The Stranger (novel)

The Outsider or The Stranger (French: L'Étranger) is a novel by Albert Camus published in 1942. Its theme and outlook are often cited as exemplars of Camus's philosophy of the absurd and existentialism, though Camus personally rejected the latter label.

The title character is Meursault, an indifferent French Algerian (“a citizen of France domiciled in North Africa, a man of the Mediterranean, an homme du midi yet one who hardly partakes of the traditional Mediterranean culture”),[1] who, after attending his mother's funeral, apathetically kills an Arab man whom he recognises in French Algiers. The story is divided into two parts, presenting Meursault's first-person narrative view before and after the murder, respectively.

In January 1955, Camus wrote: “I summarized The Stranger a long time ago, with a remark I admit was highly paradoxical: ‘In our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.’ I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game.”[2]

1 Plot

1.1 Part one

Meursault learns of his mother’s death. At her funeral, he expresses none of the expected emotions of grief.[3] When asked if he wishes to view the body, he says no, and, instead, smokes and drinks coffee in front of the coffin. Rather than expressing his feelings, he only comments to the reader about the others at the funeral. He later encounters Marie, a former employee of his firm. The two become re-acquainted, go swimming, watch a comedy film and begin to have a sexual relationship, despite the fact that his mother’s funeral took place the day before. In the next few days, he helps his friend and neighbour, Raymond Sintès, take revenge on a Moorish girlfriend suspected of infidelity. For Raymond, Meursault agrees to write a letter to his girlfriend, with the sole purpose of inviting her over so that Raymond can have sex with her but spit in her face at the last minute as emotional revenge. Meursault sees no reason not to help him, and it pleases Raymond. He does not express concern that Raymond’s girlfriend is going to be emotionally hurt, as he believes Raymond’s story that she has been unfaithful, and he himself is both somewhat drunk and characteristically unfazed by any feelings of empathy. In general, he considers other people either interesting or annoying or feels nothing of them at all.

The letter works: the girlfriend returns, but the situation escalates when she slaps Raymond after he tries to kick her out, and Raymond beats her. Raymond is taken to court where Meursault testifies that she had been unfaithful, and Raymond is let off with a warning. After this, the girlfriend’s brother and several Arab friends begin trailing Raymond. Raymond invites Meursault and Marie to a friend’s beach house for the weekend, and when there, they encounter the spurned girlfriend’s brother and an Arab friend; these two confront Raymond and wound him with a knife during a fist fight. Later, walking back along the beach alone and now armed with a revolver he took from Raymond so that Raymond would not do anything rash, Meursault encounters the Arab. Meursault is now disoriented on the edge of heatstroke, and when the Arab flashes his knife at him, Meursault shoots. Despite killing the Arab man with the first gunshot, he shoots the corpse four more times after a brief pause. He does not divulge to the reader any specific reason for his crime or emotions he experiences at the time, if any, aside from the fact that he was bothered by the heat and bright sunlight.

1.2 Part two

Meursault is incarcerated, and explains his arrest, time in prison, and upcoming trial. His general detachment makes living in prison very tolerable, especially after he gets used to the idea of not being able to go places whenever he wants to and no longer being able to satisfy his sexual desires with Marie. He passes the time sleeping, or mentally listing the objects he owned back in his apartment building. At the trial, Meursault’s quietness and passivity are seen as demonstrative of his seeming lack of remorse or guilt by the prosecuting attorney, and so the attorney concentrates more upon Meursault’s inability or unwillingness to cry at his mother’s funeral than on the actual murder. The attorney pushes Meursault to tell the truth but never comes through and later, on his own, Meursault explains to the reader that he simply was never really able to feel any remorse or personal emotions for any of his actions in life. The dramatic prosecutor theatrically denounces Meursault to the point that he claims Meursault must be a soulless monster, incapable of remorse and that he thus deserves to die for his crime. Although Meursault’s attorney defends him and later tells Meursault that he expects the sentence to be light, Meursault is alarmed when the judge informs him of the final decision: that he will be decapitated publicly.
2 Characters

