

Self-consciousness and Self-affirmation: A Study of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*

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The storm has died away, and still we are restless, uneasy, as if the storm were about to break. Almost all the affairs of men remain in a terrible uncertainty. We think of what has disappeared, and we are almost destroyed by what has been destroyed; we do not know what will be born, and we fear the future, not without reason.... Doubt and disorder are in us and with us. There is no thinking man, however shrewd or learned he may be, who can hope to dominate this anxiety, to escape from this impression of darkness. (84)

Paul Valery who spoke of the *Crisis of the mind* in the 1920's saw the cruelly injured mind as besieged by doubts and anxiety. The crisis of thought he described soon spread after the war to every field of thought. The Great War had totally destroyed most people's image of a world that was progressing and improving. In its stead, many people felt uncertain and controlled by forces over which they had no influence. Many people searched for ways to find meaning in a life that seemed to have no meaning. After the devastation of the War, these ideas began to spread throughout Western society. Values and beliefs that had guided people since the Enlightenment are suddenly questioned or abandoned.

Prior to the War, most people believed in reason and the rights of the individual. They also believed that human society was progressing. These ideas fit nicely with the logical nature of the universe as described by Sir Isaac Newton and with faith in the ability of rational humans to understand the universe.

Human life has been a complex and a multifaceted reality defying conceptual formulation and hence the contemporary mind has been perennially engaged in pursuit of knowledge seeking to impose meaning on the chaos of experience, shape an orderly picture of life and evolve coherent patterns of thought from overabundance of ardent observation to comprehend man's existence. Existence has never been an easy ordeal for man for it correlates with his struggle for survival in the universe materialistically, psychically and spiritually. The formidable tasks he has faced in life, especially during World War II has stimulated despair and frustration, set forth much difficult questions in his life about freedom and choice of freedom, incited a penchant to die and finally led to the making of a philosophy in the name of Existentialism that attained tremendous popularity in Europe, particularly in France. It is essentially associated with the condition of man, his act of living, his state of being free and the directions he takes to use his freedom in reciprocation to his wider experiences and enormous challenges he encounters in the universe that is drastically undergoing changes.

Existentialism has been expressed more tellingly in the 19th and 20th literature, especially, in the plays and novels than in philosophical treatises. Albert Camus, the leading exponents belonging to the school of existentialism, is the most illustrious example of those who carried the existentialist teaching through his creative writings like *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Fall*.

The Stranger, published in the middle of World War II, signaled a turn in the tide of modern attitudes. The novel is anti-doctrinal and anti-ideological in bias, attacks Church and state as inimical to authentic life. *The Stranger* is told in the first person, because he succeeded in graphically realizing the consciousness of existential man, the archetypal human for the twentieth century.

The Stranger is a story about moral awakening. In form, it resembles the poetry of Frost, the music of Bartok, the philosophy of Bergson, all examples of contemporary art based structurally upon creative evolution, or a world in which a new and more intense life erupts from a dormant state. Meursault, in jail awaiting execution at the time he tells his story, lives in the present, experiencing and caring about only what his senses make directly available to him. He had and has no social ambitions, or anything to say; he is not affected by what happens to others; love is meaningless, and when marriage is suggested by his mistress, he is neither interested nor uninterested. In short, he is indifferent to normal human aspirations and concerns, as detached from the conventional passions and attitudes as a human being can be. In the second half of the novel, when he is being tried for murder, Meursault is forced to justify what he has been done. He is on trial as a human being, as a nonconformist and thus an enemy of society, for not having wept at his mother's funeral, more than he is on trial for a specific murder. His prosecution is conducted by officialdom, representing the remnants of ancestor worship, the continuity of history, and abstract ideals society is based upon and dedicated to sustaining and enforcing. Initially impassive, Meursault under pressure to defend himself becomes impassioned. When a chaplain appears in his cell near the end of the novel to plead with Meursault to renounce this world and turn to God. Meursault, seizes the chaplain and yells at him that all his shadowy rewards in the hereafter are not worth one strand of a woman's hair. His new found passion does not represent a change in conviction but a growth toward self-consciousness and self-affirmation. Meursault comes to believe in what he had naturally been; he becomes aware that he had been right all along.

