Camus Society Guides:

*The Stranger*
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About This Book

This book is a SAMPLE, containing the full text of Chapter 1: Summary of *The Stranger* and Chapter 2: Character Analysis. The other chapters are missing, replaced with brief descriptions of what to expect from the complete published edition.

For details of how to acquire a copy of the full text, please visit www.camus-society.com.
Chapter 1: Summary of *The Stranger*

Meursault receives a telegram informing him that his mother has died. It is from the care home in which she had been living. Getting time off work, as shipping-clerk in a dock-side office, he travels down to the home to sit in vigil over his mother’s coffin before her funeral the next day. During the vigil he is offered coffee and chooses to smoke cigarettes. This will later be used against him in court as ‘evidence’ of his failure to grieve over his mother’s death. The day after the funeral is a Saturday and Meursault decides to go swimming. At the beach he bumps into Maria Cardona, a woman he recognizes as a former typist from his office. They swim together and he asks her out. That evening they go to the cinema to watch a comedy and afterwards she returns home with Meursault. In court, their date will be used as further evidence of Meursault’s lack of grief for his mother as well as his lack of morals. He spends the Sunday, after Marie has gone, alone in his flat watching the world go by from his balcony.
The next day is a Monday and he is back at work. That evening he bumps into his elderly neighbour Salamano who is taking his mangy dog for a walk, as well as another neighbour, a local tough called Raymond Sintès. Sintès invites Meursault into his room because he wants to discuss his mistress whom he believes is cheating on him. They both drink a lot of wine and Meursault agrees to help his neighbour punish the woman by writing a letter designed to lure her into a trap. When writing the letter on Raymond’s behalf, he discovers that she is an Arab. A week later, Meursault and Marie are in his apartment when they hear screams coming from Raymond’s place. He is carrying out the punishment. The police arrive and Raymond tries to act tough but is humiliated with a slap across the face from the policeman. Later that afternoon he turns up at Meursault’s apartment and asks him to act as a witness that his mistress had been cheating on him. Meursault agrees. Salamano’s dog goes missing and Meursault attempts to comfort the old man.

Raymond calls Meursault at work during the week to invite him to a friend’s beach chalet that Sunday. He also wants to warn Meursault that the mistress’s brother is out to get him and
may turn up at the apartment building. Meursault then is called to see his boss. The boss tells him about a possible promotion but Meursault is unimpressed and tells the man he isn’t interested. That evening he meets up with Marie who asks him about marriage; he replies that he doesn’t mind if they get married or not. Later on he eats dinner at Celeste’s restaurant and observes the strange mannerisms of an odd robot-like woman. Back at the apartment, Salamano tells him that his dog has definitely gone.

Meursault, Marie and Raymond go to the beach that Sunday. The chalet is owned by Masson, a big burly guy, and his Parisian wife. Meursault, Masson and Marie go swimming before lunch and after a boozy meal, the three men go for a walk on the beach. The brother of Raymond’s former mistress, along with a friend, turns up and there is a fight. During the scuffle, Raymond is slashed in the arm and mouth but not seriously hurt. The fight was something of a draw and, his pride hurt, Raymond goes back out with a gun to find the Arab. Meursault goes after him and manages to persuade Raymond to hand over the revolver. Feeling better, Raymond returns to the chalet along with Meursault. However, just before going back in
Meursault decides to turn around and go back on beach. By chance he bumps into the Arab who is alone. In a strange scene, Meursault finds Raymond’s gun, still in his pocket, and fires several times.

The second half of *The Stranger* begins with Meursault being interviewed by the examining magistrate. When he gets to see his lawyer he frustrates the man by refusing to say things that will help his defence. They don’t talk much about the crime itself but recent events from Meursault’s life, such as his attitude during his mother’s funeral. Despite being told that the prosecution will make much out of his apparent lack of emotion, Meursault refuses to lie and say that he controlled his natural feelings on the day. When he next meets the magistrate, the man seems less interested in the actual killing but in why Meursault fired the extra shots into the dead body. When Meursault doesn’t answer the man brandishes a crucifix expecting him to be filled with remorse and moved to tears. Meursault is neither. After this, neither the magistrate nor the lawyer speak much with Meursault, carrying on the legal process without him.
His trial is both fascinating and bewildering at first, but Meursault soon becomes bored with the proceedings. His friends are called as witnesses and he is moved by their attempts to speak up for him, especially the restaurant owner Céleste. However the words of his friends are either ignored or twisted against him by the prosecutor. The focus is much more on Meursault’s relationship with his mother than the death of the Arab. His own lawyer puts up a feeble defence but Meursault is unworried believing that his sentence will be light. He is condemned to death by guillotine in the name of the French people.

In his prison cell, awaiting the day they come to take him to his death, Meursault spends his time alternating between desperately hoping he can escape the guillotine and reflecting that life is meaningless. One day the chaplain, whom Meursault has so far refused to see, invites himself into the cell for a talk. In an explosion of vigor, he rages at the cleric and needs to be pulled off him by the guards. This moment is an epiphany for Meursault who suddenly realizes why his mother chose to take Pérez as a boyfriend, why she chose to start her life all over again, and why no-body had the right to cry over her. The novel ends with Meursault
expressing his last wish: ‘… that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate.’