**Meursault** is a French Algerian who learns of his mother’s death by telegram. Meursault’s indifference to the news of his mother’s death demonstrates some emotional detachment from his environment. There are multiple instances throughout the novel where significant moments do not have an emotional impact on Meursault. He doesn’t show emotion to the fact that his mother is dead, Marie loves him, or that he killed someone. Another aspect of Meursault is that he is a truthful person. He always speaks his mind and does not care how other people see him. However, he may have committed perjury by providing hearsay testimony on behalf of his neighbor, Raymond. He is regarded as a stranger to society due to his indifference.

**Meursault’s Mother** was sent to an old people’s home three years prior to her death, introduced in the opening line of the novel. There are multiple instances where Meursault relates to his mother’s death. Towards Meursault’s presumed execution he felt that his mother embraced a meaningless universe and lived for the moment, just as he did.

**Raymond Sintès** is the neighbour of Meursault who beats his mistress which causes a conflict with the Arabs. He brings Meursault into the conflict which ultimately results in Meursault killing the Arab. Raymond can be a foil character of Meursault in that he takes action while Meursault is indifferent. Raymond and Meursault seem to develop a bond as the story goes on, ending with Raymond Sintès testifying for Meursault during his trial. Raymond also believes that he can control people - he assaults a woman because he believes she cheated and he insists Meursault is his friend after a simple favour from Meursault.

**Marie Cardona** had been a typist in the same workplace as Meursault. A day after Meursault’s mother’s funeral she meets him at a public pool, which sparks their relationship. She asks if Meursault loves her but Meursault replies that he doesn’t think so. He still agrees to marry her prior to the murder and his arrest. Marie, like Meursault, enjoys physical contact in their relationship through the act of sex. She represents the enjoyable life Meursault wants and her pleasing aesthetic is one of the things that Meursault misses in jail.

**Masson** is the owner of the beach house where Raymond takes Marie and Meursault. Masson is a carefree person who simply likes to live his life and be happy. He wants to live life without restrictions.

**Salamano** is an old man who routinely takes his dog out for walks. He abuses the dog, but is attached to it. When he loses his dog, he is distressed and asks Meursault for advice. Meursault does not offer helpful advice and Salamano acknowledges that his life has changed.

**The Arabs** They include Raymond’s mistress. None of the Arabs in The Stranger are named.

**The Arab** He is shot by Meursault on a beach of colonial Algiers. The Arab was given an identity and a whole novel by the Algerian journalist and novelist Kamel Daoud in his 2013 novel *The Meursault Investigation*.

3 Reception

*The Stranger’s* first edition consisted of a mere 4,400 copies and could not become a best-seller. But it was well received, due to Jean-Paul Sartre’s article in the eve of the publication of this novel and a mistake from the Propaganda-Staffel.[5]

Carl Viggiani wrote of the book: “On the surface, *L’Etranger* gives the appearance of being an extremely simple though carefully planned and written book. In reality, it is a dense and rich creation, full of undiscovered meanings and formal qualities. It would take a book at least the length of the novel to make a complete analysis of meaning and form and the correspondences of meaning and form, in *L’Etranger.*”[6]

4 English translations from the French

Books. Camus was influenced by American literary style, and Ward’s translation is Americanized. A translation by Sandra Smith, entitled The Outsider, was published by Penguin in 2013.

A critical difference among these translations is in the connotation of the original emotion in what is arguably the story’s key sentence: “I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe” in Gilbert’s translation, versus Laredo’s “I laid my heart open to the gentle indifference of the universe” (original French: la tendre indifférence du monde = literally, “the tender indifference of the world”), although in the Penguin Classics 2000 reprint of Laredo’s translation, “gentle” was changed to “benign”. The ending lines differ as well: Gilbert’s “on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration” contrasts with Laredo’s to “with cries of hatred”, in a significant scene that serves as a foil to the prior “indifference of the world”. In French, the triad is “cri de haine”, which Ward’s transliteral interpretation (“with cries of hate”) is closest to in terms of phonics. Gilbert’s interpretation takes the liberty of juxtaposing “execration” with “execution”.

