"Maman died today." This is the first line of Albert Camus' great existential novel, *The Stranger*. The narrator and protagonist, Meursault, receives a telegram telling him that his mother has died in her retirement home. He isn't sure when she died, exactly, and his apparent indifference to the fact of her death puts people off. He takes the bus to Marengo, where she died, to sit vigil. Her friends from the home also attend, and their displays of grief make Meursault uncomfortable. His mother's fiancé, Thomas Peréz, joins the funeral procession, heartbroken over his loss. Meursault doesn't cry.

On the Saturday after the funeral, he decides to go to the beach. There, he meets Marie, a former coworker. He sleeps with her, then returns home. His apartment is too big for him, and ever since his mother moved into the home he has been living in a single room, having no need of the extra space. He sits in his room, staring out at the people on the street. When night falls, he gets up and thinks that, despite Maman's death, nothing has changed.

Meursault returns to work on Monday. His boss is nice to him, and he works hard. His coworker, Emmanuel, joins him for lunch at the usual place, Céleste's. That night, Meursault speaks to two of his neighbors, one of whom (Salamano) has a dog with a skin condition. His other neighbor, a man named Raymond, recently got into a fight with the brother of his Arab mistress, whom he'd been "keeping," as in paying her way. (In the French, Camus uses the term "Arabe," a pejorative word often used by French colonists.) Raymond found out she was cheating on him and beat her up. Now he wants to punish her, so he asks Meursault to write her a nasty letter.

Marie spends the night on Saturday. The next morning, they overhear a fight between Raymond and his mistress. One of their neighbors calls the cops, and Raymond is told to await a call from the police precinct. That afternoon, he visits Meursault. Meursault agrees to testify at Raymond's trial. Together, they go for a walk, then shoot some pool. When they return, Salamano tells them he lost his dog.

Meursault is at work when Raymond calls to invite him to a friend's beach house near Algiers for the weekend. Raymond also says that a small group of Arab men, including his mistress' brother, has been following him. Meursault's boss offers him a promotion, but Meursault doesn't care one way or the other. Nor does he care if he marries Marie or not. She thinks he's peculiar, but doesn't break up with him. He eats dinner alone at Céleste's, where a woman sits at his table, but doesn't speak. He goes home to find his neighbor Salamano upset. Evidently, the dog has disappeared.
Meursault, Marie, and Raymond head to the beach house, where they meet Masson and his wife. It's a hot, sunny day, and Meursault dislikes being in the sun when he's not swimming. After they eat, the three men go for a walk on the beach, where they're attacked by two Arabs, one of whom has a knife. Raymond is injured, but patched up. Later, Raymond and Meursault go for a walk on the beach, where they see the Arabs again. Raymond has his gun with him, but Meursault takes it away. Later, Meursault shoots one of the men.

Part II

Meursault speaks to a magistrate after being arrested. He has been appointed an attorney, but isn't much interested in his trial or defense. Both his lawyer and the magistrate take offense at the fact that Meursault shows no emotion, either about his crime or his mother's death. His "insensitivity" hurts his case. The magistrate begins calling Meursault "Monsieur Antichrist."

In prison, Meursault lives briefly with some Arab cellmates before receiving a cell of his own. It doesn't take long for Meursault to feel at home there. Marie visits him, trying to reassure him that he'll be acquitted. She's forced to shout, because the visiting room is very crowded, and the noise make Meursault ill. After this visit, Meursault begins to feel closed in by his cell; but that passes. He realizes that his mother was right: given enough time, you can get used to anything.

Meursault loses track of time in prison and begins talking to himself. He finds an old newspaper clipping about a Czech man who was killed by his mother and sister, who hadn't recognized him after his long absence. While Meursault is awaiting trial, the press gets hold of his story and runs with it. When he arrives in court, there's a large crowd. After the jury is selected, the judge starts to question him. This doesn't go well for Meursault.

Following Meursault's questioning, a series of witnesses are called to testify against his character in court. When the caretaker says that Meursault drank a cup of coffee and smoked a cigarette at his mother's funeral, the prosecutor argues that Meursault is a monster because of it. Then Marie takes the stand, and the courtroom falls silent when they hear that she and Meursault went to see a movie (a comedy) on the day after Maman's funeral. Raymond's testimony reflects poorly on Meursault, because Raymond is a pimp and therefore a known degenerate.

Meursault finds the prosecutor's summation boring. He knows that the prosecutor is twisting the facts to paint an overly negative picture of things. Meursault finally says that he killed the man "because of the sun." His lawyer makes an impassioned speech on his behalf, to no avail. After a short recess, the jury returns with a guilty verdict. Meursault is sentenced to death by guillotine.

While awaiting execution, Meursault's thoughts are consumed by his appeal. He knows it will be denied, but this doesn't keep him from imagining it on a daily basis. He refuses to see a chaplain, thinking instead of his impending death and of what it will feel like to die. The chaplain comes to visit against Meursault's wishes, but grows frustrated when Meursault insists that there's no hope and that he will never turn to God. Finally, Meursault snaps and makes the chaplain cry with his shouts of rage, portending his existential doom. When the chaplain leaves, Meursault accepts his fate happily.

Summary

The Stranger offers one of the most striking openings in modern fiction: “Mama died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know.” Immediately introduced is a character, Meursault, so disconnected from chronology and other human beings that he is one of twentieth century literature’s most memorable embodiments of alienation, of an absurdist world where social bonds are a sham. The British edition of Camus’s first published
novel translates the title as *The Outsider*, and Meursault indeed finds himself a marginal figure in a decentered universe where private and immediate sensations have displaced objective norms.

Meursault, an employee of a shipping company, participates in the rituals of his mother’s funeral and, though he realizes he is supposed to be playing the role of bereaved son, cannot feel anything for the old woman’s corpse. Shortly after returning to Algiers, Meursault goes to the beach, picks up a woman, Marie Cardona, and takes her to the movies and then to bed.

The following Sunday, Meursault and Marie are invited by Raymond Sintès, a raffish neighbor, to spend the day at the beach. During the outing, they are trailed and menaced by two Arab men who are apparently resentful of the way in which Raymond has abused a woman. During a solitary walk along the shore, Meursault encounters one of the Arabs again. It is oppressively hot, and the knife that the Arab wields glistens blindingly in the sun. Without premeditation or reflection, Meursault takes the gun that Raymond has given him and fires five shots into the stranger.

Narrated in Meursault’s own affectless voice, *The Stranger* consists of two sections. The first recounts the events leading up to the fatal shooting, and the second reports its aftermath—Meursault’s imprisonment, trial, conviction, and impending execution. Part 2 is in effect a commentary on part 1, an attempt to find coherence in one man’s random actions. Marie, Raymond, the owner of the café that Meursault frequents, his mother’s elderly friend, and others testify in court about the events in part 1. Both attorneys attempt to find some pattern. In the story that Meursault’s lawyer tells, all the details paint the portrait of an innocent man acting in self-defense.

Yet the prosecutor finds a different design. For him, Meursault’s callousness about his mother’s death is symptomatic of a cold-blooded murderer, and it is that reading that the jury accepts when it sentences Meursault to death by guillotine. Meursault, however, rejects the specious patterns that both attorneys impose on events. He also refuses consolation from the prison chaplain, who offers him a kind of cosmic narrative in which everything is linked to a vast providential scheme.

Alone in his cell, Meursault realizes that despite the lies people tell to camouflage the truth, all are condemned to death. Uncomfortable with the florid rhetoric that distracts a reader from stark realities, he becomes a champion of candor. In his spare, honest style and his recognition that life is gratuitous and resistant to human attempts to catalog and rationalize it, Meursault is prepared to face extinction liberated from all illusions. He is, wrote Camus in 1955, “not a piece of social wreckage, but a poor and naked man enamored of a sun that leaves no shadows. Far from being bereft of all feeling, he is animated by a passion that is deep because it is stubborn, a passion for the absolute and for truth.”

**Additional Summary: Summary**

When Meursault is notified of his mother’s death, he leaves immediately for Marengo, where she was living in the Home for Aged Persons. He is taken to the room where her coffin is placed and casually declines the doorkeeper’s offer to unscrew the lid so he can look at her. Meursault spends the night there, drinking coffee, smoking, and chatting with the doorkeeper. The next day, a Friday, he attends the funeral and leaves immediately afterward to return to Algiers.

Saturday morning, Meursault goes for a swim and runs into Marie Cardona, a girl who formerly worked in his office. He invites her to a movie and later takes her to bed.

Meursault spends Sunday lounging on the balcony of his flat, smoking and watching people on the street below. The next day, returning home from work, Meursault comes upon Raymond Sintès, a young man who
lives on the same floor. Raymond, who calls himself a warehouseman but is reputed to be a pimp, was just in a fight with the brother of a Moorish girl he is seeing. Believing that the girl is cheating on him, he beat her up, and her brother accosted him, seeking revenge. Raymond asks Meursault to draft a letter to entice the girl back so he can humiliate her, and Meursault agrees to help.

One afternoon, Meursault is in his room with Marie when they hear Raymond beating the girl again. A police officer is summoned. Later, Raymond asks Meursault to testify to his own knowledge that the girl was false to Raymond. Again, Meursault agrees to help, and he and Raymond go out to a café. Upon returning, they encounter another neighbor, an old man named Salamano, whose dog ran off. Although he abused the animal mercilessly, he is weeping and fearful of what will become of him without his longtime companion.

That Sunday, Meursault and Marie accompany Raymond to the beach, where they encounter two Arabs who were following Raymond for some time. A fight breaks out, and Raymond is cut before the Arabs slip away. Later, with his wounds patched, Raymond goes walking and comes upon the Arabs again. This time, Raymond pulls a gun, but Meursault, who followed, offers to hold it to ensure a fair fight. Almost immediately, however, the Arabs vanish.

Raymond goes back to the bungalow, but Meursault—Raymond’s pistol still in his pocket—stays out in the blazing afternoon sunlight and soon comes upon the Arab who stabbed Raymond. Meursault steps forward and, seeing the flash of a knife blade in a blur of light and heat, pulls the trigger. He pumps four more bullets into the Arab’s inert body.

Meursault is arrested and questioned by the examining magistrate for the next eleven months, usually with a court-appointed lawyer present. The questions focus on two things: his apparent callousness at his mother’s funeral and the fact that he hesitated after his first shot and then fired four more times. At one point, the magistrate displays a small silver crucifix and asks Meursault whether he believes in God. When Meursault replies matter-of-factly that he does not, the magistrate is visibly upset.

Meursault is held in prison, where he is visited by Marie, who holds out hope for his acquittal. He soon becomes accustomed to prison life, although small privations occasionally upset him, most of all, the fact that he is not allowed to smoke. He begins to sleep sixteen to eighteen hours a day. Soon, six months pass, and he begins talking to himself without realizing it.

In June, his trial begins. One of the first witnesses called, the warden of the Home for Aged Persons in Marengo, testifies that Meursault’s mother complained about her son’s conduct toward her and that on the day of the funeral Meursault neither cried nor lingered by the grave. The doorkeeper is called to testify that Meursault did not want to view his mother’s body. When Marie takes the stand, the prosecutor maneuvers her into admitting that her affair with Meursault began the day after his mother’s funeral and that they first went to the movies to see a comedy. When Raymond attempts to exonerate his friend, he is exposed as a criminal and a pimp.

After a trial that seems almost to exclude him from its proceedings, Meursault is pronounced guilty and sentenced to death by decapitation. Meursault refuses repeatedly to see the chaplain, but one day the chaplain enters the cell without his permission and tries to talk to him about God. Meursault is patient at first, but then, becoming bored and annoyed, lashes out, cursing the chaplain and pointing out that all his supposed certainty amounts to nothing in the end. Hearing the commotion, the guards rush in to rescue the priest, leaving Meursault to drop off to sleep, exhausted.

When he awakens, he finds himself awash in a strange feeling of peace and resignation, devoid of hope and accepting of what he describes as “the benign indifference of the universe.” He is content to await his execution and, in fact, hopes that it will be witnessed by a large crowd of spectators cursing him.
Additional Summary: Summary

Part One
*The Stranger* opens with the narrator, Meursault, receiving a telegram telling him his mother has died. Departing on the afternoon bus from Algiers, he travels fifty miles to Marengo for the funeral. Upon arriving, he meets the director of the retirement home who leads him to the mortuary where his mother lies in a coffin. There Meursault begins a vigil that will last until the next morning. He dozes, awakening to the sound of his mother's companions at the home. They sit across from him, joining in the vigil. The night is punctuated by fits of crying and coughing by the residents. Meursault remains unemotional. The burial the next day becomes a blur of images for Meursault: the funeral procession in the hot desert sun, the village, the cemetery, the tears and fainting spell of Thomas Pérez—a male companion of his mother—and finally the bus ride back to Algiers. At one point in the day, a funeral helper asks him if his mother had been very old; Meursault gives a vague response because he does not know her exact age. Such seemingly superfluous details resurface with great significance later in the story.

The next morning at the beach, Meursault meets Marie, a former typist at his office. They make a date to see a comedic Fernand film, after which Marie spends the night at Meursault's apartment. Alone on his balcony the next evening, Meursault concludes that the death of his mother has not changed his life at all. In the stairwell of his apartment building the next afternoon, Meursault encounters two of his neighbors: the aged Salamano, who is cursing his dog, and Raymond Sintès, a pimp. Raymond invites Meursault over for a meal. After dinner, Raymond asks Meursault to write a letter for him to his ex-mistress, a Moorish woman. Raymond wants to lure her back to punish her for having taken advantage of him. Earlier that day, Raymond had been in a fist fight with her brother. Meursault agrees to write the letter.

The next weekend Meursault and Marie hear screams coming from Raymond's apartment. With the hallway full of residents, a policeman arrives and talks to Raymond. His ex-mistress cries out that Raymond beat her. Raymond is given a summons and must go to the police station. Later that afternoon, Raymond asks Meursault if he will serve as a witness for him. Meursault assents and Raymond is eventually let off with a warning. That evening, Salamano tells Meursault that his dog is missing.

The following Sunday, Meursault, Marie, and Raymond take the bus out of Algiers to the coast. This excursion becomes a turning point in the plot. Earlier in the week, Raymond had invited them to a friend's beach house. A group of Arabs, among them the brother of Raymond's ex-mistress, watches them depart. At the beach Raymond and Meursault greet Raymond's friend Masson and his wife. After an early lunch, the three men take a walk on the beach. They encounter the brother and another Arab. A fight ensues. Raymond is cut by a knife and Masson must bring him to a doctor. Later in the afternoon, Raymond and Meursault again walk down the beach. They meet up with the two Arabs near a fresh-water spring. Raymond pulls out a revolver but Meursault convinces him to relinquish it. The two Arabs suddenly withdraw and Raymond and Meursault return to the beach house.

Preferring neither to walk up the stairs to the beach house nor to remain in the now scorching sun, Meursault decides to walk back along the beach. Struggling against the heat, he approaches the cool spring. Alone in the shade sits the brother. Feeling the breadth of the hot beach behind him, Meursault advances. The Arab pulls out his knife, the glint of which strikes Meursault. Oppressed by the heat, blinded by the flash of light and the sweat falling into his eyes, Meursault fires the revolver and kills the Arab. He pauses without reflection, then fires four more times into the inert body.

Part Two
Meursault is arrested and interviewed. A court lawyer is appointed to him and inquiries are made into his private life. Accusations of insensibility at his mother's funeral surface. Meursault explains to his lawyer that
his nature is such that his physical needs often overpower his feelings. He had been tired the day of the funeral. Meursault observes that his mother's death has nothing to do with his crime. The lawyer responds that Meursault obviously has little experience with the law.

Meursault begins the first of many interviews with a magistrate. The magistrate first asks about Meursault's mother, then inquires as to why he paused between his first and second revolver shot. To this latter question Meursault has no answer. Pulling out a crucifix, the magistrate speaks of repentance; he discovers that Meursault does not believe in God. Responding to the magistrate's accusation that he has a hardened soul, Meursault remarks that rather than feeling regret at having killed the Arab, he experiences only a certain ennui, or sadness. Eleven months pass before the trial. Marie is allowed to visit him only once because they are not married. Meursault soon becomes accustomed to the prison routine and looks forward to the now cordial meetings with the magistrate.

With the summer sun and heat comes the trial. The first day, Meursault remarks upon the conviviality of the court scene. The lawyers and journalists mingle and greet one another like members of a club. Meursault watches in silence as witnesses are called forth to testify. The prosecution recalls details from the funeral: Meursault's calmness and lack of emotion, his quick departure after the burial, and the information, followed by a hush from the courtroom audience, that he did not know the age of his mother. The prosecutor characterizes Meursault as Raymond's conspirator: he both served as Raymond's witness at the police station and wrote the letter that set into motion the events that ended in the Arab's death. The prosecutor concludes that the murder was premeditated and that Meursault killed the Arab to help his friend Raymond. According to the prosecutor, Meursault's "irregular" relationship with Marie, begun the day after his mother's funeral, reveals his fundamental lack of respect for social values and reinforces his criminal nature. When Meursault's lawyer objects and questions whether his client is accused of having buried his mother or of having killed a man, the prosecutor retorts that he accuses Meursault of having "buried his mother with the heart of a criminal." Meursault is finally asked by one of the judges why he killed the Arab. Meursault responds that it was "because of the sun." The prosecutor demands the death penalty. The jury returns a verdict of premeditated murder and the judge sentences Meursault to be guillotined in a public square.

Lying in his cell, having refused three times to speak to the chaplain, Meursault contemplates the social mechanism determining his fate and posits the benefit he would derive from knowing that at least one person had managed to escape the inevitable course of events. Waiting for his appeal, Meursault allows the chaplain to enter his cell. After answering many questions concerning his lack of faith, Meursault suddenly cries out and grabs the chaplain by the collar. In a fit of rage he yells out his certitude about life and death, declaring that all are condemned to die, and that this common end renders life absurd and our choices meaningless. Following the outburst, Meursault is overcome with peace. His speech to the priest has purged him of bitterness and hope and he feels liberated. For his existence to be complete, Meursault only wishes for many spectators to be present the day of his execution and that they greet him with cries of hate:

"In the evening, Marie came to pick me up and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said that it made no difference to me and that we could if she wanted to. She wanted to know if I loved her. I answered as I already had before, that all that meant nothing but that undoubtedly I didn't love her. 'Then why marry me?' she said. I explained to her that marriage was of no importance and that if she wanted, we could get married. Besides, she was the one asking and I was just agreeing to say yes. She then remarked that marriage was a serious thing. 'No' I said. She was quiet for a moment and looked at me in silence. Then she spoke. She simply wanted to know if I would have accepted the same proposal coming from another woman for whom I would have held a similar affection. 'Of course' I said. She then wondered if she loved me. For my part, I could know nothing about it."
Chapter Summaries: Part 1, Chapter 1: Summary and Analysis

Part I, Chapter 1 Summary

Meursault receives a telegram informing him that his mother has died in Marengo. He isn't sure why his boss is reluctant to give him the time off. He has lunch at Céleste's, a favorite restaurant, then catches the two o'clock bus. He falls asleep, then wakes up to find that he has been sleeping against a soldier, with whom he does not wish to chat.

He walks two kilometers from the bus station to the nursing home where his mother died. There, he asks to see his mother, but isn't allowed to until he speaks to the director of the home. It's revealed that Meursault was his mother's sole financial support and that he was forced to put her in the home to ensure that she received the proper care. He feels that this was the right decision, in part because Maman, as he calls his mother, was never that happy living with him.

Maman's body has been taken to the home's mortuary. There, Meursault meets the caretaker, who isn't given a name. Meursault begrudgingly initiates small talk with the caretaker, who dives into his entire life story. He tells Meursault that he's sixty-four and came from Paris. He was destitute when he happened upon the home. He never expected this to be his life. Meursault offers him a cigarette, and they drink coffee together.

A group of women from the home comes into the mortuary to grieve over their loss. One woman in particular starts to cry, which makes Meursault very uncomfortable. Apparently, this woman is (or was) his mother's best friend. She cries for a while, but then quiets down. The caretaker offers the mourners coffee, but this doesn't prevent Meursault from falling asleep for a little while. He's later able to wash up in the caretaker's room.

Meursault signs some documents for the director, who says Maman's friends won't be allowed to attend the funeral; it's more "humane" that way. The director has, however, given Thomas Peréz, Maman's "fiancé," permission to attend the funeral. Peréz wears an almost comical outfit with a felt hat and corkscrewed trousers, but his grief is real. During the procession, Peréz cries so hard that the tears fill his wrinkles, blinding him. Meursault doesn't shed a tear.

Part I, Chapter 1 Analysis

Diction

You'll notice that this novel is told almost entirely in short, simple sentences. Camus rarely uses semi-colons and deliberately keeps the language plain and accessible. Nevertheless, a style starts to emerge, and the diction reflects Meursault's flat, unemotional affect. On the rare occasions that Meursault grows upset or feels the need to speed up time, the syntax changes, and sentences start to get more complicated.

Motifs

Light and Heat. Throughout the novel, light and heat will appear as oppressive forces that upset Meursault, make him uncomfortable, and eventually lead him to commit murder. In the next chapter, we'll see how Meursault finds relief from the heat when he goes swimming with a woman.

Simile
Camus uses a simile when he describes Peréz "crumpl[ing] like a rag doll."

Symbols

**Red and White.** Meursault describes the "blood-red earth" and the "white roots" that fall over his mother's coffin. This blood-red earth is of course a symbol of death, whereas the white roots are clear symbols of goodness and purity. Together, these two colors symbolize Maman's death and afterlife.

