

THE STRANGER
Albert Camus
and
THE MEURSAULT INVESTIGATION
Kamel Daoud

A critical paper by
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The most important thing that you need to know about Albert Camus' most famous novel is that most readers get it wrong just as I did when I first read it. This is not the tale of an antisocial coldhearted human being, an unrealistic character who represents no one but himself and who offers no meaningful ideas to take away. It was published in 1942, the same year in which Camus published *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his most important philosophical tract. This is his explanation of the philosophy of Absurdism. Absurdism is the term used, not for the 'logically impossible', but the "humanly impossible". Absurdists believe that we search for the meaning of life when in fact there may not be one. It lies between existentialism, which encourages the individual to construct the meaning of one's life, and nihilism, which rejects a search for meaning in life since there is none. Absurdism holds that there may or may not be meaning in life but it must be personal and admit the absurd.

Meursault is the fictional embodiment of absurdism. It explains his behavior (or lack thereof) – the lack of tears at his mother's funeral, his willingness to marry Marie in spite of not loving her, and the murder of the Arab. These actions, which are important to society, are not important to him and he admits this at his trial, at the private interrogation by the judge, and in his cell where he refuses to repent to the prison chaplain. He tells the chaplain that he has no interest in God or anything otherworldly. He wants to live with the certainties of this life, even if it is the certainty of his own execution. He writes, "I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world...I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again."

To what extent is *The Stranger* a novel about a particular time and place – French Algeria in 1942 – and to what extent is it universal? From Camus' own writings it seems to be the latter. As he wrote in the preface to the American edition of this book, "In our society, a man who does not cry at the funeral of his mother is likely

to be sentenced to death.” The Stranger is often compared to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, but unlike Dostoevsky, Camus does not approve of his hero’s death sentence.

To what extent is Meursault’s behavior responsible for the verdict and the sentence at his trial? The answer is “very much so”. You must realize that in 1942 the French citizens living in Algeria occupied a social position quite distinct from the native Algerians. If a French citizen killed a native Algerian for any reason, the probability of a guilty verdict at the ensuing trial would have been almost zero. The strong French prejudice against Algerians in particular continues to this day. When I was a student at Stanford’s campus in France, French students told me of their dismay at the way African-Americans were treated in the U.S. When I responded that an Algerian living in France still could not get a job higher than a ditch digger, these liberal French students replied, quite seriously, “That’s different. They’re not human.”

This prejudice is the key to understanding that, unlike Camus’ book, *The Meursault Investigation* is a novel about a particular time and place. The French had invaded Algeria in 1830 and made it an integral part of France in 1848. Although France offered full French citizenship to Muslims, few applied for it since it required renouncing the right to be governed by Muslim sharia law. Haroun, the central figure in this book, is a simmering cauldron of hatred aimed not just at Meursault for killing his worshipped older brother, but toward all the pied-noir, literally the black feet, as the French settlers were known. In addition to this he hates his mother for dominating him and for constantly reminding him of his obligation to avenge his brother’s murder. He also resents his father, who disappeared with no explanation when he was a child, and even his brother Mousa, who in his own way abandoned him and left him with the never-ending burden of seeking revenge for his death.

So on the one hand we have the emotionally detached absurdist Meursault, and on the other hand we have the passionately hate-filled Haroun. Yet they have much in common. Both are murderers but with entirely different motivation. Meursault kills without premeditation. Haroun describes the crime as “majestically nonchalant”. But Meursault, as a symbol of the French colonists, takes away not only Musa’s life but also his identity and his homeland. There is a parallel here to *Robinson Crusoe*, to which Daoud repeatedly refers. Crusoe does not kill Friday but forcefully persuades him to change to conform to his ideal of civilization, to Western culture, in dress, action, and religion. Haroun’s action on the other hand is the result of years of longing. “It was not a murder but a restitution,” he says,

and “He wasn’t a Muslim so his death wasn’t forbidden.” The Algerian colonel criticizes Haroun for killing Larquais on his own rather than as a revolutionary during the War of Independence. Both Meursault and Haroun receive what many regard as unfair treatment in the justice system: too severe in Meursault’s case, too lenient in Haroun’s case, and both for reasons which have nothing to do with their crimes. Regarding the murder of his brother Haroun says, “The court preferred judging a man who didn’t weep over his mother’s death to judging a man who killed an Arab.” Regarding his murder of the Frenchman he says, “There was something unjust about their letting me go like that, without explaining whether I was a criminal, a murderer, a dead man, a victim, or simply an undisciplined moron. I found their attitude toward my crime almost insulting. The gratuitousness of Musa’s death was unconscionable. And now my revenge had just been struck down to the same level of insignificance!” More than 6,000 French Algerian civilians were killed by native Algerians during the War of Independence which lasted from 1954 to 1962. Last month the Cinematheque movie theater here in Cleveland gave a rare screening of the film “The Battle of Algiers” which depicts graphically the violent methods used by both the French military and the urban guerillas. The film was banned in France for the first 5 years after its release in 1966 but in my opinion presents the 2 sides impartially.

