMUS AND THE SUN

The sun, experienced with such pagan receptivity in the early essays, again dominates these passages of The Stranger and unifies them insofar as it symbol-
izes violence and destruction. The key to this symbolical use of the sun lies in the metaphysical intention that animates Camus’ work. The entire novel is an allegory of that absurd universe which Camus had described elsewhere—The Myth of Sisyphus—in philosophical terms. Meursault is the symbol of man perpetually estranged in the world and this conception is reinforced when Camus, lending the sun this potent destructive influence, absolves man from responsibility—and hence from guilt—by reducing him to something less than man, to the status of an irresponsible element in nature.


**CAMUS’S VISION**

The final pages [of The Stranger] remain unclear even after several readings. Camus’ intention is clear enough: he is asserting that life has value and meaning even when it appears most valueless and meaningless; he is trying to find a way to repudiate the implications of his own vision of the human predicament. Yet all he can do is to counter this vision with an abstract argument, and since he is a man of honesty and intellectual integrity, he will not permit himself a glib argument. The result is an obscure one... that carries far less conviction than the strong nihilistic bias of the book as a whole. What remains after you have put The Stranger down... is a cry of despair and the memory of a writer doing his best to say no to the pronouncements of his own voice.
MEURSAULT AND SOCIETY

Society as Camus portrays it is as duplicitous, capricious, and lethal as fate, with one vital difference: fate makes no claim to rationality, while society does make one. Once Meursault has been labeled a “criminal,” all of his previous actions that have seemed merely eccentric are brought against him as evidence of a heinous personality by the witnesses who gave no indication of judging him so harshly before his crime. There is implicit in The Stranger the theme that no matter how innocent a life one may have led, once he has been judged guilty of a crime, society sanctimoniously hastens to reinterpret all his past actions in a guilty light. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret the novel, as the jacket note of an American translation does, merely as the story of “an ordinary little man... helpless in life’s grip.” Although Meursault does describe himself as being “just like everybody else,” this represents a certain irony on Camus’ part... for it is clear that Camus meant Meursault to be something more than a normal citizen whose minor eccentricities are turned against him because a freakish stroke of fate has caused him to commit a crime. Meursault is a social rebel.

Donald Lazere, the Unique Creation of Albert Camus, 1973

MEURSAULT AND THE READER
The second part of the novel is concerned with the enigmatic problem of Meursault’s act, a problem as puzzling to Meursault as to the reader. Of the usual interpretations, Camus makes short shrift, presenting them ironically in Meursault’s semi-burlesque interviews with the prosecutor, magistrate, and lawyer, and in his account of the trial. The first person narrative now establishes a strange dissociation between the facts and feelings Meursault had previously described, and the attempts made by others to interpret them coherently. A definite shift in perspective is introduced: the reader finds himself in the position of judge, jury, and privileged witness. He and Meursault alone know the facts. Camus has thereby put upon him the burden of an explanation Meursault is unable to furnish. Self-critical and self-correcting, the novel rapidly moves towards its end.

Germaine Bree, Albert Camus, 1959

CAMUS AND HEMINGWAY

The so-called “Americanness” of The Stranger is a false trail. Camus stated afterwards that he had used Hemingway’s techniques in order to portray a character who is “ostensibly without awareness.” But Camus was always willing to admit that he had submitted to influences and he often exaggerated their importance; it was part of his desire to be honest and nice. Only a few passages of The Stranger are written in the manner of The Sun Also Rises. As Meursault stands on his balcony he surveys the street; he limits himself to visual observation and does not reconstruct what he sees. Even this owes less to Hemingway than to Camus’ evolution. He had always noted the details of Algerian popular
life. Previously he had lapsed into sentimentality but he had schooled himself to write more objectively.

Patrick McCarthy, Camus, 1982

CAMUS’S STYLE

Each sentence is a present instant, but not an indecisive one that spreads like a stain to the following one. The sentence is sharp, distinct, and self-contained. It is separated by a void from the following one. The world is destroyed and re-born from sentence to sentence. The sentences in The Stranger are islands. We bounce from sentence to sentence, from void to void. It was in order to emphasize the isolation of each sentence unit that Camus chose to tell his story in the present perfect tense.

Jean-Paul Sartre, “An Explication of The Stranger,” 1947
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FURTHER READING

CRITICAL WORKS


Thody, Philip. Albert Camus: A Study of His Work. New York: Grove, 1959. A clearly written, informative study of all Camus’s major works, with a special section on his ideas about capital punishment.

**AUTHOR’S OTHER WORKS**

Titles are listed in order of publication in the United States.

- 1948 The Plague (translated by Stuart Gilbert)
- 1954 The Rebel (translated by Anthony Bower)
- 1955 The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays (translated by Justin O’Brien)
- 1957 The Fall (translated by Justin O’Brien)
- 1958 Exile and the Kingdom (translated by Justin O’Brien)
- 1958 Caligula and Three Other Plays (translated by Stuart Gilbert)
- 1960 The Possessed (translated by Justin O’Brien)
- 1961 Resistance, Rebellion, and Death (translated by Justin
O’Brien)
1963  Notebooks: 1935-1942 (translated by Philip Thody)
1965  Notebooks: 1942-1951 (translated by Justin O’Brien)
1968  Lyrical and Critical Essays (edited by Philip Thody; translated by Ellen Kennedy)
1972  A Happy Death (translated by Richard Howard)

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