**The Sun.** Traditionally, the sun is a symbol of life and energy, its light a source of intense joy and pleasure. Meursault, however, finds the sunlight irritating, and the sun becomes a symbol of oppression for him. He will later blame his crimes on the sun itself.

Themes

**The Absurd.** *The Stranger* is Albert Camus' great absurdist novel. In this first chapter, Meursault's reactions to the formality of his mother's funeral underscores the essential absurdity of traditions about death, which dictate that Meursault not smoke at the funeral (a ridiculous expectation, to be sure).

**Death.** Much can and has been inferred from Meursault's response to his mother's death. Traditionally, a son who has recently lost his mother is expected to grieve openly, to cry at the funeral or express some feelings of remorse, but Meursault does none of these things. Throughout this chapter, he's irritated and insensitive, and seeing his mother's best friend weep makes him uncomfortable. His apparent apathy to everything around him will later result in him being called a monster at trial.

Chapter Summaries: Part 1, Chapter 2: Summary and Analysis

**Part I, Chapter 2 Summary**

Meursault wakes up in his own bed on Saturday morning, a day after the funeral. He realizes that his boss didn't want to give him the days off, because with Thursday and Friday off he has a four day weekend. He decides to enjoy himself and go down to the beach, where he runs into Marie, a former coworker of his. He spends the day swimming with her, and then takes her to see a movie (a comedy). Marie spends the night.

In the morning, Marie leaves, and Meursault eats breakfast alone. It's a nice afternoon, so he sits in front of his window and watches the people below. First, families fill the streets, and he sees kids running around in dresses and patent-leather shoes. Then the street clears for a while, only to be filled again by the fans of the local soccer team. As the evening wears on, many different kinds of people pass under Meursault's window. Though he never explicitly says so, he seems to find them beautiful and interesting. In spite of Maman's death, nothing has changed.

**Part I, Chapter 2 Analysis**

**Alliteration**

One example of this is the phrase "some saggy straw chairs." It's important to note, however, that *The Stranger* was written in French and only translated into English after its original publication. It's therefore important to keep in mind that some of these word choices are not Camus' own.

**Allusions**
Fernandel (1903 - 1971). A French actor and singer. Fernandel was the leading comic actor of his generation. In Part II of the novel, the prosecutor in Meursault's trial will make much of the fact that Meursault went to see a comedy the day after his mother's funeral.

Hyperbole

Meursault uses a hyperbole when he says, "I had the whole sky in my eyes."

Motifs

Colors. In the previous chapter, red and white appeared as symbols of death and the afterlife. Here, color reappears as a motif that will weave through the entire novel. When Meursault goes swimming in the sea, he looks up at the beautiful "blue and gold" of the sky. His reaction to these colors stands in stark contrast to the irritation he felt when faced with sunlight in the previous chapter.

Light. Light inspires very different emotions in this chapter than in the previous one. The heat and light that he described as "oppressive" before appears here as a thing of beauty, gleaming on the water and on the lush, shiny hair of women he finds beautiful. This change appears to be a direct result of Meursault's new relationship with Marie. He seems to be the kind of man who only truly finds beauty in women and sex (topics he doesn't generally like to discuss).

Themes

Guilt. This chapter includes what may be Meursault's one admission of guilt: "Besides, you always feel a little guilty." He says this in relation to his mother's death, which isn't his fault, he says, but still makes him feel guilty. This could indicate that he does have some love for his mother, or it could just be an acknowledgement of the absurd responses to death that have been ingrained in society. Either way, it's telling that Meursault admits to some guilt over his mother's death but will never express remorse for his crimes later in the novel.

Chapter Summaries: Part 1, Chapter 3: Summary and Analysis

Part I, Chapter 3 Summary

Meursault returns to work on Monday. There's a stack of invoices on his desk, and he works hard to get through them. He and his coworker Emmanuel run to catch the streetcar to Céleste's. After lunch, Meursault heads home to nap, then returns to work. When he comes home later that night, he runs into Salamano, his neighbor. Salamano's dog, a spaniel, has a skin disease, and Salamano frequently berates the dog, calling him names. Nevertheless, the two are inseparable.

Meursault's other neighbor Raymond invites him over for dinner. Raymond "lives off women," a polite way of saying that he's a pimp. He has a short fuse, too, and has recently gotten into a fight with the brother of his mistress. Her Highness, as Raymond calls her, lived off the money that he gave her. He paid for rent and food and even gave her spending money, but she kept insisting that it wasn't enough. He began to suspect that she was cheating on him, so he beat her.

Even though Raymond and his mistress have broken up, he still has sexual feelings for her. Ever since the fight, he has been obsessed with the idea of punishing her. He finally asks Meursault to write her a nasty letter on his behalf. Meursault agrees. Raymond really appreciates it.
Part I, Chapter 3 Analysis

Foreshadowing

When Meursault feels the blood pounding his ears at the end of the chapter, it foreshadows what will be his eventual downfall: that letter and his friendship with Raymond. Though he never says so, his physical response to this scene with the letter indicates that he knows it was a bad idea.

Parallelism

Camus draws a parallel between Raymond and Meursault: though temperamentally the two men could not be more different, they were both nevertheless financially responsible for another—in Meursault's case, his mother, and in Raymond's case, his girlfriend. Both women were incapable of supporting themselves, though for different reasons. The parallel characterizes Meursault as a dutiful son and Raymond as a violent pimp. This will make Meursault's trial all the more absurd.

Symbols

The Lottery Ticket. Raymond happens to find this lottery ticket in his mistress's purse one day. It becomes a symbol of chance and bad luck, because when Raymond finds it he makes assumptions about her social life and character that may or may not be true (he thinks she's having an affair, but there's no real evidence of this—nothing definitive). Chance will later become an important theme in the novel, as Meursault uses it to explain how he happened to kill the Arab man.

Themes

Violence. This chapter introduces two new characters, both of which are violent in their own ways. Elderly Salamano frequently beats and verbally abuses his spaniel, a small, whimpering thing. Similarly, Raymond beats his mistress, who has no immediate means of defending herself. When compared to these men, Meursault seems nonviolent to the point of apathy. This will make his later trial all the more absurd.

Chapter Summaries: Part 1, Chapter 4: Summary and Analysis

Part I, Chapter 4 Summary

Meursault has a normal week. He works hard, sees a couple movies with Emmanuel, then spends Saturday with Marie. The next day, they overhear a fight between Raymond and his mistress. He accuses her of using him and strikes her hard enough that one of the neighbors calls the cops. He talks back to one of the police officers, who tells him to await a call from the precinct. He will be questioned about the domestic abuse.

After the cops leave, Meursault and Marie sit down to lunch, but she isn't hungry. He takes a nap. Around three o'clock, Raymond drops by to ask if Meursault will testify on his behalf. Meursault agrees, and the men go play pool. When they return, they find Salamano on the doorstep, looking upset. It appears that he has lost his dog. Meursault suggests checking for it at the pound, but Salamano balks—he doesn't want to pay money for that beast.

That night, Meursault hears Salamano weeping. He thinks of Maman, but doesn't cry over her.

Part I, Chapter 4 Analysis
**Allusions**

*The King of the Escape Artists.* It's unclear exactly what Camus is referring to here, but this may be an allusion to Roy Gardner, a bank robber famed for his daring escapes from various penitentiaries. Given that this novel is set in Algiers, however, it's unlikely that Salamano could have stopped to see Gardner himself.

**Motifs**

*Cigarettes.* Cigarettes have appeared in almost every chapter of the novel thus far: while Meursault is sitting vigil for his mother, while he's speaking with Raymond at dinner, and when Raymond opens the door for the cops. In each case, the cigarette accompanies a scene of trouble, infusing its image with danger or distress. Later, the cigarette will become a symbol of Meursault's apparently evil or criminal character.

**Repetition**

Raymond says, "You used me, you used me. I'll teach you to use me." This repetition of the word "used" emphasizes his hurt and fury over his mistress's alleged mistreatment of him.

**Simile**

Meursault uses a simile when he says that Marie's face looks "like a flower."

**Themes**

*Death.* Though never explicitly stated, we can assume that Salamano's dog has died from the fact that it never returns. This is the second of three deaths in the novel (not counting Meursault's execution, which occurs after the novel ends). Salamano's quiet grief, as heard through the walls that night, serves as an interesting counterpoint to Meursault's apparent lack of grief over his mother's death in Part I, Chapter 1. The fact that Meursault thinks of his mother when he hears Salamano weeping indicates either that he is upset or that he doesn't feel required to be. Either way, he doesn't cry.

*Law.* When Marie asks Meursault to call the police, he makes a telling comment: he doesn't like cops. This aversion to the police will become even more relevant later in the novel, when Meursault is put on trial for murder. He has very little to say to the police, the prison guards, and even his own lawyer, which of course makes him seem like even more of a monster.

**Chapter Summaries: Part 1, Chapter 5: Summary and Analysis**

**Part I, Chapter 5 Summary**

Raymond calls Meursault at work to invite him to a friend's beach house that Sunday. Marie can come, too. Raymond also says that he's being followed by a group of Arabs. He wants Meursault to keep his eyes open for them. Meursault agrees.

A little later, Meursault's boss says that he's thinking of opening an office in Paris and would like Meursault to run it. This would mean a promotion and a chance to leave Algiers and go to Paris; but Meursault doesn't really want to go. His boss takes issue with his response, but Meursault has let go of his ambitions and isn't that interested in the job.
Marie comes over that night and asks Meursault if he would marry her. He says if that's what she wants, then yes, but it doesn't matter to him either way. If he happened to love another woman as much as Marie, he would say the same thing to her. It makes no difference. For some reason, this satisfies Marie, and they go for a walk around town before she has to leave.

Meursault has dinner at Céleste's, where a woman sits at his table, but doesn't speak to him. After dinner, he follows her for a while out of vague curiosity and boredom. Later, Salamano comes to visit, and Meursault offers his condolences about the dog, which may well have gotten run over. Maman liked the dog, Salamano says. He thinks it was right of Meursault to put her in the home. There, she could make friends.

**Part I, Chapter 5 Analysis**

**Similes**

Meursault describes the woman who sits at his table as having "robotlike" movements.

**Themes**

**Friendship.** In spite of his apparent apathy, Meursault has developed a number of friendships throughout this novel: with Emmanuel, Raymond, Salamano, and even the caretaker from his mother's home. He expresses no real affection for these friends, however. Camus further emphasizes the emotionless nature of these friendships by introducing his mother's grieving friends and Salamano's poor dog, whom he desperately misses, in spite of his previous behavior.

**Marriage.** Camus discusses two marriages in this chapter: Meursault and Marie's proposed marriage (which will never take place) and Salamano's marriage to his late wife. Like Meursault, Salamano wasn't terribly enthusiastic about his marriage. He was merely "used to" his wife, which is more or less how Meursault feels about Marie. The reader can safely assume, however, that, unlike Salamano, Meursault wouldn't feel particularly lonely if Marie were to leave him or to die. We will see how their separation affects him in Part II of the novel.

**Chapter Summaries: Part 1, Chapter 6: Summary and Analysis**

**Part I, Chapter 6 Summary**

Meursault, Marie, and Raymond wake up early to get to the beach on Sunday. Meursault is tired and has a slight headache (a bad way to start what will turn out to be a terrible day). He testified on Raymond’s behalf the day before, and Raymond got off with a warning for beating his mistress. Her brother, however, hasn't let it go, and he and some other Arab men follow Raymond and the group to the beach.

Raymond introduces Meursault and Marie to his friend, Masson. Marie and Masson's wife hit it off immediately. Masson offers his guests some fish he just caught. They go swimming, then go back to Masson's house for lunch. Everyone drinks, some of them way too much. Masson's wife takes a nap, but Masson, Meursault, and Raymond go for a walk. That's when they see the Arab men.

Raymond strikes the first blow. One of the Arab men pulls a knife and slashes Raymond's mouth and arm. He quickly retreats, and Masson takes him to the doctor. Meursault tries to explain what happened to the women, who are understandably upset about their fight. When Raymond returns, he's bitter and angry and insists on going down to the beach. Meursault comes with him, trying to keep him out of trouble.
When they see the Arab men lying on the beach, Raymond asks Meursault if he should shoot one of them. Meursault says he shouldn't do it unless the man draws his knife again, but then changes his mind and takes Raymond's gun, promising that if Raymond gets into a physical fight with the Arab and if the Arab pulls a knife, then he'll shoot the Arab for Raymond. This threat diffuses the situation temporarily. The Arabs retreat, and Raymond is satisfied.

Meursault, however, feels drained under the sun's oppressive glare. Exhausted by the very idea of climbing the stairs to Masson's bungalow, he turns back toward the beach, carrying the gun. He's already on edge when he sees one of the Arabs again. The man is lying in the sand, watching him intently. Half-blinded by the sun, Meursault steps forward, foolishly trying to escape the heat. He tenses, accidentally pulling the trigger. He kills the Arab man, shooting him once, then four more times.

**Part I, Chapter 6 Analysis**

**Foreshadowing**

Meursault's "funeral face" foreshadows his later death sentence, which he receives for his actions in this chapter. In describing Meursault's expression as a "funeral face," Camus indicates that his protagonist is already walking toward his death.

**Metaphor**

Meursault uses a metaphor when he describes the bullets "knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness." This figures unhappiness as a place where Meursault will live for the rest of the novel (i.e. a prison).

**Personification**

Meursault personifies the sea when he describes how it "gasped for air with each shallow, stifled little wave."

**Simile**

Meursault describes the day hitting him "like a slap in the face." This is just one of many similes he uses in this chapter to describe the heat and the sun as a violent force driving him to shoot the Arab man.

**Symbols**

**Beaches.** For Meursault, beaches symbolize happiness, health, and joy. When the fight with the Arab men breaks out, this happiness is forever ruined, and the beach becomes just as oppressive as the rest of the world.

**Raymond's Gun.** Raymond's gun becomes not just a symbol of death and violence but of Meursault's demise, as he shoots the Arab man needlessly. Its glinting metal and reflective sheen only amplify the violence of the sun's light, linking violence and oppression to the heat of the day.

**White Flower Petals.** These flower petals are symbols of Marie's innocence. She knocks the petals off their flowers as she walks through the grass—a happy, idle gesture, like that of a child.

**Chapter Summaries: Part 2, Chapter 1: Summary and Analysis**
Part II, Chapter 1 Summary

A week after Meursault's arrest, he's questioned by the magistrate. During the first interrogation, Meursault reveals that he has not hired a lawyer. He's then appointed a lawyer, who visits him in prison to discuss the case. It seems that investigators have spoken to people at his mother's home and discovered that he "showed insensitivity" during the wake. Meursault's response to this (that he may or may not have loved Maman and that it doesn't matter, either way) upsets the lawyer a great deal. In fact, he appears disgusted by Meursault and leaves angry.

Once again, Meursault is taken to see the magistrate. His lawyer isn't present, due to "unforeseen circumstances." This time, the magistrate has two main questions: did Meursault love his mother and why did he pause between the first and second shot? Meursault answers the first question in an indifferent tone of voice, stating that he loved his mother as much as anyone else, but doesn't explain why he shot the Arab man four more times. He doesn't have a good reason.

Frustrated, the magistrate shows Meursault a silver crucifix, insisting that God will forgive him if he repents. When this backfires, the magistrate gets angry and declares that Meursault is the most hard-hearted criminal he has ever met. He becomes dejected and loses interest in Meursault, or at least in saving his soul. Their subsequent meetings always include Meursault's lawyer. These are all so routine that Meursault begins to think almost fondly of the magistrate. Eleven months into the investigation, however, the magistrate shows how he really feels when he refers to Meursault as "Monsieur Antichrist."

Part II, Chapter 1 Analysis

Hyperbole

Though the magistrate isn't aware of it, his renaming of Meursault as "Monsieur Antichrist" is an example of hyperbole. Meursault, who has expressed little interest in religion, is by no means the Antichrist and does not symbolize the end of society or the triumph of sin. Suggesting as much is inappropriate and demonstrates prejudice against Meursault, who doesn't receive a fair trial.

Motifs

Light and Heat. Camus returns to the motif of light and heat in this chapter, as Meursault sits in the unusually hot office of the magistrate. This heat reminds him of the beach, making it easier for him to recall the exact events of that day on the beach. It does not, however, help him understand his behavior.

Simile

Meursault uses a simile when he describes his first conversation with the magistrate as seeming "like a game," meaning it feels scripted, as if they're part of a role-playing game out of a simple detective novel. This only enhances the absurdity of Meursault's situation.

Symbols

The Silver Crucifix. This crucifix symbolizes forgiveness and the magistrate's belief that Meursault can still be saved if he repents for his crimes. This crucifix means nothing to Meursault, however, and his apathetic repudiation of the symbol strips it of much of its power.

Themes
Religion. In this chapter, Camus brings the theme of religion to the forefront. He hinted at this theme in the funeral scene in Part I, when Meursault's apathy toward religion and traditional ceremonies had a distinctly alienating effect on the mourners. Here, his apparent atheism gets him into trouble with the magistrate, who believes him to be the Antichrist because of it.

Chapter Summaries: Part 2, Chapter 2: Summary and Analysis

Part II, Chapter 2 Summary

Meursault initially feels some reluctance about speaking of his life in prison, but gets over it. The prison guards place him in a cell with several Arab men, but then transfer him to his own cell. He lives in solitude after that. Early on, he receives a visit from Marie. This visit takes place in a big, brightly lit room where ten prisoners and their visitors shout over each other to be heard. She still thinks that they'll get married.

During their conversation, Meursault periodically grows bored with Marie. He listens in on some of the conversations around him, noting the husband and wife beside him and the young man and his mother to his other side. Eventually, Marie is taken away, and he returns to his cell. After this, she writes to say that they wouldn't allow her to visit again because she wasn't his wife.

Meursault struggles with his separation from Marie. He doesn't like to admit it, but he misses the physical contact and longs to touch a woman again. On the basis of this, he becomes friends with the head guard, who understands. Soon, however, Meursault lets go of his desires, succumbing to the silence and isolation of his imprisonment. He also struggles to give up cigarettes. Eventually, though, he breaks his addiction and starts looking for ways to kill time.

Meursault starts sleeping most of the day. When he's awake, he thinks about his old apartment in Algiers and imagines his old possessions. He finds an old newspaper clipping under his mattress. It tells the story of a Czechoslovakian man who had returned to a village after a twenty year absence, only to be murdered by his mother and sister, who didn't recognize him. Meursault loses track of time in prison. After five months, he finally looks at himself in a mirror and realizes he has been talking to himself.

Part II, Chapter 2 Analysis

Motifs

Cigarettes. Cigarettes make their final appearance in this chapter, which sees Meursault kick his habit due to the absence of cigarettes in solitary confinement. He suffers a brief withdrawal period, but is able to recover without medical attention. Though this vice has caused him trouble in the past, getting rid of it doesn't improve his situation and merely resigns him to his fate.

Sound. Sound becomes an important motif in this chapter. Previously, sound was most noticeable in the murder scene, when the gunshots sounded like knocking on a door. Here, Camus approaches the motif of sound through the voices of his characters: the prisoners in the visiting room, shouting to be heard, and Meursault himself, who talks out loud for months without even noticing it. The sounds in this chapter all point to the devastating effects that prison has had on Meursault (often without his even acknowledging it).

Symbols
Marie's Letter. For Meursault, Marie's letter symbolizes the end of romance, the end of sex, and, ultimately, the end of happiness. When Meursault reminisces about waiting to see Marie each week, it becomes clear that this was his primary joy in life and that giving it up is harder than giving up cigarettes, to which he was addicted. He thinks of the loss of physical intimacy as the worst part of prison.

The Newspaper Clipping. This clipping becomes a symbol of absurdity itself. Its story (of a wealthy man who just happens to be killed his mother and sister when he hides his identity from them) hinges entirely on chance and could easily have gone differently. During the trial, Meursault will assert that it was "chance" that led him to be on the beach the day of the murder. This makes his story as improbable as that in the clipping.

Themes

Sex. Meursault repeatedly says that there are certain things he has "never liked talking about." It takes a moment to realize that one of those things is sex. He refuses to go into particulars about his sex life with Marie or his romantic entanglements with women, but it's clear that sex—if not romance—is one of the few pleasures in his life.

Chapter Summaries: Part 2, Chapter 3: Summary and Analysis

Part II, Chapter 3 Summary

Meursault’s trial begins. He’s stunned to see that the stuffy courtroom is full. Apparently, the press had gotten hold of the story and built Meursault up to be a monster in the papers. This is less about Meursault's actions and more about the fact that it was a slow news cycle. His lawyer and all of the guards seem friendly with the members of the press, who greet each other as if they're at some kind of country club. A bell rings, signalling the beginning of the trial.

Three judges enter the courtroom, one in red and two in black. The prosecutor is also wearing a red robe. First the jury is selected, then the judge checks that all the witnesses are in attendance. Marie, Raymond, Salamano, Masson, Thomas Peréz, and a number of Meursault's acquaintances are there. Before the witnesses take the stand, the presiding judge questions Meursault. He reads Meursault's previous statements, then asks about Maman: was it hard for Meursault to put her in the home? He says no. This will not be the last time he's asked about Maman.

There's a short recess, in which Meursault is driven back to the prison to eat some lunch. Then the trial begins again. First, the director of the nursing home is called. He testifies that Meursault was unusually "calm" at the funeral and appeared unmoved by the loss of his mother. He also says that Maman complained about being put in the home, but adds that this is common among residents. It nevertheless reflects poorly on Meursault.