The central question for an understanding of *The Stranger* is whether Meursault is an unconscious hero or the absurd hero of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Some recent critics have felt that in his narrative Meursault shows intelligence and sensitivity, and a consistent personal attitude towards moral issues. He is often accepted as a consciously "absurd man"; and, according to Philip Thody, Camus confirmed this reading in private conversation. Meursault, after rejecting his employer's offer of a job in Paris, hints at an earlier experience that shaped his attitude:

One life was as good as another and my present one suited me quite well. I saw no reason for 'changing my life'. By and large it wasn't an unpleasant one. As a

student I'd had plenty of ambition of the kind he meant. But, when I had to drop my studies, I very soon realized all that was pretty futile. (*The Stranger* 48)

Because he realizes that he cannot impose a meaningful pattern on life, Meursault consciously rejects economic and social ambitions. He sees the lack of coherence in the world, and he refuses the usual abstractions that men place between themselves and reality.

The major events in Meursault's awakening are three major deaths-his mother's, which occurs just before the story begins; an Arab's, which occurs at the middle; and Meursault's impending execution, to take place after the story ends. The first evokes no reaction from Meursault, although it is eventually instrumental in bringing his own death. He does not regard the killing as a sin. It is an error, caused by the blinding presence of the sun. He feels at fault only because he has disturbed the relationship between himself and the natural world; he has "shattered the balance of the day." (11) Faced with execution, he realizes within himself an inextinguishable urge to live. In the shadow of death, Meursault has a poignant desire to be; in fact, by making all men equally guilty, that is, mortal, and all things equally valueless. Death frees him from anxiety and despair at the same time that it justifies him as an immediately and directly alive person that society, with its investment in super personal values, cannot tolerate.

Pressed to the wall, threatened with annihilation, Meursault refuses to submit and as a consequence discovers himself to be a rebel in the cause of concrete life. As the fire within him is ignited and burns brightly, he becomes conscious of his estrangement from other people, who are self-alienated by the acquired attitudes learned from social conditioning, and his identity with the universe. His way is confirmed as the way of the world, the natural, not the human world. He is justified by reality, which in its largest and most enduring form mirrors his instinctive nature. From his ascendance into consciousness results autonomy, and the more individuated he becomes the more alienated he is from the collective consciousness, and the more obvious it is that life is its own excuse for being. It is a self-evident and sufficient good in itself and need only assert its will to be.

Meursault's awakening reverses the moral hierarchy, producing a transvaluation in which social values is replaced by existential experiences as the norm. His plea that a large crowd watches his execution and greets him with howls of execration reflects his recognition that he is and must be the enemy of those people whose existence is a prescribed role in society's masked drama. The final truth and his last laugh is his, for he is free; he has lived for the right things, without illusion, for being, not for nothingness. His triumph is a victory over environment by the human spirit.

For Meursault morality consists in acting in accordance with his sentiments; he must describe these sentiments, to himself and to other people, honestly and without exaggeration. Society's morality, however, consists in obedience to an *a priori code*, which is held to be of universal validity. Those who accept this code are forced to deny any sentiments that conflict with it; their position bound by convention sees a refusal to abide by the moral law, or to repent if one has broken it, as an attempt to undermine the sense of his own life. Meursault denies any belief in God, but the magistrate cannot accept this:

That was unthinkable, he said; all men believe in God, even those reject Him. Of this he was absolutely sure; if ever he came to doubt it, his life would lose all meaning. 'Do you wish,' he asked indignantly, 'my life to have no meaning?' Really I couldn't see how my wishes came into it, and I told him as much. (120)

There is no alternative to life, Meursault knows, it is as much reality as man can know. The only improvement he can make upon it is to intensify and enhance it within himself through self-consciousness, but self-consciousness that is self-affirmative and not self-alienating and debilitating. Although he becomes an enemy of human society, Meursault attains a harmony with the universe that has condemned him. He arrives at a point from which he can look back on his life as a completed entity. He accepts his life as a value in itself; in accepting this value he accepts his death. He feels opening to the "benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, made me realize that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still." (120) In one of the first mentions of the theme of *The Stranger* in his notebooks, Camus remarks on the character of the story as he first conceived it:

The man does not want to justify himself. The idea that is made up about him is preferred to the man himself. He dies, alone in being conscious of his truth. Vanity of this consolation. (24)

Camus saw that until man stands alone on the edge of the fenced-in social world, as Meursault does, and elevates that part of his nature which antecedes social forms, unless he is in continual rebellion, he cannot establish or enter into a truly moral community. Only consciousness, kept true, and nimble by contact with the pristine, keeps Meursault from the automatism afflicting the "little robot" woman he meets in a restaurant. That conjunction is his defense of the life force against all the pressures toward rigidity, toward the socialization of man, in our technological and urbanized culture today.

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