5 In popular culture

The 1979 first single “Killing an Arab” by The Cure was recorded at the same time as their first LP in the UK, Three Imaginary Boys (1979) but not included on the album. However, it was included on the band’s first US album, Boys Don’t Cry (1980). Composer Robert Smith has said that the song “was a short poetic attempt at condensing my impression of the key moments in L’Étranger (The Stranger) by Albert Camus” (Cure News number 11, October 1991).

The 1995 song “Noch koroche dnya” (“Night is Shorter than Day”) by the Russian heavy metal band Aria is based on Meursault’s encounter with the chaplain in the final scene of the novel. It is also narrated from Meursault’s first-person perspective and includes (in Russian) the line, “The cries of hate will be my reward / Upon my death, I will not be alone.”

The passage in which Meursault accepts his impending execution was read over the end of the song “Asa Phelps Is Dead” by The Lawrence Arms; read by guitarist Chris McCaughan, the excerpt parallels certain themes in the song’s lyrics by bassist Brendan Kelly.

The 1993 film Menace II Society is based loosely on the basic plot (minus the trial), interactions and realizations that the character Mersault experiences. The film’s title can be found in the line from the novel, “Especially when this lack of every decent instinct is such as that of the man before you, a menace to society.”

In The Sopranos episode “D-Girl”, Anthony Soprano Jr tells his parents that life is absurd, that the hypothetical death of his friends would be “interesting,” and that there is no God. Tony and Carmela ask where this is coming from. Meadow Soprano appears at this moment and explains that Anthony was assigned The Stranger in English class, stating “This is education.”

In Mad Men, themes explored in the novel are used as a backdrop for the character of Don Draper and his existential stance, starting from Season 1 (episode 1), in which Rachel Menken describes him as someone detached from others, to one of the last episodes of Season 7 (episode 12), in which The Stranger and On the Road are cited by Bert Cooper - appearing to Don in a vision - as the type of works Don is fond of. The representation of Don under the sun of California is also a reminder of his condition as a stranger.

In the 1990 film Jacob’s Ladder, Tim Robbins’ character can be seen reading The Stranger during the subway scene at the beginning of the movie.

In the 2006 film Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby, Jean Girard is seen reading a French language copy of The Stranger while racing.

In the 2012 film Life of Pi, the titular character of Pi can be seen reading a French language copy of The Stranger in a flashback scene to his youth in Pondicherry, India.

In the first episode of the 2014 HBO Series The Leftovers, Tom Garvey can be seen in the middle of the night reading an English version The Stranger, translated by Matthew Ward.

In the tenth episode of the 2014 WGN America Series Manhattan, the character Ida is seen returning a copy of the book to Elodie and comments on the book “I thought it would be racy”.

In the first season of American Horror Story, in the second episode, Violet is seen reading The Stranger in bed when her mother brings her a cupcake.

The Joe Iconis song, Kevin, deals with a young man who feels completely detached from his surroundings. The refrain states, “I can’t feel a thing anymore. It’s all been done before. And everything’s a horrible bore. And living is a terrible chore. You know that it’s true. There’s nothing new to do in Brooklyn anymore”. The near the end of the song, testing his apathy, the singer randomly strangles a stranger, killing her and dumping her body in an alley. However, he is “still numb”.

6 Selected film adaptations

- 1967 Lo Straniero by Luchino Visconti (Italian)
- 2001 Yazgı (Fate) by Zeki Demirkubüz’s (Turkish)
7 See also

- Character evidence
- *Le Monde’s* 100 Books of the Century

8 References


[3] The book’s famous opening sentences—“Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know.”—give the reader an immediate appreciation of Meursault’s emotional disjointedness.


9 External links

- *L’Étranger*, Les Classiques des sciences sociales ; Word, PDF, RTF formats, public domain in Canada
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