Then the caretaker is called to the stand. He testifies that Meursault offered him a cigarette during Maman's vigil and later accepted a cup of coffee (as did the other mourners). This upsets the jury, and Meursault notices that the entire audience has been judging him because of it. He doesn't deny what he did, and his lawyer argues it's insignificant, but the prosecutor uses it to smear Meursault's character.

Thomas Peréz then testifies that he was crying too hard at Maman's funeral to notice if Meursault was crying, too, meaning that he may or may not have been crying. Meursault's lawyer points out that this may or may not be true, and that this characterizes the entire trial: "everything is true and nothing is true!"
Céleste then takes the stand. He states that Meursault was a good customer and a friend and that the murder was simply "bad luck," meaning that it was the result of a series of unfortunate events. This makes Meursault happy, but he doesn't show it; and of course the jury doesn't care. Marie takes the stand. The prosecutor asks her to describe her first date with Meursault. He points out that this date took place the day after the funeral. His comments cause Marie to burst out in tears.

Following Marie's outburst, Masson and Salamano take the stand. Both testify that Meursault is an honest man. Raymond is the last witness and, some would say, the last nail in the coffin. He says it was all "just chance": chance that Meursault had the gun, chance that he shot the Arab man, chance that he was involved in Raymond's dispute in the first place. The prosecutor immediately discredits Raymond's testimony by revealing that he's a pimp.

Meursault's lawyer shouts, "Come now, is my client on trial for burying his mother or for killing a man?" When the spectators laugh, the prosecutor proclaims that the two are gravely related. Soon, the trial is adjourned, and Meursault is taken back to prison. The dim light of evening reminds him of his old life and how content he was to listen to the sounds of the city.

**Part II, Chapter 3 Analysis**

**Metaphor**

Meursault equates the jury with streetcar passengers who stare at him (the new passenger) in order to figure out if there's something funny or weird about him. He uses this metaphor to indicate that he's often judged in the real world, just as he is in the courtroom.

**Motifs**

**Colors.** In this chapter, red and black become very prominent colors. Both the prosecutor and the presiding judge wear red, whereas the two other judges, who remain silent, wear black. The use of color here aligns the prosecutor and the presiding judge, who seem united in their distaste for Meursault.

**Simile**

Meursault describes a man "who looked like a fattened-up weasel."

**Themes**

**Chance.** Chance first made its appearance in this novel in Part I, Chapter 3, when Raymond finds a lottery ticket in his mistress' purse. Here, chance frames Meursault's crime as a kind of happenstance: all the events leading up to it were "just chance," as if at any given point things might've worked out differently. One might reasonably assume, because of this, that Meursault's actions were mistakes, but he doesn't seem to think of it that way at all.

**Isolation.** Just before the trial begins, Meursault gets the feeling that he's an "odd man out, a kind of intruder" at his own trial. He's surrounded by people who already know each other (lawyers, journalists, and judges) and doesn't notice his friends in the crowd at first. That word—"intruder"—touches on the theme of isolation implied by the title, The Stranger. The reader is meant to assume that Meursault doesn't really fit in French society, that he isn't part of the status quo and thus can't relate very well to others. His isolation makes it easy for the prosecutor and the press to target him.
Meursault's lawyer makes a good point when he says that in this absurd trial "everything is true and nothing is true." The truth of the matter is that Meursault shot the Arab man for no good reason and without planning the murder in advance. However, the prosecutor and the reporters are twisting the facts of the case, making Meursault out to be a monster simply for drinking a cup of coffee. Truth, it seems, is less important than appearances, at least in this novel.

Chapter Summaries: Part 2, Chapter 4: Summary and Analysis

Part II, Chapter 4 Summary

Meursault's lawyer and the prosecutor both make their closing arguments. Meursault notes that, at heart, the two speeches are the same: both claim that he's guilty, but one offers an explanation and the other doesn't. The prosecutor argues that Meursault's actions were premeditated and that all of his actions are indicative of a criminal mind. He then says that Meursault is a soulless monster who has never expressed remorse for his crimes. He even suggests that, because of his supposed moral culpability in his mother's death, Meursault is spiritually guilty of the crime to be tried in the court the next day (a parricide).

Astonished, Meursault stands up to say he never intended to kill the Arab man. He did it "because of the sun," meaning the heat and light that has been oppressing him throughout the novel.

Meursault's lawyer asks for a few hours to prepare his closing remarks. That afternoon, they return to the courtroom to hear the lawyer's argument. He speaks in the first person, assuming the role of Meursault as he says, "It is true I killed a man." This is a rhetorical strategy that all defense lawyers use, according to one of the guards. Meursault finds his lawyer's closing remarks less skillful than the prosecutor's. He hears the sound of an ice cream truck and remembers the life he has lost.

Finally, the jury leaves the courtroom to deliberate. It only taken them forty-five minutes to deliver a verdict of "guilty." The judge then sentences Meursault to death by guillotine. Meursault is given the opportunity to say something, but doesn't.

Part II, Chapter 4 Analysis

Hyperbole

During his closing statement, the prosecutor argues that Meursault is also guilty of the parricide (or murder of a father) to be tried that following day. Though the prosecutor clearly thinks this to be a logical statement, given his speech, it is an obvious example of hyperbole, because Meursault is in no way culpable for that murder, morally or legally.

Repetition

Camus has used repetition throughout the last several chapters to both clarify and warp the facts of Meursault's case. Essentially, the more often these facts are repeated, the more vulnerable they are to interpretation, making it easy for the prosecutor to repeat them all in a damming light that makes Meursault seem like a monster. This is a rhetorical device he's using to make it difficult for the jury to interpret the facts any other way.

Prosopopoeia
Prosopopoeia is a rhetorical device in which a speaker (in this case, Meursault's lawyer) speaks on behalf of another person (in this case, Meursault). Typically, this only occurs when the other person is physically absent. However, an argument can be made that, because Meursault describes himself as "far removed from the courtroom," that he's spiritually "absent" enough for his lawyer to use the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia during summation.

Symbols

The Tin Trumpet. The ice cream vendor's tin trumpet symbolizes not only freedom but joy; the joy of life in summer, the sweet cool ice cream breaking through the heat, the pleasure of pleasure itself. Once convicted, Meursault will never experience these things again.

Chapter Summaries: Part 2, Chapter 5: Summary and Analysis

Part II, Chapter 5 Summary

Meursault refuses to see the chaplain again. Instead, he thinks about the impossibility of escape and of how, even if he were to run from the guillotine, he would be shot down by a bullet anyway. Even though he knows this, he can't help himself from thinking of escape. He remembers a story Maman told him about his father, whom he never actually knew: that one day his father went to witness an execution, and when he came home he spent the morning throwing up, because he was so upset. It doesn't make Meursault feel better.

Meursault expounds on how he would change the system if he had a chance: he would devise some kind of drug cocktail that would guarantee death nine times out of ten; that way there would still be some hope of surviving for the prisoner. He thinks the guillotine is too final. It makes him wish the blade will work the first time, which is tantamount to wishing for death itself. He also realizes that there are no steps leading up to the guillotine. This makes it less of a spectacle for him.

Meursault clings to two things: the dawn and his appeal. He knows that the guards will take him in the morning, so whenever he survives it, he knows he has another day. He thinks of his appeal even though he knows it's futile. He even considers the distant possibility of being pardoned. Most often, though, he succumbs to his fears and anxieties. He again refuses to see the chaplain, who visits him anyway.

During his visit, the chaplain insists that Meursault turn to God. Everyone in his position has, in the past. When Meursault expresses no interest in God, the chaplain stands up, looks Meursault right in the eye, and asks if he has any hope at all. Meursault doesn't look away, having mastered this game of chicken, and insists that there's nothing after death, that when he dies he will merely be dead. He finds the chaplain's presence oppressive.

Finally, Meursault snaps and grabs the chaplain by the collar. He yells that the chaplain is wrong to believe in hope, that his chastity is a kind of death, and that nothing matters, nothing at all. He feels vindicated, because no one believed his theories of life before, but he knows he's right now. There's no reason for him to care about death. He was going to die anyway, and so will everyone else. This outburst brings the chaplain to tears. He's taken away, and Meursault finds peace.

Part II, Chapter 5 Analysis

Alliteration
Camus uses alliteration when he describes the light as a "golden glow" in Meursault's cell.

**Allusions**

**The French Revolution (1789 - 1799).** The French Revolution was a time of great upheaval in France, which was swimming in debt. Over a period of ten years, the monarchy was destroyed, feudalism abolished, and a new French republic founded. Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette, were famously executed by guillotine in front of large audiences. Meursault alludes to this because their executions gave him the impression that he would have to walk up stairs to reach the guillotine. This is false.

**Metaphors**

Meursault refers to the prison-industrial complex as a "relentless machinery" that conspires to keep men in prison and bury them under the machinations of a heartless justice system.

**Motifs**

**Colors.** Within his prison cell, Meursault's world is reduced to gray stones, drab uniforms, dark nights. The only color in his life is that of the sun and sky, which he can see through the bars of his window. He takes great comfort in these colors, describing their "golden glow" and brilliant red in almost tender terms. It's clear that color is his only real joy in this chapter.

**Sound.** While awaiting his execution, Meursault becomes acutely aware of sound. He listens for the guards and their footsteps, knowing that when they come for him he'll be led to the guillotine. He rushes to the door at even the faintest sounds, straining to decipher his own fate. Sound becomes a source of great anxiety, as Meursault contemplates his death, just as silence becomes a source of peace.

**Simile**

Meursault compares his breath to a dog's panting, indicating his level of distress.

**Themes**

**Death.** Near the end of the chapter, Meursault asserts that there's no afterlife and that, once he dies, he will be forgotten, just like everyone else. He goes so far as to say that, if Marie is dead, then she doesn't matter to him anymore. When one absurd life ends, millions more continue, so what does it matter if someone lives or dies? Originally, he regards his execution with a mix of fear and disbelief. After he speaks with the chaplain, however, he makes peace with his impending death and meets it with a kind of happiness.

**Religion.** Camus has woven the theme of religion throughout the novel, beginning with Maman's funeral and continuing through Meursault's trial. His atheism has damned him in the eyes of the law even more so than his actual crime, which would appear no more or less vile than any other murder were it not for the discussion of Meursault's criminal "soul." In this chapter, Meursault repudiates religion and yells at the chaplain who lectures him about God and hope. Religion, like life, proves meaningless, because it will not save Meursault from death.

**Themes**

*The Stranger,* with the *Myth of Sisyphus* (1955; *Le Mythe de Sisyphe,* 1942), is Camus's great apology for the absurd. Camus himself described it as an "exercise in objectivity, the impersonal working out of the logical
results of the philosophy of the absurd." According to Camus's philosophy at this time, life has no meaning; there is no hope for it ever to have meaning. There is no eternity; therefore, all must be done in this life. Indeed, this very thought brings happiness to Meursault at the end of his trial. Passive and indifferent to the forces of life, Meursault exemplifies a life without meaning, an idea that was to attract a world at war, and especially the French people, victims of a humiliating Occupation.

In the midst of this hopeless universe, Camus nevertheless shows a poetic appreciation of the Mediterranean atmosphere in which he grew up. Camus's evocation of the sun at the moment of the murder is lyrical, although it has been judged by some critics as a contradiction to the absurd and indifferent universe created up until this moment. The sea likewise appears in all its sensuality as Meursault and Marie bathe, the symbol also of life, and of evasion. Camus ends the book on a lyrical note, as Meursault, facing a starry night, would be willing to begin life again, and finally feels happiness in his acceptance of the absurd, like Sisyphus, whom, says Camus, one must imagine as happy in the futility of rolling his rock endlessly uphill.

**Themes**

**Absurdity**

Absurdity is a philosophical view at which one arrives when one is forced out of a very repetitive existence. As Camus says in “An Absurd Reasoning” from his essay collection *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

> It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.

This description characterizes Meursault perfectly. The essay collection explained the philosophy of the absurd, and the novel demonstrated the theory.

Meursault’s repetitive life runs smoothly. Then, little by little, Meursault’s happy stasis is pulled apart by the rest of the world’s movement and collapse begins. His mother dies, and with her, a sense of stability he has had his whole life. He becomes involved with Marie, who asks him whether he cares for her and in asking nearly breaches his safe isolation. Raymond insists upon being his friend. Salamano’s dog just disappears, thus disrupting a parallel repetitive rhythm. He shoots a man, and the law demands that he die. Each subtle disruption of Meursault’s desire to be indifferently static brings him to a mental crisis. This crisis is resolved when he comes to understand the utter meaninglessness of his individual life within the mystery of the collective society. The events of his story only make sense that way. Any other explanation leads him to theology—represented by the priest—or fate.

In an expression of Camus’s humanist logic, neither theology nor fate can offer men of intelligence (men like Meursault, willing to use only bare logic to consider the question of life) an explanation for the absolutely senseless things that humans do—war, murder, and other heinous acts. The alternative, therefore, is absurdity. Meursault recognizes the “truth” that life is meaningless. That means life is just what one makes of it while being conscious of two certainties—life and death. In doing so, Camus argues, one would uphold traditional human values because they safeguard one’s life. In other words, human values (what we understand today as “human rights”) lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. When one is truly willing to face this Truth, one can be happy. Unfortunately, Meursault is executed before he can live in this fashion.

**Colonialism**

There are no hints which suggest that the novel takes place in a colonized country. There are, however, hints
that racial tensions exist between French-Algerians and “Arabs.” From the first page the reader knows that the novel is set in Algeria and that the date of publication is 1942. Therefore, it can be guessed that the novel occurs in a colonized setting. In addition, the narrator hints at the racial tension by telling the story as if it took place solely among some French people who happened to live in Algeria. Meursault only associates with French-Algerians, and the only people he names are French-Algerians. Then, for no apparent reason, he shoots an Arab.

While it could be argued, and usually is, that the issue of race and colonialism is not an important theme to the novel (because the novel is about the larger concern of absurd individuality), it is still important to note its existence. First, none of the Arabs in the book, including the murder victim, receive a name. In fact, the nurse at the nursing home is given no other attribute aside from having an abscess that requires her to wear bandaging on her face. The reader sees her as marked by this condition, and she is described as an “Arab.” The reader gains little information about her. Another Arab woman is Raymond’s girlfriend. She accuses him of being a pimp, and he beats her. She has no name. In fact, Meursault comments on her name, saying, “[W]hen he told me the woman’s name I realized she was Moorish.” It does not bother him that his “friend” is having relations with an “Arab,” nor does it bother him that Raymond wants to mark her for cheating on him. He wants to cut her nose off in the traditional manner of marking a prostitute. Finally, her brothers and his friends begin to follow Raymond. It is this nameless group of Arabs who Meursault, Masson, and Raymond encounter at the beach. One member of the group is found by Meursault alone and is shot.

The issue of race is the most troubling and unresolved issue of the novel. If one reads the novel solely in terms of the theme of absurdity, the action of the story makes sense—in a meaningless sort of way. However, read in terms of a lesson on human morality and the ethics of the Western tradition wherein a white man goes through a struggle—or agon—in the land of the “Other,” then the story is very contradictory and highly problematic. Meursault certainly does arrive at a “truth,” but that arrival was at the cost of a man’s life as well as a ruined love.

Free Will
Though the possession of a free will is taken for granted by most people, the presentation of its “freeness” in The Stranger is rather unsettling. Meursault consistently expresses his awareness of his own will as free. In some instances, this might be interpreted as indifference, but Meursault is decidedly, perhaps starkly, free. He does not feel the temptation to encumber his reasoning with considerations or dogmas. For example, he is never worried and is repeatedly doing a systems check on his body—he declares states of hunger, whether he feels well, and that the temperature is good or the sun is too hot. These are important considerations to Meursault, and they pass the time. Conversely, the magistrate is frustrated, tired, and clings to his belief in God. Meursault discerns that the magistrate finds life’s meaning only through this belief. But when the magistrate asks if Meursault is suggesting he should be without belief, Meursault replies that it has nothing to do with him one way or the other. This is because the only things that should concern Mersault, he decides, are elemental factors, such as keeping his body comfortably cool.

Characters: Characters Discussed

Meursault

Meursault (mur-SOHLT), a young clerk in a business office in Algiers, Algeria. Although not totally disengaged from humanity, Meursault, the narrator and main character, maintains only unemotional and uncommitted relationships with others, even his mother. When called to a home for the aged in Marengo, fifty miles away, for his mother’s funeral, he shows no desire to view her body for the last time and shocks the other residents of the home by his seeming indifference. Though physically intimate with his Arab girlfriend, Marie, he regards her desire for marriage as a matter of no consequence. When an acquaintance named
Raymond Sintes promises to be Meursault’s “pal” for life if he will help him in his own love affair, Meursault
replies only that he has “no objection.” Meursault is completely but passively amoral. He sees nothing wrong
with attending a comic film with Marie immediately after returning from the funeral or in assisting Raymond
in the latter’s mean-spirited effort to punish his girlfriend for her refusal to submit to his domination. When
Meursault and Raymond arm themselves against two Arabs, one of them the brother of the young Arab
woman Raymond is attempting to dominate, it occurs to Meursault that whether he shoots or does not shoot
the Arabs would amount to the same thing. When he kills one of the Arabs, he acts unconcerned. Another
feature of his character, complete resignation to the flow of events, including the consequences of the murder,
emerges during his prison experience. If character is created by, and is merely the sum of, a person’s
decisions, as existentialist philosophy holds, Meursault makes very few true decisions. Even the five shots
that he fires into his victim seem to represent something that simply happens to him rather than any conscious
choice. Later, in his cell, he contemplates his future calmly, concluding that having lived even one day in the
outside world provides a prisoner with enough memories to keep him from ever being bored. He cooperates
with his court-appointed lawyer only passively and does nothing to help the latter counter the general
impression of callousness toward his mother that the lawyer knows the prosecution will use to sway the jury.
Meursault completely lacks faith in God or in the possibility of an afterlife. He rebuffs all soul-saving
attempts of the priest who visits him in his cell after his conviction. He possesses only the existentialist
certainty of death and feels happy in the awareness that life has emptied him of any hope except the hope that
his execution may draw “howls of execration” from a crowd of onlookers.

Marie

Marie, Meursault’s girlfriend, by contrast a conventional young woman who enjoys the beach and films. She
want to settle down with a husband and is willing to marry the indifferent Meursault. By visiting him in prison
and attending his trial, she exhibits patient hopefulness in behalf of her hopeless companion.

Raymond Sintes

Raymond Sintes, an aggressive young man who comes closest to being a friend of Meursault. He possesses
mostly undesirable traits. Pugnacious and vindictive, he beats his own Arab girlfriend and talks constantly of
punishing her and wreaking vengeance on her brother, who appears only to be trying to protect her. It is
Raymond’s aggressive attitude that draws Meursault into the situation that results in his crime.

The lawyer

The lawyer, unnamed, is a crafty and valiant defense attorney. He is nevertheless unable to elicit from his
client the responses that might prevent the imposition of the death penalty.

The priest

The priest, also unnamed, is a man of faith, conscientious in his duty. He is knowledgeable about psychology
but unsuccessful in his attempts to reclaim Meursault’s soul for Christianity. The fact that he is resourceful
and persuasive serves to underline the extent of Meursault’s resistance to all aspects of conventional faith and
hope.

Characters

Meursault, the protagonist, is a character who is ostensibly without awareness, except for immediate physical
sensations. He is an "outsider," as the title sometimes appears in English, who refuses to play the game of
society. There is a gap between what he feels and what goes on around him, and he constantly vacillates
between total comprehension and total skepticism. Although he does not understand the people around him, he keeps on trying. He is unable to create a real relationship with other people. His attraction to Marie is purely physical; when she wants to marry him, he replies with his usual "It doesn't matter." His neighbor Raymond Sintes requests his help; he writes the requested letter mechanically. However, one has the impression that he keeps trying to enter into the world around him, but that he is too much of an "outsider" to succeed. His name suggests "mer," the sea, and "soleil," the sun, which summarizes his contact with primitive physical sensations only.

Other characters are represented through Meursault's eyes, since the story is narrated in the first person. Marie appears as any woman, physically attractive, described often through her hair, her clothing, her body. One might doubt her commitment to Meursault, until she comes to visit him in prison, and is still interested in marrying him. Meursault's two neighbors, Salamano, and Raymond Sintes, are described humorously. Salamano looks like his dog, whom he constantly insults. Yet when the dog disappears, he is inconsolable. Raymond Sintes has a doubtful profession, a cluttered room, and a mistress on whom he wants revenge. Meursault is amused by them, but not overly involved. On the other hand, the judge of instruction, the lawyer, and the chaplain are presented ironically, in keeping with the parody of justice, the depersonalization of Meursault, and his refusal to believe in a future life.

**Additional Characters: Characters**

**Marie Cardona**
Formerly a typist in the same office as Meursault, Marie Cardona happens to be swimming at the same place as Meursault the day after his mother’s funeral. She likes Meursault and their meeting sparks a relationship. She asks if he loves her but he tells her honestly that he doesn’t think so. Still, he agrees to marry her, but then he is arrested.

Marie represents the happy life Meursault desires to live. In fact, she is the only reason he even considers regretting his crime. Meursault sees Marie’s face in the prison wall—but the image fades after a time. Marie, for Meursault, was a comfort representing a life of “normality” that he might have lived. However, it did not happen. Instead he becomes certain only of life and death and is executed.