Both Meursault and Haroun are atheists. The scenes of Meursault’s rejection of the judge with his crucifix and of the priest in his cell are two of the most powerful scenes in the book. Haroun’s mockery of the iman next door, his threat to blaspheme through the loudspeakers inside the minaret, and his imagined conversation with God demonstrate his irreverence as well. He describes his neighbor reciting the Koran like “a dispute between heaven and a creature. Religion is a public transportation I never use. I detest religions and submission.” He later states, “I feel like busting through the wall that separates me from my neighbor, grabbing him by the throat, and yelling at him to quit reciting his sniveling prayers, accept the world, open his eyes to his own strength, his own dignity, and stop running after a father who has absconded to heaven and is never coming back.” As for death...I’ve come back from it, and I can report there’s nothing of the other side but an empty beach in the sun.” In this respect Haroun is just as much a “stranger” or “foreigner” to the Arab culture as Meursault is to the French culture.

Both novels were written in French. The English translation of *The Stranger* has been the subject of numerous controversies in the literary world. The French title is *L’Etranger*, which does not mean The Stranger but The Foreigner. The French words for “the stranger” are “l’inconnu”. Camus chose *L’Etranger* to signify that

Meursault's thoughts and behavior were foreign to those of other human beings. His title conveys this idea to French readers. However, the literal English translation *The Stranger* does not have the same nuance for English-speaking readers. Interestingly British translators published it under the title of *The Outsider*.

The opening sentence also poses a problem for translators. "Maman est morte." How do you translate the simplest of sentences into English? The problem is that in English we do not have a word like "maman" (spelled m-a-m-a-n) that conveys the same sense of adult filial affection. "Mother" is too distant and formal. "Mom" is too casual. "Mommy" is too infantile. One English translator solved the problem by leaving the original French word in the sentence. Numerous articles in literary magazines and even in the *New Yorker* magazine have been devoted to the translation of this one sentence.

The name of the central character has also been analyzed. "Meur" is part of the French word for "death" and "sault" is part of the word for "leap". Chateau de Meursault is an estate in Burgundy with a vineyard producing fine chardonnay.

The closing paragraph of the novel has also caused controversy. Various translators have described Meursault anticipating his own execution, opening himself to either the "gentle", "kind", or "tender" indifference of the world. The French word is "tendre".

The writing styles of the 2 authors are completely opposite to each other. Camus' sentences are brief, simple, dry, understated and unemotional. He allows the readers to deduce his viewpoint and then to react to it. Kamel Daoud's hero Haroun calls Camus' style "mathematical" and "perfect". Haroun says, "He writes so well that his words are like precious stones, jewels cut with the utmost precision. He writes about a gunshot, and he makes it sound like poetry! His world is clean, clear, exact, honed by morning sunlight, enhanced with fragrances and horizons." On the other hand, Daoud writes with impotent rage but also with sardonic humor. He takes whole sentences from *The Stranger* and turns them around to serve his own purposes. The opening sentence in Daoud's book is "Maman est vivante." "Mother is living." After he murders Larquais it occurs to him that he could take in a movie or go swimming with a woman just like Meursault did the day after his mother's death. The murder takes place at 2 in the morning, just as his brother's murder had taken place at 2 in the afternoon. He writes, "What will my accusers say? That I didn't weep when I killed Joseph?"

Like Mersault, Haroun anticipates his own execution in front of a large crowd of spectators greeting him with cries of hate.

We find out that his mother is quite different from Meursault's mother in more ways than just being alive. She can be regarded as a symbol of the Algerian people. She works for years as a servant in the house of a French family, then takes possession of their house when they flee the country. Her exaggerated tales of her older son's murder reflect the resentment of the native Algerians toward the French. She is literally unable to breathe normally until a *pied noir* is killed in retribution. She is the contemporary equivalent of the Furies in Greek tragedy who pursue and goad the hero to murder a murderer, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violent retribution. Haroun says, "I think I'd just like justice to be done. I don't mean the justice of the courts, I mean the justice that comes when the scales are balanced. And I've got another reason besides: I want to pass away without being pursued by a ghost." "Women have never been able to free me from my own mother, from the smoldering anger I feel toward her...her eyes, which followed me everywhere...as if they were asking me why I hadn't found Musa's body or why I'd survived instead of him or why I'd come into the world." He feels an almost sensual closeness with his mother, who seems threatened by his brief relationship with Meriem.

Women in these two novels are secondary characters but each brings out important aspects of the central character's personality. Marie is in love with Meursault and is willing to go along with whatever he wants to do, be it swimming, a date at the movies, or sex. She makes it clear that she wants to marry him and does not seem to mind that his agreement to marry her is casual. She visits him once in prison and testifies at his trial attempting to help his case but without success. His attitude toward her is indifferent as it is toward all men and women. He uses her for his own pleasure, not for a serious relationship.

Meriem brings out feelings of love on an emotional and physical basis that Haroun has never before experienced, but she also makes him realize how inadequate he feels as a man, for which he blames his mother.

In conclusion, even though the two novels seem to complement each other in terms of plot, their authors' objectives were completely different. Camus' goal in writing *The Stranger* was philosophical, to demonstrate his philosophy of Absurdism as a consistent way of life for his central character, whereas Daoud's goal in *The Meursault Investigation* was political, to demonstrate the injustices of the French colonists in Algeria and to justify their expulsion from that country.

The choice of first names for the 2 principal Algerian characters in Daoud's book is interesting. Musa is the Arabic name for Moses and Haroun is Arabic for Aaron, brothers in the Old Testament.