**Caretaker**
The caretaker takes a keen interest in Meursault. He stays by him throughout the vigil and provides him with explanations and introductions. He also tries to justify his life to Meursault. He explains that he has been to Paris and only became a caretaker when fate made him destitute.

It is the caretaker who provides the most damaging testimony at the trial. The caretaker testifies that Meursault “hadn’t wanted to see Maman, that [he] had smoked and slept some, and that [he] had had some coffee.” The prosecutor dwells on the caretaker’s testimony and asks him to repeat the part about having a coffee and a cigarette with Meursault. It is during this testimony that Meursault “for the first time … realized that [he] was guilty.”

**Céleste**
Céleste owns the cafe at which Meursault customarily dines. He is called as a witness at Meursault’s trial. His theory on Meursault’s crime is that it was bad luck. He seems to be a fatalist, believing that one is more the victim of chance than a free agent.

**Defense Counsel**
The lawyer represents Meursault to the best of his ability. He seems to be the only person who understands the silliness of the trial and the difficulties for someone like Meursault. After the examination of Pérez on the
witness stand, he says, “Here we have a perfect reflection of this entire trial: everything is true, and nothing is true!” Unconsciously, the lawyer has just sided with Meursault— the truth of the court is arbitrary and meaningless.

**Director of the Home**
The director of the nursing home where Meursault’s mother lived is a very matter-of-fact man. Death in his community means taking care of ceremony and keeping, as much as possible, the other patients from being too much on edge. Consequently, everything is done “as usual” so that while a funeral is a stress to the community, it is also a habitual ritual. The director accompanies the funeral procession to the gravesite and offers Meursault information about his mother’s life at the home, but Meursault is not very interested.

**Examining Magistrate**
The magistrate, as an investigator, is interested in what other people think. This makes him the exact opposite of Meursault in psychological makeup. He examines Meursault’s testimony for the insights they might provide about Meursault’s mind, rather than making an effort to establish the facts of the murder. He tells Meursault that with God’s help, he will try to “do something” for him. The magistrate asks Meursault if he loved his mother before asking about the five shots. Thus, the connection between Meursault’s behavior at his mother’s funeral and his act of murder is made concrete. The magistrate then presents Meursault with a Bible and crucifix, hoping to save Meursault’s soul.

The ruse backfires because Meursault refuses to see the relevance of religion to the state’s case against him. Having failed to “do something for him,” the magistrate never brings up the matter again.

The magistrate is an important character in the story as the representative of society’s law. He fails in his attempt to make Meursault acknowledge either the authority of law or that of religion. The magistrate is entirely unable to understand Meursault, and after a few sessions speaks only to his lawyer.

**Lawyer**
See Defense Counsel

**Masson**
Masson is the owner of the beach house to which Raymond takes Meursault and Marie for the day. Masson is an obese, carefree fellow who wants them all to live there in the vacation month of August and share expenses. He believes that lunchtime is when one is hungry and that it is good to do things when one wants and not according to schedule. Thus he is simply a man who likes to live well and to be happy.

**Arthur Meursault**
Meursault is a French Algerian clerk who learns that his mother has died. He attends the funeral and, on the following day, goes to the beach. There, he meets Marie, with whom he begins a relationship. A neighbor invites him to the beach where they encounter some Arabs. Meursault shoots one of the Arabs for no apparent reason. He is arrested, tried, and executed. Until the moment when the judge pronounces him guilty, Meursault is annoyingly indifferent to the activities of the real world. The judgement jars him into an examination of life, at the end of which he concludes that life is absurd. He finds peace and happiness in this acknowledgment. This conclusion of his analysis, Meursault discovers, is liberating.

*The Stranger* is the manifestation or incarnation of Camus’s theory of the “absurd” man. Meursault reveals Camus’s theory through his actions. That is, the protagonist Meursault possesses a curious psychology whose activity is of more interest than the fact of his crime. Meursault is an “outsider”— a person who lives in his own private world and maintains no interest in anyone else, least of all in how they view him. However, he is not unaware of others. Several crucial moments demonstrate this: at the opening, Meursault is aware that his boss shows him no sympathy upon hearing of his mother’s death. Next, he is aware that one is expected to
mourn the dead, which he refuses to do. He knows he could say he loved Marie and that she would accept his love, but he does not. Lastly, he is aware, throughout his own trial, that he ought to say certain things, but he does not.

Finally, as Camus himself said, Meursault is a Christ figure who dies for everyone who misunderstands him. Meursault becomes aware of the meaninglessness with which society pursues its notions of propriety, and, in the case of the prison chaplain, its dogmas. Meursault is convicted as much for his psychological indifference, his selfish and asocial behavior, and his lack of mourning for his mother, as for his crime. His position is not without logic. For example, when the magistrate tries to persuade him to believe in God so that he might be forgiven, Meursault asks what difference that makes when it is the state that will find him guilty and then execute him—not God.

It is before the priest, however, that he finally explodes: “none of [the priest’s] certainties was worth one strand of a woman’s hair. Living as he did, like a corpse, he couldn’t even be sure of being alive. It might look as if my hands were empty. Actually, I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he; sure of my present life and of the death that was coming. That, no doubt, was all I had.” Meursault dies because he knows this truth—he is killed because the others cling to their illusions.

Monsieur Thomas Pérez
Pérez is an old man who was a friend of Meursault’s mother at the nursing home. He insists on attending the burial. Because of a limp and his age, Pérez falls behind the procession but still manages to attend. He is called as a witness at the trial and is unable to say whether or not he had seen Meursault cry.

Raymond
Raymond is a neighbor who asks Meursault to write a letter for him. Meursault agrees to do so because it is easier than saying no. Consequently, they become friends and Meursault even testifies to the police that Raymond’s girlfriend was cheating on him. In response, the police let Raymond off (for beating her) with a warning. However, the girlfriend’s brother is not so benevolent, and, along with a group of Arabs, starts following Raymond. A showdown takes place when Raymond and Meursault visit Masson’s beach house. A fight ensues, and Raymond is cut. Shortly after this, Meursault shoots one of the Arabs.

Raymond represents the small-minded man who views things in terms of possession—he beats a woman for not being solely his; he insists that Meursault is his friend because he agreed to write the letter. Relationships, for Raymond, are his certainties and life fills in around them. It is Raymond, contrary to the evidence, who unquestioningly believes that Salamano’s dog will return.

Salamano
Salamano is a disgusting older man who beats his dog. His routine walk with his mutt and his muttering give Meursault daily amusement. This routine is part of the general rhythm of tedium that is Meursault’s universe. Sadly, the dog goes missing, and Salamano comes to Meursault for help. Meursault offers him none and Salamano acknowledges that his whole life has changed. The disruption of routine caused by the loss of the dog is one of many signs that Meursault’s tedious universe has collapsed.

Analysis: Literary Style

Narrative
Psychological self-examinations are common in French first-person narratives, but Camus’s *The Stranger* gave the technique of psychological depth a new twist at the time it was published. Instead of allowing the protagonist to detail a static psychology for the reader, the action and behavior were given to the reader to decipher. Camus did this because he felt that “psychology is action, not thinking about oneself.” The
protagonist, along with a failure to explain everything to the reader, refuses to justify himself to other characters. He tells only what he is thinking and perceiving, he does not interrupt with commentary. By narrating the story this way, through the most indifferent person, the reader is also drawn into Meursault’s perspective. The audience feels the absurdity of the events. However, other characters, who do not even have the benefit of hearing the whole of Meursault’s story as the book’s readers do, prefer their ideas of him. They are only too ready to make their judgments at the trial. Moreover, they readily condemn him to death as a heartless killer without regret.

Structure and Language
Camus’s narration was immediately recognized as extremely innovative. His language, while recognized as similar to the American “Hemingway style,” was seen as so appropriate to the task as to be hardly borrowed. The style that Camus uses is one of direct speech that does not allow much description. He chose that style because it backed up his narrative technique. The reader is focused on the characters’ reactions and behavior as they are related through Meursault.

Camus also divided the story at the murder. Part one opens with the death of Maman and ends with the murder of the Arab. In part two of the novel, Meursault is in prison and at the end is awaiting his execution. The division reinforces the importance of Meursault in the universe of the story. Normality is jarred throughout the first part until it dissolves into chaos because of the murder. The second half shows the force of law entering to reestablish meaning and therefore bring back order through the death of Meursault. The structure and the language, then, are technically at one with the greater theme of absurdity.

Setting
Environment is a very important element to Meursault. He reports the heat of rooms, the way that the sun affects him, and all the other conditions of the habitat he lives in. The story itself is set around the city of Algiers and the beach. It is always daytime and the sun is always out. Curiously, in the universe of The Stranger there is no night, no darkness outside of mental obscurity. Things happen overnight, but no plot action occurs in the dark. The only moment when darkness does threaten is at the start of the vigil, but the caretaker dispels the darkness with the electric light. Other things that happen overnight include private encounters with Marie (we assume) and the verdict, which is read at eight o’clock at night. However, the novel’s events occur during the day, long days that are hardly differentiated from each other. Such facts of time emphasize the absurdity of Meursault; everything is meaningless except for the current state of the body in the environment.

Foreshadowing
This technique is used to indicate a happening before it occurs, and this foretelling can be foreboding. A disturbing moment for Meursault, as well as the unsuspecting reader, occurs while Meursault is sitting near his Maman’s coffin. “It was then that I realized they were all sitting across from me, nodding their heads, grouped around the caretaker. For a second I had the ridiculous feeling that they were there to judge me.” Later, in part two, it is precisely his behavior at this funeral with which the state prosecution is concerned. The way in which Meursault honors his mother has everything to do with his guilt. In other words, the sense of judgement he felt from those sitting across from him at the funeral vigil foreshadowed the solitary condemnation at the trial.

Analysis: Places Discussed

*Algiers

*Algiers. Coastal capital of Algeria, a country in North Africa. Although not specifically described, Algiers serves as a general backdrop not only to the main action but above all to Meursault’s struggle with the
collective forces of nature arrayed against him.

**Beach**

Beach. Outside Algiers, where Raymond, Meursault’s friend, has a bungalow. When the sun beats down on Meursault, the reflecting light gouges into his eyes, the lazy sea waves turn him lethargic, the fiery beach presses him forward, and the cloudless sky pours a sheet of flame on him. Under this onslaught, he has no other choice but to react in self-defense, first, by erasing the source of the attack (the Arab and his shining knife) and then by firing four additional shots for the four elements of nature.

**Prison**

Prison. Tiny cell in which Meursault awaits his execution. Only a confined space can allow him to concentrate on the essential and to think philosophical thoughts, unmolested by outside distractions and pointless discussions. After his final metaphysical revolt he is ultimately at peace, as evidenced by the stars shining on his face like a celestial projector, instead of the relentless and punishing sun, and by the heat now being replaced by the refreshingly cool night breeze on his cheeks. This Meursault calls “the benign indifference of the universe.”

*Marengo*

*Marengo*. Retirement home and cemetery located some fifty miles west of Algiers. Before and during his mother’s funeral Meursault shows a strange callousness and lack of sorrow about her death. The unbearable heat and the blinding glare of the sun further aggravate this insensitivity, as he matter-of-factly attends the ceremony. Apparently unmoved by the occasion, he also observes the arid landscape around him, noting the green cypresses, the red soil, the humming insects, the rustling grass, and the various smells.

**Swimming pool**

Swimming pool. Part of the harbor complex. Rather than mourn over his mother’s death, he spends the next day with a female former coworker at the pool. The two then go to a movie theater to see a comedy and lastly to his apartment, where they spend the night together.

**Detention center**

Detention center. Jail in which Meursault is held before his trial. He and his court-appointed lawyer discuss his defense, which given his general apathy, does not look promising. Progressively, as he understands the purpose of his imprisonment, he adapts to his new environment by killing time and by sleeping.

**Courtroom**

Courtroom. Room in which Meursault’s trial takes place. Again, the heat is stifling, increased by the hour of the day and the large crowd of spectators and reporters. Again he responds and reacts in an all-too-aloof and unconcerned manner. This is why he is considered a “stranger,” quickly found guilty, and sentenced to death.

**Examining magistrate’s office**

Examining magistrate’s office. The first time Meursault is formally interrogated, the nondescript, ordinary room is so hot, with flies buzzing around, that he nods to any statement, from accepting Christ as his personal savior to being vexed over having shot a man.
Analysis: Historical Context

Algeria
Resuming a policy of imperialist expansion after the Napoleonic era, France invaded Algeria in 1830. The French soon controlled the city of Algiers and some coastal areas, but not until 1857 did they subdue the whole region. France sent settlers to colonize the conquered region, but even as late as 1940 the French in Algeria were outnumbered 9 to 1. During World War II the Algerians fought on the side of Germany, which occupied France. However, they were not too keen on resisting the Americans, and when General Eisenhower landed in November of 1942, he met little resistance. That invasion prevented Camus from leaving France and joining his wife in Algeria until the liberation of France in 1944. Throughout the rest of the war, the Algerian independence movement grew due to contact with other Westerners—British and American soldiers.

The independence movement continued to grow after the war but was violently put down by French troops. The struggle escalated when the National Liberation Front (FLN) wrote a new constitution in 1947. Unable to deliver on the promise of the new constitution, the FLN began a war of independence with France in 1954. By 1962, Charles de Gaulle agreed to grant the country independence.

World War II
World War II was in full swing in 1942, since America had declared war on Japan and Germany in response to the Pearl Harbor attack. However, the Allied cause did not look good. France had fallen to the Germans, and British troops were pushed from their holdings in the Pacific to India by the Japanese. On the Russian front, the Germans seemed to be on the verge of capturing Stalingrad when they attacked in February. This attack took the form of a gruesome siege. There was still hope, however, because both the British and the Russians refused to give in. Geography aided the Russians and the superiority of the Royal Air Force made the siege of Britain hazardous.

Summer began and the Allies started to gain against the Axis Powers. American troops were more successful than not in flooding the Allies with needed supplies through their base in Iceland. June brought real progress when the American Navy met the Japanese in the Battle of Midway. This decisive victory ended Japanese expansion in the Pacific and irreparably crippled their naval strength. In November, Eisenhower led a joint British-U.S. force in a landing in Algeria. In Russia, the Germans were still unable to claim victory since the Russian army was refusing to give way. In the end Russia lost 750,000 soldiers throughout the year. The Germans gained against the Russians only to lose all but eighty thousand men, who survived by cannibalism, and surrendered by February of 1943. Slowly the tide was turning against the Germans.

Analysis: Literary Techniques

*The Stranger* is probably the most original of all of Camus's works. A narrative rather than a novel, it was really executed in the spirit of a "new novel," that writers of the 1960s, influenced by Camus, were to discover. Actually the story is the fragment of a tale, with many pieces left to the reader's imagination. The very fragmentation suggests the lack of coherence in the world of the absurd. The choice of language and style conveys Meursault's indifference and apathy. The absence of the passe simple, the past tense traditionally used in literature and present, is here replaced by the passe compose, or conversational past. The author makes free use of indirect speech, and thus accentuates the gulf between what is happening and what Meursault is thinking.

The novel is divided into two parts, with parallel structure. Critics generally consider the first part as superior and more original. It is here that Meursault describes the lack of relationship between the world and himself. The second part deals with his trial, and contains more irony and lyricism, with particular emphasis on solar imagery and poetry. In both parts, however, Camus shows his skill in narration as well as in lyricism.
Analysis: Social Concerns

_The Stranger_ was the first great novel to emerge from French Algeria. The Arab presence figures prominently in the story, and stresses kinship, rivalry, and bloodshed. The violence expressed in the murder of the Arab by Meursault brings out the violence in Arab-European relations. The Arabs, however, were not natural enemies to the French, and the one who is killed in the story represents his race as a model of silence and contemplation. The fact that Meursault murders him needlessly shows that murder is not the solution to the Arab-European conflict, which was to erupt into warfare in the 1950s, and in which Camus took a side opposed to native independence.

Camus also addresses the question of justice in Meursault's trial. Actually, it is a parody of justice, for he is tried, not for killing a man, but for not having wept at his mother's funeral. Throughout his trial, he is robbed of his own identity, never really allowed to speak, and his lawyer uses the first person in his place. Meursault represents the person persecuted by society because he refuses its falseness and hypocrisy. He will have no part of its artificiality, and will not become involved in its game. In the end, he is convicted on a technicality, showing that the trial is a meaningless formality.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1942: Algeria is a French colony under Nazi occupation. Today: The political party which established Algeria as an independent nation has lost power to more fundamentalist groups.

1942: Mahatma Gandhi is imprisoned as a part of the British government crack-down on India’s demand for independence.

Today: Independent India has a population of just under billion people and, according to Bill Gates, is soon to catch up with the United States in terms of technological sophistication. India’s middle class is currently the largest of any nation on Earth.

1942: Roosevelt’s $59 billion-dollar budget called for $52 billion to be spent on the war effort.

Today: In peace time, the U.S. spends 6 times that amount on military expenditure.

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

Consider the element of time in the novel. Suggest some reasons why Camus chose not to establish the date or era. Keep in mind the historical context of the novel and the universal pretension of the theme.

Consult psychological literature and create a profile of the “outsider.” What sort of mental condition creates a person of moral indifference? Begin with the book _The Outsider_ by Colin Wilson.

Do some research on the condition of freedom of the press in France under Nazi occupation and the role of journals such as _Combat_ in the resistance to this occupation. Does the refusal of Meursault to abide by the societal code of the world in which he lives have anything to do with the conditions under which Camus struggled?

Read the _The Myth of Sisyphus_. What is the absurd man? Was Camus successful in creating a character in terms of his theory of the absurd? Does Meursault have a place in reality?
Read the first American existential novel by Richard Wright, entitled *The Outsider* (1953), and compare to Camus’s *The Stranger*.

Often encyclopedic entries on existentialism will list Camus as a representative author. Select an existential novel (by such authors as de Beauvoir or Sartre) and compare its themes to Camus’s theory of the absurd. Agree or disagree with such a categorization.

Much has been made of the evident moral clash between Meursault and the magistrate or the priest. Do you think that Camus’s project was the outlining of a moral code or the presentation of the absurd man?

### Analysis: Literary Precedents

Camus has often been compared to Pascal in his existential questioning and anguish, although Pascal was a firm believer in immortality. Among his nineteenth-century predecessors are the skeptical Vigny, and Stendhal, whose *The Red and the Black* (*Le Rouge et le noir*, 1830) also contains a mistrial and a condemnation on technicalities. Victor Hugo's *The Last Day of a Man Condemned to Death* (*Le Dernier jour d'un condamné,* 1829) also contains the reflections of a man in prison. Meursault's crime is similar to that in Samuel T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). Germaine Bree sees in Meursault an echo of Fyodor Dostoevsky's Dmitri Karamazov, "whose real crime was not the one that he is tried for, but one which will lead him to a new level of awareness" (*The Brothers Karamazov* [*Bratya Karamazov*], 1879-1880). Finally, the short, unconnected sentences of the entire narration are most like Hemingway, who was a great influence on many mid-century French authors.

### Analysis: Adaptations

The only one of Camus's novels to have been adapted for the cinema is *The Stranger*, produced by Paramount in 1967 and directed by Luchino Visconti. Emmanuel Robles, a friend of Camus's, also shared in the screenplay, which was quite faithful to Camus's text. There is a short film, *Albert Camus: A Self-Portrait*, produced by Fred Orjain, which shows Camus talking about the theater, and which also gives some views of Algeria. There are a number of sound recordings of Camus's voice, where he reads selections from *The Fall* (1956), *The Plague* (1947), and *The Stranger*. The 1950 film *Panic in the Streets*, directed by Elia Kazan, although not directly inspired by Camus, treats the same theme of the plague as in Camus's *The Plague*.

### Analysis: Media Adaptations

There has been only one adaptation of Camus’s novel to the screen. Directed by Luchino Visconti, *L'Etranger* was produced in 1967 by Paramount pictures. The film failed to capture the Camus’s style, but fortunately, the role of Arthur Meursault is executed brilliantly by Marcello Mastroianni and Anna Karina delivers a fine performance as Marie Cardona.

### Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

The obvious next step from *The Stranger* would be to read Camus’s other 1942 work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. There, through a collection of essays, he explains his position on the absurd at the time of writing *The Stranger*.

Camus was regarded as the conscience of occupied France for his writings in *Combat*. For that paper he wrote such editorials as *Neither Victims Nor Executioners* (printed in the fall of 1946 and reprinted in 1968 by Dwight Macdonald). This piece argued the logical basis of an anti-war stance consistent with his own
theories. He argued that murder is never legitimate, silence between those in disagreement is intolerable, and fear must be understood. In short, he defined a modest position “free of messianism and disencumbered of nostalgia for an earthly paradise.”

Camus’s 1947 novel, *The Plague*, is seen by many to be a parable about World War II that demonstrates his moral philosophy. In this novel, a town is struck by plague but survives not by beliefs and prayer but through the rational investigation and practice of medical science.

There are other works which deal with the theme of absurdity. One very famous work was a play written by an Irishman who also took part in the French Resistance. The play is *Waiting for Godot* (1952) by Samuel Beckett.

A more properly existentialist work is the 1947 work, *The Age of Reason*, by Jean-Paul Sartre. Camus worked in the Resistance with Sartre but they had a falling out after the war. Sartre, more than Camus, exemplifies the philosophy of existentialism.

Another existentialist was Simone de Beauvoir. She is best know for *The Second Sex*. In 1943, she wrote an existential novel entitled *She Comes to Stay*. It is an interesting contrast to Camus’s novel of the year before.

**Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading**

**Sources**


**For Further Study**

Robert J. Champigny, *A Pagan Hero: An Interpretation of Meursault in Camus’s ‘The Stranger’*, translated by Rowe Portis, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969. Champigny analyzes Meursault through several readings which show the character as innocent but whose characteristics set the stage of his guilt. Champigny also argues that Meursault’s reaction to his guilt make him a hero.


Adele King, *Notes on L’Etranger: The Stranger or The Outsider*, Longman York Press, 1980. King offers an introduction to the novel, detailed summaries of the chapters, and brief critical commentary that touches on the most important parts of the novel: theme, historical context, structure, style, etc. An invaluable aid.

Norman Podhoretz, “The New Nihilism and the Novel” in his *Doings and Undoings*, Farrar, Straus, 1964, pp. 159-78. According to Podhoretz, Camus was the first writer to identify the transition of the hero in twentieth-century fiction from rebel to stranger. In so doing, Camus spotted the significance of the new nihilism and identified it.


English Showalter Jr., *The Stranger: Humanity and the Absurd*, Twayne, 1989. A readable introduction to the novel that offers historical context, the work’s importance, and an introduction to critical reception of the novel. The second half of the study presents a close reading of the novel.

**Bibliography**


**Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines**

**Topic #1**
Illustrate how Meursault’s indifferent attitude and moral ambiguity is fundamentally at odds with society’s expectations of how a person should think and behave.

**Outline**
I. Thesis Statement: *In The Stranger, society views Meursault as a cold-hearted killer and a moral “blank.” It categorizes him as dangerous and evil because Meursault refuses to conform to society’s accepted standards of behavior.*
II. Meursault’s attitude and behavior
A. At his mother’s vigil and the funeral
   1. Meursault remains unemotional and detached
   2. Doesn’t want to see his mother’s body
   3. Drinks coffee and chats during the vigil
   4. Offers no expression of comfort, or grief to his mother’s close friend, Thomas Perez
   5. Doesn’t cry at the funeral
B. Relationship with Marie after the funeral
   1. Marie’s reaction to Meursault when she learns about his mother
   2. Meursault’s activities the day after his mother’s funeral
      a. Swims with Marie
      b. Goes out on a date and begins an affair with Marie
C. Friendship with Raymond and agreement to write the letter
   1. Meursault never questions morality of writing such a letter
   2. Society’s view of a man like Raymond and Meursault’s association with him
D. Murder of the Arab and reasons for pulling the trigger
   1. Meursault shoots once, then fires four more times
   2. Meursault’s bizarre explanation about “the sun”
E. No apparent remorse for crime
   1. Inability to ever feel regret about anything
   F. Meursault doesn’t believe in God

III. How society views Meursault
A. Behavior at the funeral is repugnant to many
B. Starts affair with Marie the day after the funeral
   1. Meursault enjoys himself, even though his mother has just died
C. Why is Meursault Raymond’s friend?
   1. Raymond has a bad reputation
   2. Meursault must be involved with Raymond in some type of criminal activity
D. Why does Meursault murder the Arab?
   1. No one understands Meursault’s explanation about the sun
   2. Must be part of suspected criminal activity
   3. Meursault “murdered” his mother by putting her in a nursing home. His crime is even worse than the parricide case
   4. Therefore, Meursault is capable of anything
E. Refusal to believe in God proof of Meursault’s immorality
   1. The magistrate’s appeal to Meursault with the crucifix
   2. Meursault’s honesty interpreted as immorality
   3. Meursault’s rejection of the chaplain and everything he represents

IV. Meursault’s understanding of himself and his actions
A. Alone in his cell, awaiting his execution, Meursault understands the significance of his behavior and crime
   1. Final rejection of society and its attitude towards him

Topic #2
Discuss Meursault’s reaction to the sun and its effect on his mood and behavior.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Meursault behaves as if he were an element of nature, influenced by the sun, and not responsible for his actions.
II. Meursault and the sun
A. Meursault reacts to the sun and heat at his mother’s funeral
1. Reaction to sun supersedes other emotional reactions
2. This reaction misinterpreted by society which expects Meursault to behave in a conventional manner
B. Enjoying the sun with Marie while swimming
1. The sun as source of pleasure
2. Contrast to the heat and discomfort Meursault experienced on the bus and at the funeral
C. Running in the sun with Emmanuel to catch the truck
1. The sun blinding Meursault to everything but his most immediate desires, in this case, to catch the truck
D. Meursault, Marie, and the sun on the beach
1. The sun again supplying warmth and comfort
E. Meursault on the beach with the Arab
1. The heat and piercing sunlight conspire against Meursault

III. Destructive power of the sun
A. Meursault, estranged in the world, finds it impossible to relate to others in many situations when affected by the sunlight
1. Meursault on the bus to the nursing home
2. Sun influences his unusual behavior at the funeral
B. Blinding sunlight leads to his shooting the Arab
1. Moments leading up to the shooting
2. Meursault’s decision not to go into the bungalow
3. The sun drives Meursault towards the cool stream and the fateful meeting with the Arab
4. The piercing sunlight in Meursault’s eyes
5. The Arab’s shiny knife
C. Heat and sunlight in the courtroom
1. Meursault unable to express himself to the judge and lawyers
D. Meursault’s excuse about the sun is incomprehensible to everyone in the courtroom

IV. Meursault as an element of nature
A. Meursault living from moment to moment, influenced by the changes of nature
B. Meursault experiences no feelings of guilt or remorse
C. The sun as an indifferent force in nature, responsible for either pleasure or pain
D. Meursault’s understanding of man’s place in the universe
E. Contrast between Meursault’s life and the existence of the sun

Topic #3
The Stranger has been called an example of Camus’ belief that “a novel is a philosophy put into images.” Discuss how Camus’ understanding of the absurd is depicted in The Stranger.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Meursault’s actions and beliefs reflect the absurdist philosophy as understood by Camus.

II. Camus’ definition of the absurd
A. Common personal experience of the absurd
1. Mechanical nature of individual lives
2. The inevitable passage of time
3. Human sense of alienation and isolation
4. Human beings’ place in the universe
B. In literature and the arts
1. Other works by Camus including The Myth of Sisyphus and Caligula
2. Camus and the Theater of the Absurd

III. Sense of the absurd as reflected in *The Stranger*

A. Meursault’s routine life
   1. His work and leisure time
   2. How Meursault spends his Sunday
   3. Encounter with the robot woman

B. Meursault’s relationships
   1. His feelings for his mother, when she was alive and after her death
   2. Response to Marie’s asking if he loves her
   3. Acceptance of Raymond as his friend
   4. Attitude towards, and treatment of, old Salamano

C. Life and death
   1. Meursault’s reaction to the news of his mother’s death
   2. Killing the Arab
   3. Contemplating his execution
   4. Meaning of life in the face of death

D. Benign indifference of the universe
   1. Nature as a representative of neither good nor evil
   2. The permanence of the universe and the images of nature

E. Meursault’s acceptance of his own death and his understanding that all people are “condemned to die”

Critical Essays: Suggested Essay Topics

Part 1, Chapter 1
1. Discuss how Meursault responds to his natural surroundings, especially the sun and heat.

2. Discuss Meursault’s feelings towards his mother when she was alive and his response when he learns of her death.

3. How do Meursault’s reactions to death and the grief of others differ from what society generally considers appropriate behavior?

Part 1, Chapter 2
1. After telling Marie about his mother’s death, Meursault mentions feeling “a bit guilty” about it. Why does Meursault feel the need to explain himself to both his employer and Marie?

2. Describe the way Meursault spends his Sunday. Why does he seem so content doing almost nothing?

3. Meursault doesn’t like Sundays because they disrupt his normal routine. Why do you think Meursault would be bothered by this?

Part 1, Chapter 3
1. Meursault focuses a great deal of attention on the mundane details of his life. Why do you think these details, and his daily routine, are so important to him?

2. How does Meursault feel when he sees old Salamano beating his dog? How does he feel when Raymond tells him he beat up his girlfriend? Discuss Meursault’s attitude in relation to these two events.
3. Discuss Meursault’s relationship with Raymond. How does he feel about becoming Raymond’s “pal,” and why would he agree to write such a deceitful letter for him?

**Part 1, Chapter 4**
1. When Marie asks Meursault if he loves her, he displays an indifferent, almost apathetic attitude towards her. Why would she continue to have a romantic interest in him?

2. Compare Meursault’s reaction to Thomas Perez’s grief over the mother’s death, and his reaction to old Salamano’s despair over his lost dog.

3. Considering his indifferent attitude, why would Meursault agree to be Raymond’s witness?

4. Since he treats his dog so harshly, why do you think Old Salamano is so upset when the dog runs away?

**Part 1, Chapter 5**
1. When the employer offers Meursault a new job, he suggests that a “change of life” might be good for him. Why would Meursault turn down the job in Paris?

2. Discuss Meursault’s feelings for Marie. He says he doesn’t love her, yet he wants to make her happy. Why would Meursault agree to marry Marie?

3. Discuss Meursault’s fascination with the “little robot” woman and her odd, mechanical actions.

**Part 1, Chapter 6**
1. Discuss Meursault’s reaction to the sunlight. How does it affect his moods and actions?

2. Why does Meursault talk Raymond out of shooting the Arab?

3. When Meursault shoots the Arab he tells us: “I knew I’d shattered the balance of the day…” What does he mean by this?

4. Why do you think Meursault is so reluctant to tell Marie and Madam Masson about the confrontation with the Arabs?

**Part 2, Chapter 1**
1. Meursault doesn’t explain why he assumes his case will be “very simple.” Discuss the reasons why Meursault might feel this way.

2. Why is the magistrate so upset when he talks to Meursault about God?

3. Why is the lawyer worried about Meursault’s behavior at his mother’s funeral?

**Part 2, Chapter 2**
1. Discuss how Meursault’s behavior and way of thinking change as he spends time in prison.

2. Why would Meursault tell the Arab prisoners about his crime? Why wouldn’t he consider inventing a story to protect himself?

3. Discuss why Meursault becomes so fascinated with the Czechoslovakian murder story.
4. Considering the atmosphere in the visiting room, why do you think Marie is so cheerful and optimistic when she visits Meursault?

**Part 2, Chapter 3**

1. Discuss how Meursault’s feelings and attitude change about his trial as he observes the courtroom proceedings.

2. Why would the prosecutor ask Marie questions about her relationship with Meursault? Does the prosecutor really consider this an important aspect of the case? Explain your answer.

3. Meursault has difficulty trying to explain why he killed the Arab. What do you think his motivation could have been?

4. Although Meursault has adapted to the daily routine of the prison, he begins to realize that he misses many of the pleasures he took for granted when he was a free man. Has Meursault changed since he killed the Arab? How is he different, or the same?

**Part 2, Chapter 4**

1. Discuss how the prosecutor attempts to equate Meursault’s crime of killing the Arab with the parricide case. Why?

2. Discuss how, during the trial, the emphasis shifts from an examination of the crime itself to a condemnation of Meursault’s personality and behavior.

3. Do you think justice is served by the verdict? Can a man like Meursault, who is so at odds with society’s conventions and morals, be given a fair trial? Is Meursault truly judged by a jury of his peers?

**Part 2, Chapter 5**

1. Meursault states that he realizes that “nothing was more important than an execution.” What do you think he means by this, and how does the story about his father relate to his present circumstance?

2. Why does the chaplain cry when he leaves Meursault’s cell? Explain your answer.

3. Why would Meursault want to have a huge, angry crowd attend his execution?

**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

A French author born in Algeria just before the outbreak of World War I, Albert Camus considered the history of his times a history of “murder, injustice, and violence.” He lost his father in the Battle of the Marne, grew up in the shadow of a world war, and participated in the next world war as a member of the French resistance movement.

Athletic and intellectually gifted, Camus played football while attending the University of Algiers, where he studied philosophy and the Greek classics, planning to become a teacher. In 1937, however, at the age of twenty-four, he was stricken with tuberculosis, which led to four years of enforced inactivity while he recuperated. During this period, he began to write and to formulate the philosophy that would underlie his novels, plays, and essays. In 1957, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

As much a philosopher as a creative writer, Camus is closely associated with the atheistic branch of existentialism, a philosophy emphasizing humanity’s consciousness of its mortality and its consequent need to
find meaning in a universe that seems indifferent and inhospitable to such a quest. Camus believes that there is no god, hence that life has no purpose. Things—human beings, plants, animals—simply live and die as part of a natural process that has no transcendent meaning or value. Human beings are distinguished from plants and animals only by virtue of the fact that they are conscious of their own mortality. Alone among all living things, human beings know that they must die. This awareness pushes them to seek explanations, to try to find meaning in what is essentially meaningless. Camus and other thinkers describe this situation as “the absurd.” Human beings—seekers of meaning in a meaningless universe—live in a condition of absurdity.

Meursault, in The Stranger, is not at first a seeker of meaning, nor is he particularly aware of his own mortality. He simply sleepwalks through life, as many do, ignoring the inevitability of death and the implications of mortality. Camus argues that most human beings live in this condition for as long as they can, going about their daily routines like automatons, refusing to think, seeking solace in simple physical and material pleasures. However, most are doomed to be awakened to their condition when something—the death of a loved one, perhaps, or a serious illness as in his own case—disturbs their routine.

For Meursault, the event that forces him out of his complacency is the killing of the Arab—not the murder itself, a meaningless event brought about by a natural response to the sun and danger, but its aftermath. When society condemns him, Meursault realizes that he is not being condemned for taking a human life but for refusing to accept the illusions society promotes to protect itself from having to acknowledge the absurdity of the human condition. In effect, Meursault is condemned to death for failing to weep at his mother’s funeral.

After he is condemned, Meursault could fall back on the illusions proffered by society through its priests and clergymen—hucksters and shills, as Camus thought of them. To do so would have been intellectually dishonest. In fact, the novel’s real turning point occurs when the priest visits Meursault in his cell. Here, for the first time, Meursault shows passion, revolting against the priest’s effort to impose on him the platitudes and false certainties of religion. Meursault chooses, instead, to accept his condition; he refuses to deny the reality of his impending death. In doing so, he discovers the one tie that links him to all other beings: death. Once death, or the inevitable cessation of existence, is recognized as the single inescapable condition of existence, life, however meaningless it might ultimately be, becomes valuable. However, whatever value life has must be imposed on it; people must engage it actively. Ironically, Meursault learns this too late.

The Stranger is a deeply disturbing novel. From its famous dispassionate opening—“Mother died today. Or maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure.”—to its conclusion, where Meursault expresses the hope that on the day of his execution he will be greeted by “a huge crowd of spectators,” all hurling at him “howls of execration,” the novel challenges assumptions about life and literature. Just when it appears that Meursault can be dismissed as a callous egoist, he reveals complexities of emotion common to all; he merely refuses to pretend to feelings he does not possess. When Meursault becomes enmeshed in the legal system, Camus shows how society is more concerned with appearances than with any meaningful concept of justice. When Meursault, instead of repenting and seeking solace in some transcendent reality, refuses to acknowledge the possibility of anything beyond the immediate facts of his situation, the heroism of his attitude is made clear.

Camus’s style in this novel is disturbingly flat and objective, an anomaly for a first-person narrative. It has often been suggested that Camus was influenced by Ernest Hemingway in this respect. With this curiously flat style, Camus suggests that in an absurd universe all things have equal value. Nothing in the entire universe is intrinsically more meaningful than anything else.

Critical Essays: The Stranger

Narrator Meursault begins with one of the most famous opening statements in modern literature: “Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure.” Meursault is not so much callous as affectless, utterly
disconnected from social conventions. He attends his mother’s funeral but fails to conform to the rituals expected on such an occasion.

The next day, he goes to the beach and picks up a woman named Marie. The two become lovers, but Meursault is unable to make any long-term commitments. He is also befriended by a petty hoodlum named Raymond.

The following week, Raymond invites Meursault and Marie to join him at the beach. While walking alone along the shore, Meursault confronts a hostile Arab. The sun flashes in Meursault’s eye while he finds himself with Raymond’s revolver in his hand. Before he is aware of anything, he has fired five shots into the Arab’s body.

The novel is divided into two almost equal parts; the second focuses on Meursault’s trial for murder. The prosecutor builds his case upon what he argues is a pattern of consistently selfish, cynical behavior. The defense attorney uses the same circumstantial evidence to attempt to depict Meursault as fundamentally sympathetic.

Meursault rejects the specious games of both and the premise that there is a meaningful pattern to any individual’s existence. Uncomfortable with the facile abstractions that distort the gratuitousness of actions, he offers himself as a martyr to the truth.

Written in a severe, understated style, the novel mocks grandiose claims for coherence among discrete, immediate events. It questions traditional assumptions about moral responsibility and about the individual’s role in society.

Bibliography:


Critical Essays: Critical Overview
The success of *The Stranger* has been matched by an unceasing flow of criticism. Most of that criticism has been a positive affirmation of Camus’s place as a master of French literature. One reviewer even described Camus as the writer America had been waiting for since Hemingway. The criticism has also had the effect, good or bad, of rendering the novel a moral treatise. This occurred early on when Jean-Paul Sartre reviewed the work in 1943 and said, among other things, that with this work “Albert Camus takes his place in the great tradition of those French moralists.” Philip Thody, in a more recent article, says this is a misleading approach to *The Stranger* since in moral terms the novel is full of contradictions, whereas if read for its absurd theory, no breakdown exists.

Taking the cue from Sartre, other reviewers of the 1940s matched the novel with Camus’s writings in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and criticized Camus’s ability to handle Heidegger and Kierkegaard. Richard Plant, however, did not seem to need the heavy guns of philosophy to enjoy the novel, according to his 1946 article “Benign Indifference.” Instead, he claims, the novel presents the protagonist’s philosophy as “nothing but a rationalization of his sublime indifference.” Unfortunately, Plant seems to grow confused and therefore moves very quickly to compare Camus with the American style of writing. Plant says that the way Camus handles the shooting of the Arab should serve as a model to Americans of the “tough school.” Finally, Plant says, “Camus emerges as a master craftsman who never wastes a word.”

During the 1950s most critics were more concerned with Camus’s political stance in response to the Algerian independence movement as well as his disagreement with French intellectuals—namely Sartre. The strife of the decade, accompanied by ailing health, gave Camus a horrendous writing block and left him silent but for a few rare occasions. Critics generally enjoyed *The Plague* of 1947 and *The Fall* of 1956. His Nobel prize was seen as well deserved.

Two exceptions to the above were Norman Podhoretz and Colin Wilson. The latter wrote a book in 1956 detailing the trend in modernity, and its fiction, toward a hero who stood for truth. Wilson entitled this work in honor of Camus’s novel—in its British translation—as *The Outsider*. This character is defined as follows:

> The Outsider’s case against society is very clear. All men and women have these dangerous, unnamable impulses, yet they keep up a pretense, to themselves, to others; their respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational. He is an Outsider because he stands for [this] Truth.

Sartre wrote similarly about the phenomenon Camus’s *Stranger* represented. However, Sartre believed such a being had a place in society whereas Wilson was simply recording a literary trend.

Podhoretz was also interested in this new hero. In 1958, he credited Camus with the correct identification of this new hero. “It was, of course, Camus who first spotted the significance of [the] new state of nihilism and identified it, in *The Stranger*, with the pathological apathy of the narrator Meursault—the French were far in advance of the Americans in seeing that the ‘rebel’ was giving way in our day to the ‘Stranger.’”

Camus’s death in 1960 shifted the discussion surrounding his work to an automatic respect, followed by criticism. Exemplifying the criticism that arose in the face of his death, Henri Peyre wrote in a 1960 article, “Camus the Pagan,” “the works of Camus, as they stand interrupted by fate, utter a pagan message which is to be set beside that of the great pagans of antiquity and that of some of the modern pagans to who Christianity owes an immense debt of gratitude.” If Camus could be said to have had a religion, it would have been atheistic humanism. Writing in a 1962 introduction to “Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays,” Germaine Bree commented: “Camus’s rapid rise to celebrity between 1942 and 1945 is unparalleled in the history of French literature: *The Stranger, The Myth of Sisyphus*, and the two plays *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding*, together with Camus’s role in the Resistance and the widespread interest in his Combat editorials, started his
career in meteoric fashion.”

By the 1970s, criticism had returned to traveled, but still fruitful, paths of inquiry. In 1973, Donald Lazere wrote, “The Stranger, like the Myth, asserts the primacy of individual, flesh-and-blood reality against any abstract notion that claims to supersede it.” But then with the rise of Post-Colonial criticism, there was a turn to aspects of The Stranger that were not often discussed. Philip Thody, in “Camus's L'Etranger Revisited” (1979), wrote that despite the fact that Camus championed the cause of Algerian independence in his journalism, he did not escape or confront colonialism in his fiction. For support Thody points to the obvious and striking absence of names for Algerians. Neither the nurse (who has an abscess), Raymond’s girlfriend, nor the Arabs (who follow Raymond) have names. They are simply part of the scenery affecting Meursault when he pulls the trigger.

**Essays and Criticism: Elements, Philosophy, and Viewpoints in The Stranger**

The Stranger is probably Albert Camus’s best known and most widely read work. Originally published in French in 1942 under the title L'Etranger, it precedes other celebrated writings such as the essays The Myth of Sisyphus (1943) and The Rebel (1951), the plays Caligula (1945) and The Just Assassins (1949), and the novels The Plague (1947) and The Fall (1956). Set in pre-World War II Algeria, The Stranger nevertheless confronts issues that have preoccupied intellectuals and writers of post-World War II Europe: the apparent randomness of violence and death; the emptiness of social morality in the face of an irrational world; a focus on existential and absurd aspects of the human condition. Through the singular viewpoint of the narrator Meursault, Camus presents a philosophy devoid of religious belief and middle-class morality, where sentience and personal honesty become the bases of a happy and responsible life.

What perhaps strikes the reader first about The Stranger is the unemotional tone of the narrator, Meursault. The novel begins: “Today, mama died. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know. I received a telegram from the retirement home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Deepest sympathy.’ That tells me nothing. It could have been yesterday…” Meursault’s flat response to the death of his mother conveys a sense of resignation, one supported by his lack of ambition at work and his indifference in personal relationships. Save for his tirade against the chaplain at the end of the novel, Meursault remains rather monotone throughout; his only pleasures are immediate and physical: the taste of a café au lait; the warmth of sun and water; the touch of his fiancée, Marie. Thus, from the opening words, Camus projects his remarkable philosophy through an unremarkable protagonist: since death is both arbitrary and inevitable, and since there is nothing beyond death, life only has importance in the here and now, in the day to day activities that make up our existence. Camus’s simplistic narrative style, influenced by the journalistic tradition of Hemingway and his own experience as a reporter, helps to convey the sense of immediacy that lies at the foundation of his philosophy.

From a literary standpoint, The Stranger offers aspects that complement both modern and traditional sensibilities. With regards to the former, the story is presented as the subjective experience of a first-person narrator. We do not know his first name, what he looks like, or precisely when the action of the story takes place. He does not divulge much information about his past, nor does he attempt to present a cohesive view of, or opinion about, the society in which he lives and works. Such qualities are in stark contrast to the Realist novel tradition represented by such nineteenth century writers as Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), whose works attempt to reproduce a complete account of French society through the eyes of a moralizing, omniscient third-person narrator.

In a more classical vein, The Stranger offers order and balance. The novel is organized into two parts of equal length, and the central episode of the book—the shooting of the Arab—is both preceded and followed by five chapters. Themes are maintained with strict focus: the story opens with the death of Meursault’s mother, the
murder lies at the exact center of the book, and the novel concludes with the death-sentence of Meursault. Within the story Camus creates scenes of explicit parallel and contrast. The tears and fainting of Thomas Pérez at the funeral, for example, offer a foil to Meursault’s lack of emotion. The noise of Salamano cursing his dog directly precedes the screams of the Moorish woman as Raymond beats her; both relationships share qualities of physical love and abuse. One might argue that Camus’s sense of literary balance is an attempt to put into practice an existential philosophy: the only order in a disordered world is the one we create for ourselves.

_The Stranger_ and its author have often been linked to Existentialism, a post-World War II philosophy that has become synonymous with the name of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80). Although Camus was a one-time friend and supporter of Sartre, he denied being an existentialist. Nevertheless, there are clear existential themes in _The Stranger_, a product of the intellectual climate of the times. Camus’s preoccupation with the nature of being, for example, and his rejection of reason and order in the universe, are both existential concerns. When Camus presents the Arab’s murder as the result of a random series of events, and Meursault refuses to lie in court to help win his case, we enter into existential realms of human action and responsibility. There is no outside force governing our lives, according to the existentialists; individuals must take responsibility for their own actions. Meursault’s ultimate vindication is in having remained true to himself and to his feelings in a society that cultivates deception and hypocrisy.

Since its publication, critics have interpreted Meursault’s plight in many ways. From a mythic or structuralist viewpoint, Meursault reenacts a timeless struggle of an individual caught up in the forces of fate, driven toward the murder by divine powers acting through the sun and the sea. In psychological readings, the protagonist acts out issues held by the author: an oedipal love for his mother and the desire to kill his father. Poststructuralist accounts concentrate on the novel’s language and Meursault’s inability to explain his actions adequately in court. This inability should be read as the failure of language, these latter critics argue, since it lies outside of reality, and not that of society’s justice system or of its moral code. If there is a reading Camus himself preferred it was one that took into account his philosophy of the absurd. Many readers, following Sartre’s first review of the novel in 1943, look to Camus’s _The Myth of Sisyphus_ for the most revealing commentary on the work. Published the year after _The Stranger_, the essay defines the absurd as arising from the meeting of two elements: the absence of meaning in the natural world, and mankind’s inherent desire to seek out meaning. Meursault’s ultimate dignity resides in the knowledge that his quest for meaning will always go unfulfilled; happiness is achieved only in a life without illusions. Notions of the absurd become an important part of post-World War II literary production in France, the principal writers, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genêt and Eugène Ionesco, forming what has become known as the “Theater of the Absurd.”

Meursault’s experiences with the natural world draw out elements of Camus’s philosophy of the absurd. Meursault’s name itself has been associated with the environment that affects him so strongly throughout the novel. In French, mer means “sea”; sol means “sun.” Standing under the penetrating rays of the midday sun at the beach, “the same sun” that burned the day he buried his mother, Meursault faces off with the Arab. Suddenly scorched by a hot blast of wind from the sea, blinded by the sweat in his eyes, Meursault fires the revolver and shatters the silence of the day. Later, in court, he will tell the judge that he killed the Arab “because of the sun.” He shows no remorse for the crime he has committed, realizing that it occurred only because of chance circumstances. This meeting between man and nature, like all such meetings, ends in a meaningless act. All that remains is for him to acknowledge what he has done.

Not surprisingly, much commentary has focused on the colonialist aspects of the novel, above all because the victim of the murder is an Arab. Camus’s philosophy of the absurd may point to the murder as meaningless, but during a time of straining relations between Arabs and French (war broke out in 1954 between France and Algeria and concluded in 1962 with Algerian independence), the killing of an Arab by a French-Algerian could have been interpreted, and was, as a meaningful act indeed. A critic of colonialist oppression and a proponent of social justice for Muslims, Camus—a pied-noir or Frenchman born in Algeria—is nevertheless
silent in his novel on the volatile political issues of the time. Although not depicted as social inferiors, Muslims in the novel are relegated to the periphery: a deformed nurse, an abused mistress, prisoners, and shiftless hangers-on. Camus considered himself an “Algerian” writer, yet his two-dimensional treatment of Arabs in the novel has, for some, aligned him more on the side of the French.

Early on in his career, Camus planned out the stages that his work would follow. *The Stranger* belongs to the first stage of his writing career, a period that also includes such titles as *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Caligula*. *The Stranger* projects a “zero point,’’ according to the author, an “absurd” state of existence reduced to immediate sensations. Camus’s later works, informed by his years working in the French Resistance and his experience with totalitarian governments, move beyond the leveling effect created by *The Stranger* and build upon positive social values. *The Just Assassins* and *The Plague*, belonging to the later period, recount tales of community, justice, and solidarity.


**Essays and Criticism: The Stranger**

*The Stranger*, which grew out of the experiment of *A Happy Death* and was nourished by Camus’s political experiences, constitutes an attack on the accepted norms of bourgeois society. It calls into question many aspects of an oppressive colonial regime: the use of the judiciary, religion, and above all, language to maintain dominance. It is an ironic condemnation of colonialist and racist attitudes. The novel also develops a theme with variations on indifference and difference, a theme rooted in the Algerian experience, as Camus’s articles in *Alger-Républicain* have shown. If the hero Meursault has a moral message—and the reference to him as a Christ figure would suggest that he has—it is one that plays a constant role in Camus’s thought; there are no absolutes to which one can adhere, only limits, and the vital nuances are played out within those limits. Total indifference and apathy allow others to act without limits. Meursault develops from an acquiescent figure who admits no limits to a combatant who claims the right to be different.

The story has a simple plot. Meursault, a clerk in an Algiers shipping office, attends his mother’s funeral at an old people’s home in Marengo. The following day he goes swimming, meets an old friend, Marie, takes her to see a Fernandel movie, and initiates an affair with her the same evening. With another friend, Raymond, he spends a Sunday on the beach with Marie, where they encounter three Arabs, one of whom has a grudge against Raymond. In the ensuing confrontation, Meursault shoots one of the Arabs.

The second half of the novel relates Meursault’s trial and conviction, and his growing selfawareness during the months in prison. After being sentenced to death, he affirms his own system of values and rejects that of established society.

When *The Stranger* was first published in 1942 the aspect that evoked the most interest among critics was the use of the passé composé, the compound past tense, since the traditional tense used in literary narrative is the passé simple. Sartre, in his review of the book, comments that the effect of the passé composé is to isolate each sentence, to avoid giving any impression of cause and effect. Meursault’s experience is a succession of presents. During the transition from Mersault to Meursault, Camus changed the form of the narrative: an omniscient author using the passé simple and the third person was replaced by a first-person narrative in the passé composé. The author leaves his hero in a situation where he is dominated by the power of language rather than in control of it; language is equivalent to destiny.

Camus’s concern with language is evident in *The Stranger*. [The] use of language beyond [Meursault’s] mastery reveals an intellectual confusion that stems from the limits of his education. It is true that Meursault was once a student; but in rejecting ambition, he also rejected the value of an intellectual life. Rational thought
is not worth the linguistic effort involved. Ironically enough, misinterpretation is not limited to Meursault. The French authorities misinterpret too.

“Literature” obscures the true nature of reality: Meursault is someone who has “given up language and replaced it with actual revolt. He has chosen to do what Christ scorned to do: to save the damned—by damning himself.” Viewed in this light, Meursault’s deliberate firing of four more shots into the dead body is an act of revolt, a defiance of the society in which he lives. Meursault, who places no reliance on language, throws down the gauntlet but fails to justify his action in the eyes of the world.

It is obvious that Meursault is in conflict, albeit unconsciously, with all the norms of the French system; in response to his narration of events, the reader’s sympathies lie with the Arabs defending their honor rather than with the unsavory Raymond. Meursault refuses to play the game, to be part of the family. The authority figures are all predisposed to be kind to Meursault: the soldier on whose shoulder he falls asleep on the bus, the director of the old-age home, his employer, the examining magistrate, his lawyer, the priest. It is only when he says no that they begin to resent him; he declines to view his mother’s body, he turns down a promotion that would take him to Paris, he refuses to recognize the Cross, or to misrepresent the details of his case. When he says yes, it is to the “wrong” things: to a cup of coffee, to a Fernandel film, and to Raymond’s sordid plan.

During the trial, it becomes clear that Meursault is being tried not for his action, but for his attitudes. The ironic presentation of the prosecutor’s arguments, in which the narrator’s use of free indirect discourse shows up the emptiness of the rhetoric, makes the trial seem farcical. Indeed one could assert that Meursault is innocent with respect to the invalid reasons for guilt attributed by the prosecution: “I accuse this man of burying a mother with a criminal heart.” The implications of “the void in the heart that we find in this man” are enlarged to the scale of “an abyss into which society could sink.” Meursault is accused of two crimes which he has not committed: burying his mother with a criminal heart (although psychoanalytical studies of this text have concluded there is some basis for his feelings of guilt at her death), and killing a father, since the prosecutor affirms in a flourish of rhetoric that he is responsible for the crime that will be tried in court the following day.

Bearing in mind the trials in Algeria that Camus covered as a journalist, one could conclude that the parodic deformation is mild, for in many of those cases the charges were politically motivated, the witnesses bribed, and the verdict a foregone conclusion. It is true that Meursault makes no effort to defend himself; but it is because he does not understand the ideas behind the verbiage, nor the consequences of his own words and deeds. The words used do not express reality, but Meursault and his friends are unable to counteract the force of their intent. They are verbally ill-equipped. The prosecutor, however, rejects such a defense before it is voiced. “This man is intelligent…. He can answer. He knows the value of words.” In a sense, this is true. Meursault refuses to use words that do not precisely translate his feelings, words like love, guilt, shame. Society is accustomed to euphemism and lip-service.

Meursault finds a voice and an adequate command of language in the final pages of his narrative. The reader is led to suppose that his execution is imminent and that his voice will be silenced: the guillotine effectively dislocates the very source of speech.

Only in his final outburst does Meursault consciously evaluate other people, although still in a negative way. Camus called him “a negative snapshot.” In an absurd world, all men are equal. It is through a kind of askesis, a narrowing down of his field of vision, that Meursault reaches an initial state of awareness, just as Mersault did. But Mersault is committed to death, and Meursault is committed to life.

Camus is playing ironically with ambiguity here, but this does not detract from the moral intent, to demonstrate that judgment is unjust because it is based on ambiguous data. Misinterpretation can be
accidental or intentional, but in either case the consequences can prove fatal.

Metaphysical absurdity is mirrored by the social situation depicted in *The Stranger*; as Camus remarked, “*The Plague* has a social meaning and a metaphysical meaning. It’s exactly the same. This ambiguity is also present in *The Stranger.*” The injustice of that social situation is in turn reflected and complicated by the particular attributes of a colonial society. Meursault learns in the course of writing his life that it is not meaningless, and his desire to relive it is the first positive affirmation he makes.

One aspect of Meursault’s statement, which will be a constant in Camus’s ideas on rebellion, is the emphasis on the concrete and the present. The prison chaplain embodies exactly what Meursault rejects: a nonphysical relationship with the world and with human beings, a passive submission to the injustices of God and society, and a dogmatic faith in a better life in the future. Meursault is solidly involved in the here and now, convinced that joy is one of the most precious of human emotions, not to be sacrificed for some abstract and hypothetical goal. He sums up, but only for his readers, his notion of happiness during the final day in court: “While my lawyer went on talking, I heard the echoing sound of an ice-cream vendor’s horn. I was overwhelmed by the memories of a life that was no longer mine, but in which I had found the simplest and most persistent joys…: the smells of summer, the neighborhood I loved, a certain evening sky, Marie’s laughter and her dresses.” The core of Camus’s arguments in *The Rebel* is here in embryo.

*Source: Susan Tarrow, “*The Stranger,*** in her *Exile from the Kingdom: A Political Rereading of Albert Camus*, University of Alabama Press, 1985, 215 pp.*

**Essays and Criticism: Camus's L'Etranger Reconsidered**

The ambiguity of the novel starts with the title. With regard to whom or to what is Meursault a stranger or an alien? The word *étranger* is only used twice in the récit, but not for Meursault. Alienation or estrangement is said to be the mood of Camus’s *L'Etranger*, and this short novel allegedly demonstrates a person’s complete lack of relatedness to other human beings. Meursault, however, is not like Baudelaire’s “étranger,” who has no friends, like the “stranger” in Schnitzler’s short story “Die Fremde,” or like the outsiders in Thomas Mann’s early writings, who create an atmosphere of cold estrangement whenever they meet other people. Meursault is not odd, certainly not odder than, for instance, Salamano. True, Marie once calls him “bizarre,” but this does not apply to his way of life, or his character, only to his unconventional views of love and marriage. He is not a stranger to Masson or to his boss. He has friends, such as Celeste, Emmanuel, Raymond; and his friends stay by him when he is in trouble. People in the neighborhood know him and he knows them. He is one of them.

Thus, it is rather obvious that Meursault is not a stranger to others. However, it is more difficult to determine whether he is a stranger to himself, as it has often been said.

There can be hardly any doubt, however, that Meursault is a stranger to society. As Camus states in his “avant-propos,” “il est étranger à la société où il vit, il erre, en marge, dans les faubourgs de la vie privée, solitaire, sensuelle.” (One might perhaps question both “errer” and “solitaire”). He is, according to Camus, not playing society’s game, because he does not lie, even where and when everybody lies in order to simplify life, and because he rejects time-honored formulas, such as expressing regret after a crime, even when this rejection means the death sentence. Whether this actually stems from a “deep, though silent passion for the absolute and for truth” is debatable; this passion being too silent to be noticeable. To be sure, he is not only sincere when he refuses to pretend before the investigating judge that he feels genuine remorse, but also when he refuses to pretend to Marie that he loves her, and his sincerity makes him even say dogmatically that one is never allowed to pretend. Yet when he congratulates his lawyer in court, he is aware of not being sincere, and his testimony in behalf of Raymond at the police station is not a proof of his absolute sincerity either.
Meursault may also be termed a stranger to society because of his unconventional ideas about love, marriage, and how to get ahead in a job. Love, a conventional concept according to Le Mythe de Sisyphe, does not mean anything to him, and marriage, a conventional basis of society, is not a serious matter. He also declines the opportunity of going to Paris. Not to have any professional ambition is an affront to modern society. Meursault antagonizes society also by his “friendship” with the pimp Raymond and, above all, by not displaying the usual signs of grief at and after the burial of his mother.

Meursault is also a stranger to society because he sometimes feels left out. In the courtroom he has the bizarre impression of being just an intruder. Though he is sometimes tempted to “intervene” in the proceedings, he is told by his lawyer to keep quiet. His own trial seems to be held without him and his fate is decided without anyone asking him about his opinion. He is “reduced to zero” precisely by somebody who “acts” in his interest and who, according to convention, identifies himself with him by using “I” many times when he speaks of him. Meursault’s helplessness during the proceedings in court may be symbolic of man’s precarious place in a mass society whose workings he does not control nor even understand and whose leaders may speak in his name to further their own interests.

Meursault not only disregards some of society’s time-honored conventions, but also some of its most valued achievements. Unlike another “stranger,” Jean Pérouse in Mauriac’s Le Baiser au lépreux, he makes no reference to his former studies. Literature, philosophy, science, art do not seem to exist for him. No great personality, living or dead, is ever named in the book. Although he went to a university, there are only a very few instances which would indicate that his education might be more than elementary. Raymond obviously assumes that Meursault can write better to his prostitute mistress than he himself could. Meursault remembers having learned in school something about the guillotine and about the events of 1789 (the only historical fact mentioned in L’Etranger). He apparently read some mystery novels, and also thinks he should have read books dealing with executions. These are rather few and strange examples of the education society has given him. His short, “disconnected” sentences and his almost exclusive use of the passé composé may also be taken to be—among other things—a rejection of school rules and conventional writing.

This negative attitude toward culture perhaps reaches its climax in that unbelievable description of Paris, the cultural center of his nation: “C’est sale. Il y a des pigeons et des cours noires. Les gens ont la peau blanche.” (It’s dirty. There are pigeons and dark alleys. The men have white skin.) This is not meant to be funny. Meursault does not crack jokes and Marie does not laugh when she hears it, although she usually laughs at almost anything. It seems that L’Etranger is directed not only—as it has often been noted—against the Pharisiens but also against the Parisiens. Camus, of course, has often been critical of Parisian life and society, comparing it with the happier and more natural life in sundrenched Algeria.

However, this stranger to society never attacks society as such. He is not an anarchist or a rebel, he does not accuse or deride the judicial system, even praises some of its features, and is, according to the warden, the only prisoner who understands and approves certain punitive aspects of prison life. He is a law-abiding citizen, holds a steady job, works hard and well, and wears a black tie and a black armband as a tribute to convention. He is respectful to everybody, including the authorities (“Oui, monsieur le Directeur,” “Oui, monsieur le Président”) and does not deny conventional politeness: he thanks the director for arranging a religious funeral and later for attending the funeral. He compliments Masson on his cabin and thanks the newspaperman for his friendly words. He never uses offensive language.

Meursault, the stranger to society, never speaks of “society,” although the public prosecutor and the papers do. It is “the others” who have condemned him, that faceless, anonymous, undistinguishable group of people that sit in the jury box as well as in the streetcar and judge any new arrival.

A word that is stressed by Camus in connection with estrangement, especially in his Le Mythe de Sisyphe, and has perhaps become the most popular word of his philosophical vocabulary, is “absurd.” It has confusingly
different meanings, and often is synonymous with “indifferent” or “stranger”-like. Meursault, therefore, has also been called an absurd man, his style “style absurde,” and L’Étranger an absurd novel or a novel of the absurd. In the novel the word is used only once. In his outburst at the end Meursault calls his life, not life in general, “absurd.” But “absurd” has no meaning without the assumption of a meaning, and it is not clear which meaning Meursault thinks or feels his life has been lacking. This somewhat corresponds to the “poor joys” of his life he speaks about, which imply great and real joys, of which, however, there is not the slightest intimation in the novel.

According to the terminology and the illustrations of Le Mythe de Sisyphe, Meursault’s basic indifference is absurd, since the absurd teaches that all experiences are indifferent. In addition, some of his experiences can be called absurd, such as that of the “inhuman landscape” and that of the independent reflection in the mirror of his tin can. In Le Mythe de Sisyphe Camus also calls the uneasiness absurd which one feels on discovering how non-human men really are and how mechanical their gestures can be. In L’Étranger Meursault is fascinated by the little woman who one day sits down at his table in the restaurant. Twice he calls her “bizarre,” and he even follows her to watch her. Her gestures have the precision of an automaton. This woman automaton, as he calls her, observes him in court as intently and seriously as the young newspaperman. Since the latter is to some extent Meursault (and Camus) himself, this encounter with her may indicate his discovery of his own mechanical way of life. The jerkiness (saccadé) of her gestures also corresponds to the frequent jerkiness of his style. But the “femme automate” is not a “reflection” nor a “more extreme version of him.” He lacks her “incredible” precision, speed, and assurance. Also, Meursault apparently sees “la mécanique qui écrasait tout” not in his life but in his execution. By the woman automaton Camus may have intended to symbolize the mechanization of modern life in this story that uses the style of modern American fiction.

“Indifference,” which plays a key role in Camus’s world, is a concept related to estrangement and absurdity and often synonymous with either. His teacher, Jean Grenier, wrote an essay “De l’Indifférence,” and the original title of Meursault’s story was “L’Indifférent.” In the preface to the 1957 edition of L’Envers et l’endroit, Camus diagnoses a deep indifference in himself which is like a natural weakness and has to be corrected. In Le Mythe de Sisyphe, however, he finds a noblesse profonde in indifference and sees that man at an advanced stage will nourish his greatness with the wine of absurdity and the bread of indifference. The world reveals to him a serene indifference to everything. The sky, in particular, is indifferent, has an inane, indifferent smile, pursues with the earth an indifferent dialogue, and is even indifferent to the “atrocious victories and just defeat of Nazi Germany.” But it also has charm, beauty, sweetness, and tenderness. This “explains” the paradoxical “tendre indifférence du monde” in the last paragraph, when Meursault looks at the starry sky.

Meursault is never called “indifferent” in the novel, but a group of hostile Arabs watch Raymond’s house with indifference and the court reporters seem indifferent. It is clear from these two occurrences that indifference is not identical with apathy, but rather with lack of emotionalism. Meursault displays indifference at the death of his mother, at Raymond’s offer of friendship, at Marie’s desire to marry him, and at his employer’s proposal to transfer him to a Paris office. After his mother’s death “nothing has changed.” One cannot change one’s life; at any rate, all lives are of equal value. Meursault’s indifference is probably not congenital, like Camus’s, but the result of a drastic experience of an undisclosed nature. The break came when he had to give up his studies and ambitions. Now he knows that “all that” has no real importance and in various situations he repeats the slogan of indifference: “It’s all the same to me.” The prospect of impending death shakes his indifference considerably, although he tries to maintain it by looking at the sky, and in his violent anger at the chaplain he even loses it to some extent, but only to regain and reaffirm it on a higher, lyrical, or mystical level. Again he maintains that nothing has any importance, that all lives and men are equal (because of death); but now with the “stars on his face,” he feels that the world’s “tender indifference” is penetrating him. As he finds the world brotherly now, it is a kind of mystical union, not with mother nature, but with brother world. Whereas the end of the first part, which leads to a violent death, is dominated by tension, hostility, destruction, and misfortune (malheur is the last word of this part), the end of the second part leads Meursault,
who expects a violent death, to vague feelings of truce, peace, tenderness, brotherhood, and happiness. The last word (haine) is harsh again, but it means in its context the conquest of solitude and the reconquest of indifference.

Although Camus once states that “those are very poor who need myths” and that Algerians live without any myths, he himself reinterpreted or recreated old myths and perhaps created some new ones. In particular, his L’Étranger has been thought of as embodying various old and new myths. The multiplicity of mythical interpretations points definitely to the suggestive intensity of Camus’s novel, but perhaps also to the elusive vagueness or to the abuse of “myth” as a literary term.

While representing the myths of modern man, of Oedipus and Sisyphus, Meursault is also said to be a reincarnation of the myth of Christ. Indeed, it is almost generally believed that this little office clerk, who cannot feel sad at his mother’s death, who does not believe in a life hereafter, who kills a fellow-man, who does not seem to have any set of moral values, and who, consequently and perhaps not quite jokingly, is called “Mr. Antichrist” by the investigating judge, is a Christ figure, a tragic hero who takes upon himself the burden of humanity, a “sacrificial victim,” or the “scapegoat of a society of pharisees and Pilates.” Camus himself calls him—“paradoxically,” as he says—“the only Christ we deserve.” True, Meursault is like Christ a “victim of a judicial error,” is like Christ unprejudiced toward social outcasts, and is executed at approximately the same age Christ was. But, in spite of Camus, one cannot see how Meursault “accepts to die for truth.” He does not “incarnate truth,” he does not die for the sake of sincerity, but because of his sincerity (whatever the causes of his sincerity may be), because his attitude is not “conventionnelle, c’est-à-dire comédi- enne.” He does not live or die for anybody or anything, nor does he think he does, and his death does not change anything or anybody.

It is also rather difficult to see how the sea and the sun are used as “mythic religious symbols” in L’Étranger and especially how they are “associated in Camus’s mind” with the mother and the father. The homonymy of mère and mer does not mean much, since most of the time Meursault calls his mother “maman.” It is impossible to see the connection between the colorless, boring old woman, as Meursault sees his mother, whom he hardly cares to visit at the old age home, and the fascinating and beautiful Mediterranean, which he likes to watch and where he enjoys swimming. And while the sun is in L’Étranger the most powerful force, the father is weakness personified. All that Meursault knows about his father is that he vomited after witnessing the execution of a stranger, whereas his “stranger”-son finally expects his own execution with a feeling of near elation….

Camus in the “avant-propos” calls Meursault “un homme pauvre et nu.” Indeed many a reader may sympathize when seeing poor Meursault suffer from an excess of light and heat, or dine on boudin, or “lost” in the forensic maze, or subjected to monstrous accusations. To be sure, there also are extenuating circumstances for his crime: the preceding scuffle, the beginning of a sunstroke, the lack of premeditation, the excessive consumption of wine, the feeling of the hostility of the world, the reflex (or defensive) nature of the first shot. But Meursault is no innocent, as most critics assume, unless one adopts the “absurdist” point of view, which “makes murder at least indifferent.” Meursault’s deed is not altogether an accident or a stroke of bad luck, as his friends in the courtroom and the magazines have called it. It comes as a climax: first, Masson, Raymond, and Meursault walk on the beach, then Raymond and Meursault, and finally, Meursault alone; at first, Meursault tries to prevent Raymond from shooting, then he thinks that one could shoot or not shoot, which is not a very innocent thought, and finally he does shoot. As he stands by the body of the dead man, he does not even feel that he has committed a crime. He understands that he has destroyed the equilibrium of the day and the exceptional silence of a beach—which is a credit to his feeling for nature—but he does not feel that he has also and above all destroyed a human life. He has to be told that he committed a crime and actually remains to the very end a “stranger to his crime.”
Paradoxically Meursault gets even more elusive when he reaches what is generally assumed to be “lucidity” at the end. The light which illuminates for him his past life and life in general is not bright sunshine, but seems to come from the stars which he sees. His rejection of a future life, his reaffirmation of indifference, his contention that death equalizes all men and makes everything look unimportant, seem clear, in spite of the passionate tone; his lyrical reflections at the very end, when he has regained his calm and reached the height of lucidity, are the least clear passages of the whole novel….

Those who see in Meursault a Christ figure recall “the last moments of Christ, whose crucifixion was preceded by cries of hatred from the crowds.” But then one must also explain why Meursault suddenly and consciously identifies himself with Christ or parodies him. When one thinks that Meursault deserves the hatred of the people because he “has denied their myths,” and they see in him the symbol of their fate, which is usually masked by myths, one overlooks the fact that Meursault does not speak of expecting, but of wishing those cries of hate; also he has never been aware of his denying collective myths or of his being a symbol of something. When one believes that Meursault “wants the crowds to be there because he wants society to give some sign that it realizes how much he defies it,” one forgets that the death penalty is a clear enough sign of how society regards him.

Meursault’s strange last wish is above all proof of the firmness of his indifference in contrast to his attitude in court where the mere sight of people who, as he thought, detested him, made him feel like crying. He actually does not express that strange wish, but he feels the desirability or necessity of it; that wish probably means the ultimate height of tender indifference, which he thinks he has not achieved yet, but may or will very soon achieve.

The number and the violent reaction of the spectators are, of course, also a sign that people care about him, but a possible connection with the Salamano episode seems to be more enlightening. The only other time “haine” is employed in L’Etranger is to denote Salamano’s feelings toward his dog. The old man even constantly uses what might be called “cris de haine” toward his dog: “Salaud, charogne.” Since after his presumably violent death the hated dog makes his former master cry with affection and unhappiness, Meursault’s possible identification with the generally detested dog may be an indirect way of expressing his desire to be remembered well by the people who despised him before his death. Meursault’s identification with a dog at the time of his execution recalls Josef K., who in Kafka’s Der Prozeb; is executed at the end “like a dog.”

Meursault’s final illumination does not quite illuminate him in the eyes of the reader, who is left in the dark about the narrator’s outward appearance (except his complexion), about his first name, and, above all, about his childhood and youth. In addition, Meursault shows baffling inconsistencies in his attitudes and actions. At ten in the morning he barely manages to walk three quarters of an hour because of the sun, but he walks the same distance at four o’clock the day before after a bus ride without any complaints; he takes a sunbath the day after, races after a truck and jumps on it at twelvethirty two days later, and enjoys lying in the sun for hours. He shuns the “effort” to climb a few wooden steps, but instead takes a long walk in the broiling sun. He first wants to “see his mother right away,” but then repeatedly declines to see her. He does not care about Sundays, but does not want to waste a Sunday visiting his mother. And why does he keep Raymond’s revolver? And why does he (as well as the prosecutor) mistake the day of his mother’s burial for the day of her death (is this another “burial of the burial”)?

These are some of the puzzles which the numerous critics of the book have failed to solve or even to notice. Prompted by their philosophical preoccupations, some have in ingenious “superstructures” discussed ill-defined alienations or discovered non-existent myths and “absurdities,” while they often failed to see obvious facts and to explain disturbing difficulties. One ventures to hope that careful and searching attention will turn to the “properly esthetic” facets of the book, such as the varied style and the enigmatic point of view. L’Etranger itself will continue radiating its charm and challenge.
Teaching Guide: Introduction

So you’re going to teach Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*. Whether it’s your first or hundredth time, *The Stranger* has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations. While it confronts challenging topics—domestic abuse, murder, cynicism—teaching this text to your class will be rewarding for you and your students. Studying *The Stranger* will give them unique insight into social conformity, colonialism, and important themes surrounding free will, moral judgement, and the philosophy of absurdism. This guide highlights some of the most salient aspects of the text before you begin teaching.

Note: This content is available to Teacher Subscribers in a convenient, formatted pdf.

Facts at a Glance

- **Publication Date:** 1942
- **Recommended Grade Level:** 11-12
- **Word Count:** 36,830
- **Author:** Albert Camus
- **Country of Origin:** France
- **Genre:** Philosophical Fiction, Courtroom Drama
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, Existentialism
- **Conflict:** Person vs. Person, Person vs. Society, Person vs. Supernatural, Person vs. Self
- **Narration:** First-Person
- **Setting:** Algiers, Algeria, mid-1940s
- **Structure and Dominant Literary Devices:** Unreliable Narrator, Two-Part Structure
- **Tone:** Detached, Cynical, Observant

Texts that Go Well with *The Stranger*

*The Plague* by Albert Camus. His 1946 follow-up novel to *The Stranger*, *The Plague* explores the moral and social issues that arise when a plague sweeps through Oran, a city in French Algeria. In the novel, Camus draws from his own experiences with chronic illness to expand his absurdist philosophy, further addressing questions of mortality, fate, and free will. Though the novel depicts tragedy, many contend that *The Plague* provides an optimistic counterpoint to *The Stranger’s* cynicism.

“Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelley. This 1819 poem also questions the value of human social orders. The poem’s speaker describes a fallen statue, the king of a bygone people, surrounded by nothingness, perhaps exploring the “gentle indifference” to human civilization that Meursault realizes in *The Stranger*.

*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* and “Discourse on Colonialism” by Aimé Césaire. Born in French Martinique in 1913, Césaire was both a contemporary of Camus, a celebrated surrealist poet, and a political revolutionary who worked for self-determination throughout the Caribbean islands. *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939) is a book-length poem that explores his identity and experience within the French Empire. “Discourse on Colonialism” (1950) is an expository essay exploring similar terrain.
**The Second Sex** by Simone de Beauvoir, one of the central figures of the French existentialist movement. *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, is de Beauvoir’s exploration of the treatment of women throughout history and within French society. Influenced by many of the same thinkers as Camus, de Beauvoir’s expository prose addresses Christian theology, Marxist philosophy, Freudian psychology, as well as the work of other French writers, such as Arthur Rimbaud and André Breton.

*Nausea* (1938) by Jean-Paul Sartre. Similar in structure and style to *The Stranger*, *Nausea* is Sartre’s existentialist philosophical novel. Antoine, the novel’s protagonist, is an isolated, dejected historian living in Bouville, a fictionalization of Le Havre, the French city in which Sartre lived and taught during the 1930s. As Antoine struggles to control his physiological responses to objects and people in the world around him, Sartre has the opportunity to dramatize the tenets of his version of existentialism.

**Teaching Guide: Key Plot Points**

*The Stranger* consists of 11 chapters that are split into two parts. In part I, Meursault interacts with the larger society around him. He attends his mother’s funeral, dates Marie, meets with his neighbors, and ultimately kills a man at the beach. In part II, Meursault is in prison and awaits trial. The characters with whom he interacts in part I give testimony about their previous interactions with Meursault.

**Meursault Attends His Mother’s Funeral (Part I, Chapter One):** *The Stranger* opens as Meursault, a man of French descent living in Algiers, learns of his mother’s death. He travels to the home for the elderly where she lived, interacts with the funeral director and the caretaker, and observes his mother’s friends. Remarkably, Meursault doesn’t show any external signs of grief.

**Meursault Goes to the Beach and the Movies (Part I, Chapter Two):** The day after his mother’s funeral, Meursault goes on a date with his girlfriend, Marie. They spend the day at the beach, see a popular comedy, and spend the night together. The next day, Meursault spends time on his balcony, observing the people of Algiers.

**Meursault Writes a Letter for Raymond (Part I, Chapter Three):** Meursault returns home after a day at work and has dinner with his neighbor Raymond. Raymond explains that his mistress has been cheating on him. Angry that he is still attracted to her, Raymond asks Meursault to write a letter to his mistress, enticing her to return to Raymond’s apartment. Meursault agrees, despite his knowing that Raymond treats his mistress violently.

**Raymond Assaults His Mistress (Part I, Chapter Four):** On Sunday, Meursault is eating in his apartment with Marie when they hear a commotion coming from Raymond’s apartment. They investigate and find Raymond attacking his mistress. A police officer arrives and ends the violence. Later, Meursault agrees to be a character witness for Raymond.

**Marie Proposes to Meursault (Part I, Chapter Five):** While walking around town, Marie proposes marriage. Meursault agrees, though says that it doesn’t make any difference to him. Meursault then eats dinner alone before returning to his apartment. Once in his building, he sees his neighbor Salamano. Salamano expresses his condolences to Meursault about his mother’s death, saying that he was sure Meursault loved his mother despite his sending her to a home for the elderly.

**Meursault Shoots a Man (Part I, Chapter Six):** Meursault, Raymond, and Marie all go to the beach. There, they see Raymond’s mistress’s brother, whom they call “the Arab.” Raymond fights with his mistress’s brother, and Meursault takes Raymond to the hospital. Back at the beach, Meursault advises Raymond not to shoot his mistress’s brother. Returning to the beach later without Raymond, Meursault finds the man alone.
and shoots him himself.

**Meursault Stands Trial (Part II, Chapter Three):** Imprisoned for his crime, Meursault is tried for murdering Raymond’s mistress’s brother. The funeral director, the caretaker, Marie, and Raymond give testimony as to Meursault’s behavior and state of mind in the days following his mother’s death. The prosecutor argues that there is a “profound, fundamental, and tragic” connection between Meursault’s unusual actions: his lack of grief for his mother and his murder of the man at the beach.

**Meursault Considers His Execution (Part II, Chapter Five):** Convicted of murder and sentenced to death, Meursault considers his life’s worth. In argument with the chaplain, Meursault realizes that all humans are alike in that, no matter what choices they make, their lives ultimately end in death. Meursault opens himself to the “gentle indifference” of the world, realizing that he has “only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of [his] execution and that they greet [him] with cries of hate.”

**Teaching Guide: History of the Text**

**Absurdism in French Algeria:** In 1913, Albert Camus was born in French-controlled Algeria. Colonized since the 1830s, the Algeria that Camus knew was deeply impoverished and divided along lines of race and class. Always interested in politics and literature, Camus was forced to drop out of university due to tuberculosis. After working in anti-colonial journalism and community theater in Algiers, Camus found himself living in Paris during World War II. Though the Great Depression and Nazi occupation quelled the intellectual momentum in Paris that had been ignited at the end of World War I, Camus was nonetheless influenced by the philosophy of the existentialists and the literary style of both the surrealists and the Lost Generation. Influenced by his experiences with poverty, illness, colonized Algeria, and occupied France, Camus developed the philosophical paradigm of absurdism through his collected theatrical, expository, and fictional works.

- **Existentialism and Absurdism:** Sharing café au lait with the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Camus took on existentialism as his primary philosophical influence. Expansive in its considerations, existentialism developed in response to the chemical warfare and mechanized weapons unleashed during World War I. Existentialists approached ethics and morality with an acceptance of the notion that there is no continued existence of human life or consciousness after death. Existentialism questions the extent to which objective facts can be known and doubts whether individuals can truly understand themselves or others. Further, existentialist theory generally asserts that life is meaningless but that in embracing that meaninglessness, one can find value, or at least pleasure, in the human experience.

- **Though Camus’s work reflects these ideas, he approached philosophy in the context of Nazi-occupied France and viewed absurdism as distinct from existentialism. While existentialism at large often concerns itself with human nature in the abstract, Camus’s work more often deals specifically with human motivation and decision-making in the social sphere. Camus labelled his philosophical ideology **absurdism** in response to the irrationality and chaos he observed when considering the effects human choices have on society.

- **Influenced by the Lost Generation:** Paris during the 1920s is known for its flowering artistic culture. In the same way that Pablo Picasso pushed the boundaries of what could be captured on a two-dimensional canvas, so too did writers from around Europe and the United States gather in the cafés and salons of Paris to challenge the boundaries of the written word. Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and F. Scott Fitzgerald were among those Americans who became known as the Lost Generation. Hemingway described his style by comparing it to an iceberg, suggesting that, when literature is well-wrought, readers can grasp the gravitas of a story with minimal description, interior monologue, or exposition in the text. This notion, exemplified by Hemingway’s clipped, simplistic
style, informed the way Camus developed Meursault’s detached, unrelatable characterization in Part I of *The Stranger*.

- **Influenced by Surrealism:** Though more subtle than the influence of the Lost Generation, the surrealists also influenced Camus, particularly in their means of capturing ambiguity and the natural world. Meursault is often overwhelmed by the natural elements, light particularly. Meursault also often disassociates from his experiences, such as when he describes shooting the man at the beach. “The trigger gave,” he says, abstracted as he is from his own finger pulling the trigger. Such literary techniques can also be seen in the work of surrealist writers such as André Breton and Simone de Beauvoir. Further, the irrationality depicted in *The Stranger* echoes the visual irrationality present in the work of surrealist visual art, such as that of Salvador Dalí and Man Ray.

**Publication History and Reception:** Europe boasts a long tradition of philosophical literature, reaching from the Roman epic poetry of Lucretius and Ovid to the Christian allegories of medieval Europe to the tomes of Dostoevsky in 18th-century Russia. With Franz Kafka’s publication of *The Metamorphosis* in 1915 and Sartre’s *Nausea* in 1938, the character-driven novella became an established style through which a writer could convey cerebral, philosophical ideas to mass audiences. *The Stranger* was originally published in 1942 and translated into English for the first time in 1946. Though not an immediate seller, *The Stranger* was critically acclaimed thanks to a review written by Sartre that just preceded the novella’s publication. A prolific playwright, journalist, and essayist, Camus wrote a number philosophical novellas after *The Stranger*, most notably *The Plague* (1947) and *The Fall* (1956). Camus was awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize in Literature for his collected works.

**Significant Allusions**

- **Allusion to Popular Culture:** Camus refers to popular culture of the era in order to underscore the distinction between Meursault’s response to his mother’s death (indifference) and the cultural norm (grief).

  - The day after his mother’s funeral, Meursault and Marie go and see a “Fernandel movie.” **Fernandel** was a comedic French actor and sometimes director famous during the 1940s. During the trial scene, the onlookers are shocked that Meursault would see such a comedy so soon after his mother’s death.

- **Allusions to Religious Thought:** Throughout the text, Meursault’s actions and opinions exist in conflict with the Christian morality that governs the culture around him.

  - As the lawyers prepare for trial, Meursault has frequent meetings with the magistrate. The magistrate says goodbye by saying, “That’s all for today, Monsieur Antichrist.” **Antichrist** is a biblical term referring to any individual who denies the teachings of God or Jesus Christ. Though the controversial character appears in both monstrous and human form, there is general consensus that the figure is paramount in bringing about the apocalypse.

  - *The Antichrist* is an 1888 philosophical text by Friedrich Nietzsche. In it, he criticizes Christian individuals and asserts that Christianity is a religion for the weak and unhealthy. He also claims that Christian culture replaced nobler cultures from the past. In his private letters, Nietzsche referred to himself as the antichrist.

- **Allusions to Greek Mythology:** At emotional high points, the novella makes reference to Greek mythology in order to reinforce themes in the text.

  - **Blindness/Sight:** *The Stranger* contains frequent descriptions of light, darkness, and Meursault’s
vision. Before committing murder, he describes the light reflecting off a knife he holds as “a scorching blade” that “stabbed at my stinging eyes.” Importantly, this murder leads Meursault to his philosophical epiphany. As in Sophocles’s classic play *Oedipus Rex*, sight is paradoxically associated with understanding. When Meursault had sight previously, he didn’t understand himself or those around him. Once metaphorically blind and subsequently imprisoned, Meursault exhibits growing philosophical understanding of the world around him.

- **Sirens:** After Meursault’s exchange with the chaplain, he awaits his execution, describing that “in the dark hour before dawn, sirens blasted.” In classical mythology, sirens were mythological monsters that lived on seaside cliffs. Often depicted with the head of a woman and the body of a bird, sirens used their lovely voices to lure sailors to their deaths. Here, the sirens remind Meursault of his impending death.

**Teaching Guide: Teaching Approaches**

**Understanding Meursault:** Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in large part for the prescience of *The Stranger*. The novel was noted for the way it captures the delusion, nihilism, and malaise extant in Europe during World War II. Refusing to act in accordance with rhyme or reason, Meursault is an enigmatic character whom students and scholars have puzzled over for decades. As the protagonist of this philosophical novella, Meursault—his perspective, behavior, and development—exemplifies the absurdist philosophy Camus created.

- **For discussion:** What are the most important choices Meursault makes in the text? Why does he make those choices?
- **For discussion:** How do his choices impact himself and those around him? To what extent do the choices Meursault makes have consequences?
- **For discussion:** Describe Meursault’s relationships with others. How does he build connections with, or distance himself from, those around him? What does the novella suggest about the nature of human relationships?
- **For discussion:** Engage in a close reading of Meursault’s final words to the chaplain and thoughts about his execution. What is Meursault’s attitude toward his choices and the society around him?
- **For discussion:** Consider Mersault's unique qualities, most importantly his lack of feeling. To what extent do they reflect Mersault as a character? What do these qualities say about him, rather than as a reflection on an individual's place in society?

**A Portrait of Colonialism:** Though the novel addresses the nature of the human experience at large, it is also grounded in the context of Camus’s life and times. Born impoverished in French Algeria in 1913, Camus reported on poverty for an anti-colonialist newspaper in Algiers during his early career. In writing *The Stranger*, Camus fictionalized the Algiers of his time, allowing his characters, their experiences, and his philosophical ideas to examine the social order therein.

- **For discussion:** What social orders exists in the book? How does government or organized religion impact Meursault’s actions and worldview?
- **For discussion:** How is social class manifested in the book? Who exercises social privilege, and what seems to give individuals power?
- **For discussion:** How does the text distinguish between characters of French descent and those of Algerian descent? How does ethnicity affect different characters’ experiences in the text?
- **For discussion:** According to Meursault, why did he kill the man at the beach? Is his account trustworthy? Are his actions justified?
- **For discussion:** According to the prosecutor, what has Meursault done to deserve imprisonment and execution? Is his punishment justified?
Nonconformity and Moral Judgment as Themes: In part I, Meursault doesn’t conform to the social expectations of French Algeria. He doesn’t emote when attending his mother’s funeral and even attends a comedy the next day, he behaves apathetically towards Marie, and he watches as Raymond beats his former mistress. In part II, the French Algerian government and citizenry hold a trial to consider both his illegal actions and his moral nonconformity.

- **For discussion:** Describe the social expectations demonstrated in part I. In what ways does Meursault conform to or reject these standards?
- **For discussion:** Does Meursault realize that he doesn’t conform? When are his social transgressions accidental, and when are they intentional?
- **For discussion:** To what extent is Meursault convicted for murder, and to what extent is Meursault convicted for nonconformity? Is Meursault’s conviction justified? Why or why not? Are the proceedings of his trial just? Why or why not?

The Stranger as a Vehicle for Absurdism: Disillusioned by the horrors of World War I, thinkers and writers flocked to Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. When Camus arrived, he selected a literary form en vogue at the time to convey his own worldview: the philosophical novella. *The Stranger* offers students the opportunity to consider how literary and rhetorical devices convey absurdist themes in the text.

- **For discussion:** Describe the primary settings Meursault inhabits. What do they suggest about his values? What do they suggest about the values of the society around him?
- **For discussion:** Consider the ways in which Meursault’s character develops over the course of the text. What do the changes in Meursault reveal about the values of absurdism?
- **For discussion:** Which literary or stylistic devices does Camus employ in the text? How do these devices develop characterization and themes in the text?
- **For discussion:** Which rhetorical elements are at play in the text? To what extent is Meursault a reliable narrator?
- **For discussion:** Are you ultimately swayed by the absurdist worldview presented in the text? Why or why not?

Teaching Approaches: Tricky Issues to Address

The Novel Presents a Cynical, Disempowering Worldview: The tragic and unthinkable number of deaths wrought by World War II influenced many of the darker themes in *The Stranger*, such as the futility of free will and the meaninglessness of human life.

- **What to do:** Remind students that absurdism is just a set of ideas put forward by a small group of thinkers. Camus is not necessarily more right or wrong than any other philosopher.
- **What to do:** Remind students that Camus’s ideas—and those of other existentialist writers—were historically contingent. Viewed against the backdrop of two world wars, the apparent grimness of their ideas is more readily understandable.
- **What to do:** Expose students to other philosophical ideas for contrast.
- **What to do:** Invite students to bring in real-world examples of individuals having an impact in the society around them. Compare and contrast the values and practices at play in their examples with those exhibited by Meursault.

The Protagonist Is Unsympathetic: Rare is the student or scholar who finds Meursault to be a sympathetic character. He is notable for his unfeeling nature, complicity in domestic abuse, and irrational violence.
• **What to do:** Explain to students that the human condition is complex, and people can’t be entirely reduced to either “good” or “bad.” Meursault gives readers a chance to consider the unsympathetic aspects of the human nature that exist in everyone.

• **What to do:** Invite students to be philosophers themselves, analyzing when, how, and why Meursault behaves unethically.

**Violence Is Rampant and Then Minimized:** At the heart of the plot of *The Stranger* is a grotesque act of domestic violence followed by an irrational murder. Importantly, those around Meursault gloss over these incidents, criticizing Meursault’s social unconformity rather than his brutality.

• **What to do:** Remind students that most read *The Stranger* as critical of the colonial society in which Meursault lives. The absurd manner in which violence is minimized is exactly the point of the text.

• **What to do:** Engage students in creative writing and/or thinking to imagine the story from the perspective of the victimized characters: Meursault’s mistress and her brother. How would they perceive and recount the events of the novel? How might they view the justice dispensed in part II?

**Teaching Approaches: Alternative Approaches**

While the main ideas, character development, and discussion questions above are typically the focal points of units involving this text, the following suggestions represent alternative readings that may enrich your students’ experience and understanding of the novel.

• **Focus on light and nature.** Light is a predominant motif in *The Stranger*, punctuating both time and Meursault’s shifting perspectives, and Meursault often describes his worldview in terms of his interactions with natural elements.

• **Focus on attitudes toward mortality.** Between Maman, Salamano’s dog, and Meursault’s impending execution, death is a preoccupation for many in the text. How does Meursault’s attitude toward death develop in the text? What perspectives does he get from others?

• **Focus on gender relationships.** Invite students to consider the women who play secondary roles in *The Stranger*. How are colonial and absurdist themes expressed and developed through their characters?

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 1, Chapter 1: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. Where does Meursault live?

2. How does Meursault react when he learns of his mother’s death?

3. What happens when Meursault asks his employer for time off to attend his mother’s funeral?

4. Who is Celeste?

5. What happens to Meursault on the bus to the nursing home?

6. How does Meursault feel when he talks to the warden?

7. What do Meursault and the doorkeeper do during the all-night vigil?
8. Who is Thomas Perez?

9. Does Meursault cry at his mother’s funeral?

10. What does Meursault react to during the funeral?

**Answers**
1. Meursault, the narrator of the story, lives in Algiers, a hot, sun-drenched city in North Africa.

2. Meursault does not show any real emotion when he receives a telegram informing him of his mother’s death; he only expresses a passing interest in the details.

3. The employer is somewhat irritated that Meursault will be away from the office. Meursault feels guilty at first, then annoyed that his employer is not more sympathetic.

4. Celeste is Meursault’s friend and the owner of Meursault’s favorite restaurant.

5. Meursault is bothered by the glaring sun on the road. He falls asleep during the ride.

6. Meursault feels uneasy and gets the impression that the warden blames him for putting his mother in the nursing home.

7. Meursault and the doorkeeper chat and drink cafe au lait. Meursault has a difficult time staying awake.

8. Thomas Perez is an old man who was Meursault’s mother’s “special friend.” He cries and faints at the funeral.

9. No, Meursault does not cry or show any sadness, but he is anxious for the event to be over.

10. Meursault remains primarily concerned with his physical surroundings. He studies Perez’s face, notices the heat and various odors around him, and observes the other graves in the cemetery and the color of the flowers.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 1, Chapter 2: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. Why does Meursault worry about his employer when he wakes up on Saturday morning?

2. Who is Marie Cardona?

3. What kind of movie does Marie want to see?

4. How does Marie react when Meursault tells her about his mother?

5. Why does Meursault decide not to eat at Celeste’s on Sunday?

6. What does Meursault do when he’s alone in his apartment?

7. Who does Meursault see from his bedroom window?
8. How does the tobacconist sit on his chair?

9. What does the football fan say to Meursault?

10. How does Meursault feel about Sundays?

**Answers**

1. Meursault worries that his employer will be annoyed at him for taking two days off right before the weekend, even though it was for his mother’s funeral. He’s afraid the employer will think he’s taken a four day holiday for himself.

2. Marie Cardona used to work as a typist at Meursault’s office. He meets her at the swimming pool on Saturday and they see each other again that night.

3. Marie wants to see a comedy starring the French actor Fernandel.

4. Meursault notes that Marie “shrank away a little” when he told her about his mother.

5. Meursault does not eat at Celeste’s because he doesn’t want to be bothered by people asking him questions about his mother’s death.

6. Meursault stays in bed until noon, then he rises, eats, cuts an ad out of a newspaper, and sits by his window looking down at the street scene below.

7. Meursault watches an assortment of people pass by on the street below his window.

8. The tobacconist sits astride his chair with his folded arms resting on the back. Watching from his bedroom window, Meursault sits on his chair the same way, imitating the man.

9. The football fan calls up to Meursault: “We licked them!” Meursault calls back “Good work!”

10. Meursault has never cared for Sundays. They disrupt the perfunctory routine of his day-to-day existence.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 1, Chapter 3: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. How does Meursault’s employer treat him when he returns to work on Monday?

2. Who is Emmanuel?

3. How does Celeste react when he sees Meursault?

4. How long has old Salamano had his dog and why does he abuse him?

5. Who is Raymond Sintes?

6. Why does Raymond want to get revenge on his girlfriend?

7. What does Raymond ask Meursault to do for him?
8. Does Meursault want to be Raymond’s friend?

9. What does Raymond say about Meursault’s mother?

10. What does Meursault do after he leaves Raymond’s room?

**Answers**

1. Meursault’s employer is in a good mood on Monday morning. He offers his sympathy to Meursault and asks how he is feeling.

2. Emmanuel is Meursault’s co-worker. At lunchtime they have an adventure running after and leaping onto a truck.

3. Celeste is sympathetic and says she hopes that Meursault isn’t “feeling too badly.” Meursault tells Celeste he is very hungry.

4. Old Salamano has lived with his dog for eight years. The old man becomes furious when the dog pulls him down the street or gets in his way.

5. Raymond Sintes is Meursault’s neighbor. He is a tough young man, reputed to be a pimp.

6. Raymond claims that he is supporting his girlfriend, but that she is cheating on him. He found a lottery ticket and bracelets in her purse, things he never bought for her. He’s convinced that some “dirty work” is going on.

7. Raymond wants Meursault to write a letter to the girlfriend for him. He wants to convince the girlfriend to come back to him so that he can beat her up and throw her out again.

8. Meursault accepts Raymond’s offer of friendship, but admits to himself that he doesn’t care “one way or the other.”

9. Raymond says he was sorry to hear that Meursault’s mother had died, but it was bound to happen at some point, anyway.

10. Meursault stands alone on the “dank, dark” landing, experiencing the smells and sounds of the hallway.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 1, Chapter 4: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. Where do Meursault and Marie go on Saturday?

2. What does Marie do when Meursault tells her about old Salamano and his dog?

3. How does Meursault feel about policemen?

4. How does Raymond greet the policeman who comes to his door?

5. Why is Raymond shaking when he talks to the policeman?
6. How does Meursault feel about being Raymond’s witness?

7. Why is old Salamano so upset?

8. How does Raymond treat Salamano?

9. When Salamano visits Meursault, what does Meursault tell him?

10. Why does Meursault think about his mother?

**Answers**

1. Meursault and Marie go to the beach. Later they return to Meursault’s apartment.

2. Marie laughs at Meursault’s story.

3. Meursault tells Marie that he doesn’t like policemen.

4. Raymond greets the policeman with a “sickly smile” and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

5. The policeman accuses Raymond of being drunk, but Raymond says he is shaking because the angry policeman is standing at his door.

6. Meursault says he has no objections, but he doesn’t know what Raymond expects him to say.

7. Old Salamano is upset because he lost his dog at the Parade Ground.

8. Raymond tries to reassure Salamano that he’ll find his dog again.

9. Meursault tells Salamano that his dog is probably at the pound and won’t be killed for at least three days.

10. After he overhears Salamano crying, Meursault, “for some reason,” thinks about his mother.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 1, Chapter 5: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. Where does Raymond want to go on Sunday with Meursault and Marie?

2. What does Meursault’s employer suggest during their meeting?

3. How does Meursault feel about Paris?

4. What does Marie ask Meursault?

5. Does Meursault want to marry Marie?

6. With whom does Meursault eat at Celeste’s?

7. What does Meursault notice about the “robot” woman?
8. What was Salamano’s occupation?

9. According to Salamano, what do Meursault’s neighbors say about him?

10. Why did Meursault put his mother in the nursing home?

**Answers**

1. He wants to go to a friend’s seaside bungalow just outside Algiers.

2. The employer suggests that Meursault take a job in the new branch office in Paris.

3. Meursault has no interest in living in Paris. He thinks it is a dingy town with masses of pigeons and dark courtyards.

4. Marie asks Meursault if he loves her and if he will marry her.

5. Meursault doesn’t care. He says he doesn’t “mind” and agrees to marry Marie if it will make her happy.

6. The “little robot” woman eats at Meursault’s table in Celeste’s.

7. Meursault watches the robot woman study the menu, add up the bill, and march off down the street in a stiff, mechanical fashion.

8. Salamano worked for the railroad.

9. Meursault’s neighbors say “nasty things” about Meursault because he put his mother in the nursing home.

10. Meursault explains that he couldn’t afford to keep his mother at home. In addition, they never spoke to each other and she was “moping with no one to talk to.”

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 1, Chapter 6: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. How does Meursault feel when he wakes up on Sunday morning?

2. Where does Meursault first see the Arabs?

3. What does Meursault think about Raymond’s outfit?

4. Who is Masson?

5. How does Meursault feel after he eats lunch?

6. Where do Meursault, Raymond, and Masson go after lunch?

7. What happens when Raymond fights with the Arab?

8. What does Raymond do when he meets the Arab again?
9. How does the sun affect Meursault when he’s walking alone on the beach?

10. What happens when Meursault confronts the Arab?

**Answers**

1. Meursault wakes up with a headache, feeling “under the weather.”

2. He sees them standing around in front of the tobacconist’s shop.

3. Meursault is “put off by his getup.”

4. Masson is Raymond’s friend. He owns the bungalow on the beach.

5. Meursault complains of feeling “slightly muzzy.”

6. They go for a walk on the beach and they encounter the two Arabs.

7. The Arab pulls a knife and cuts Raymond on the face and arm.

8. The second time Raymond meets the Arab, he considers shooting him, but Meursault talks him out of it.

9. Meursault experiences a “dark befuddlement” when the intense sunlight “blasts” into his face.

10. With the sun “stabbing” into his face, Meursault shoots the Arab five times and kills him.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 2, Chapter 1: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. What does Meursault think about the magistrate when he first meets him?

2. What does Meursault’s lawyer look like?

3. What charge against Meursault, besides murder, is the lawyer concerned about?

4. Is the lawyer optimistic about Meursault’s case?

5. How did Meursault feel about his mother?

6. How does the lawyer react to Meursault during their first meeting?

7. What does the typist do during Meursault’s meeting with the magistrate?

8. How does Meursault react to the magistrate when the magistrate starts talking about God?

9. How does Meursault feel sitting in the magistrate’s office?

10. Does Meursault accept the fact that he is a criminal?
Answers
1. Meursault finds him to be “highly intelligent and, on the whole, likable enough.”
2. The lawyer is a “small, plump, youngish man with sleek, black hair.”
3. He is concerned about the charge of “callousness.”
4. When the lawyer first meets with Meursault, he tells him that he has a good chance of getting off, if Meursault follows his advice.
5. Meursault tells the lawyer that he had been “quite fond of Mother.”
6. He is repulsed by Meursault and annoyed at his answers.
7. The clerk types an answer he assumes Meursault will give to the magistrate’s question about Meursault’s mother, but then has to cross it out when Meursault responds differently than expected.
8. Meursault says, “He rather alarmed me.”
9. He feels hot, uncomfortable, and bothered by annoying flies.
10. Meursault tells us: “Somehow it was an idea to which I never could get reconciled.”

Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 2, Chapter 2: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What does Meursault hope for when he’s first put in prison?
2. How does the Arab prisoner help out Meursault?
3. What does Meursault feel the first night he spends in jail?
4. How far apart are the prisoners kept from their visitors?
5. What does Meursault long for when he sees Marie?
6. What does Marie do when Meursault is led back out of the Visitors’ Room?
7. Why does the jailer think Meursault is different?
8. Besides women, what else are the prisoners deprived of?
9. As Meursault loses track of time, what are the two words that still have meaning for him?
10. What does Meursault use for a mirror?

Answers
1. Meursault has a “vague hope” that something good will happen, some “agreeable surprise.”
2. He shows him how to make a pillow with his sleeping mat.

3. Meursault feels bugs crawling on his face.

4. They are separated by a “gap of some thirty feet.”

5. He wants to reach out and squeeze her shoulders.

6. She throws him a kiss.

7. The jailer tells Meursault he’s different because he can think and “use his brains.”

8. Smoking is also forbidden in the prison.

9. The words “yesterday” and “tomorrow” still have meaning.

10. He uses a polished “tin pannikin.”

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 2, Chapter 3: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. During what month does Meursault’s trial begin?

2. What does the special news correspondent from Paris look like?

3. How many judges preside over Meursault’s trial?

4. What is the first thing the judge questions Meursault about?

5. What does the judge ask Meursault about his mother?

6. Following Meursault, who is the first witness called?

7. What does the doorkeeper say about Meursault?

8. Who does the defense call as its first witness?

9. What does Marie do at the conclusion of her testimony?

10. Who is the last witness?

**Answers**
1. The trial begins in June.

2. He is a small, plump man who reminds Meursault of an “overfed weasel.”

3. There are three. Two are in black robes and one is in scarlet.

4. Meursault must answer questions about his identity.
5. The judge wants to know why Meursault sent her to the home.

6. The warden of the nursing home is the first witness.

7. The doorkeeper testifies that during the vigil over his mother’s body, Meursault slept, smoked cigarettes, and drank coffee.

8. Celeste is the defense’s first witness.

9. She bursts into tears.

10. Raymond is the last witness.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 2, Chapter 4: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. According to Meursault, what did the prosecutor “aim at” during his closing argument?

2. How does Meursault want to explain his lack of regret to the prosecutor?

3. What does the prosecutor call “the most odious of crimes?”

4. How does the prosecutor compare Meursault’s crime to the parricide case?

5. Since Meursault has already admitted killing the Arab, what verdict does the prosecutor ask for?

6. How do some of the spectators in the courtroom react when Meursault tries to explain his reaction to the sun?

7. What word does Meursault’s lawyer use when referring to Meursault during his speech?

8. What is Meursault’s impression of his lawyer?

9. How is Meursault to be executed?

10. How do those near Meursault react to him after the sentence is read?

**Answers**
1. His purpose was to convince the jury that Meursault’s crime was premeditated.

2. He wants to explain in a “quite friendly, almost affectionate way.”

3. Parricide is called the “most odious of crimes.”

4. He says Meursault is “morally guilty of his mother’s death.”

5. Murder without extenuating circumstances is the verdict he asks for.

6. They giggle.
7. He uses the word “I.”

8. Meursault thinks his lawyer is inexperienced and less talented than the prosecutor.

9. Execution is by decapitation in “some public place.”

10. They regard Meursault with looks of “almost respectful sympathy.”

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Part 2, Chapter 5: Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. How many times has Meursault refused to see the chaplain?

2. The guillotine reminds Meursault of what other type of device?

3. How does Meursault spend his nights in his cell?

4. What subject does Meursault wish he had read more about?

5. What does Meursault do after he refuses to see the chaplain?

6. Instead of a “divine face,” what image does Meursault try to see on the wall of his prison cell?

7. Does Meursault allow the chaplain to kiss him?

8. What happens when the chaplain touches Meursault’s shoulder?

9. When the jailers rush into Meursault’s cell, what do they do to him?

10. What does Meursault do after the chaplain leaves?

**Answers**
1. He refused to see the chaplain three times.

2. The guillotine’s shining surfaces and finish remind Meursault of some type of laboratory equipment.

3. He forces himself to stay awake, waiting for the dawn.

4. Meursault wishes he had read more accounts of public executions.

5. He thinks about Marie.

6. Meursault tried to envision Marie’s face, but he was never successful.

7. No, he does not allow the chaplain to kiss him.

8. Meursault grabs the chaplain and launches into an angry tirade.

9. They go to strike him but the chaplain begs them not to.
10. He falls into a deep sleep.