Chapter 2: Character Analysis

The characters appear below in the order they appear in *The Stranger*. Later chapters in this guide will often refer to events and ideas that are covered here; for example, when this occurs I will write (see: Marie Cardona). To get the most out of this book you are strongly advised to read this chapter in its entirety before tackling the later chapters. The authority figures in *The Stranger* have not been given names; I have referred to them, as Meursault does, by their job titles. As you read you will find that I have included a lot more than just a brief description of the character; for example, in the entry on Boss I have analyzed Meursault and Camus’ attitude to work.

**Maman**

Meursault put his mother in a care home three years before her death. He couldn’t afford to pay for a private nurse to look after her and thought she’d be better off in residential care. At home they had run out of things to say to
one another: ‘Maman used to spend her time following me with her eyes, not saying a thing.’\textsuperscript{2} During the first few days at the care home she cries a lot but soon gets used to the place and ‘A few months later she would have cried if she’d been taken out.’\textsuperscript{3} Indeed, she makes friends and even takes a ‘fiancée’ (see: \textit{Thomas Pérez}). Meursault tells us that one of her favourite sayings was that after a while you could get used to anything.\textsuperscript{4}

Meursault loved his mother, or so he tells his lawyer and later the examining magistrate. For the first two years of her stay at the home he would visit her on Sundays and only reduced the frequency of his visits in the last year, because she didn’t seem to need to see him so regularly (she had her best friend and her ‘fiancée’).

Her husband, Meursault’s father, must have died many years previously because we are told Meursault never knew him. This was true of Camus’ own father who only lived with his son for eight months before he died. In the last

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{2}] Camus, \textit{The Stranger} (trans. Ward), p. 5
\item[\textsuperscript{3}] Camus, \textit{The Stranger} (trans. Ward), p. 5
\item[\textsuperscript{4}] Camus, \textit{The Stranger} (trans. Ward), p. 77
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
chapter, Meursault tells a story he had heard about his father witnessing an execution and being physically sick on his return home; this anecdote was based on a true story Camus heard about his own father.

Some commentators have claimed that Meursault is incapable of love (and so could not have loved his mother) and others have claimed that he no longer thought about her after putting her in the home. For a discussion on this see Chapter 4.

Céleste

The restaurant owner and friend of Meursault. He has a big belly and a white moustache. Meursault is a regular customer and he and Céleste often go to the races together. During the trial, Céleste acts as a character witness, telling the court that Meursault ‘is a man of the world’. He believes that the killing was an accident. After his testimony fails to impress the judge his eyes tear up and his lips tremble; Meursault is moved and tells us that this moment was the first time he’d ever wanted to kiss a man. Céleste’s name refers to the ‘heavenly’.
Emmanuel

Works as a dispatcher at Meursault’s office. He and Meursault are friends and often go to the cinema together. Emmanuel is often considered to have some kind of learning difficulties, at any rate he has difficulty understanding the films and will ask Meursault to explain them. Emmanuel is the only friend of Meursault who is mentioned in the first half of the book but is not present at the trial.

What’s in a name? Emmanuel, in Hebrew, means ‘God is with us’; during the trial Emmanuel/God is not with Meursault.

Caretaker

Works in the old people’s home Meursault’s mother was in. He is sixty-four, around the same age as Mrs. Meursault. He used to live in Paris but had to return home to Algeria because he was destitute. Meursault takes an interest in the old man’s stories and raises the possibility that the caretaker is just as much a resident of the home as the other inmates; when the caretaker dismisses this idea, Meursault reflects that ‘...of course it wasn’t the same. He was the
caretaker, and to a certain extent he had authority over them.’

It is interesting to note that the first thing Meursault says to the caretaker is that he wants to see his mother, but later, when the man offers to unscrew the lid of the coffin, Meursault declines. When the caretaker asks him why he doesn’t want to see his mother, Meursault doesn’t have an answer and feels embarrassed. Later, in court, the caretaker will testify against Meursault, saying that he didn’t want to see his mother and that he smoked cigarettes during the vigil. On the stand, he is embarrassed and uncomfortable saying things that will be used against Meursault, and is surprised and grateful when Meursault, who is asked if he has anything to add, corroborates the old man’s account.

**Director of the home**

Described as ‘a little old man with the ribbon of the Legion of Honor on his lapel’, he is officious and authoritarian. Meursault wants to see his mother straight away, but the rules state

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he must see the director first; however, when he arrives at the office the director is busy and so he must wait. When he does get to meet the man, the director shakes his hand, employing the old power-play of gripping his hand for an uncomfortably long time. During the meeting the director talks over Meursault, hardly letting him get a word in edge-ways, briskly informing him that everything has been arranged. These arrangements include a religious service for the funeral. Meursault reveals to us that although his mother wasn’t an atheist, ‘Maman had never in her life given a thought to religion.’

Presumably, the director was the penny-pinching author of the callous telegram sent to inform Meursault of his mother’s death.

The next day, the director tells Meursault that he will be attending the funeral and that he has permitted one of the residents to attend, Thomas Pérez. He explains that residents are not usually permitted to attend funerals but since Pérez and Mrs. Meursault were so close he has made an exception. The director considered their relationship ‘childish’ but is allowing the old man to attend the funeral because, on doctor’s orders, Pérez was not

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7 Camus, The Stranger (trans. Ward), p. 6
permitted to join the vigil. Note that Pérez was considered too frail to sit in vigil but is permitted to take a forty-five minute walk under the intense heat of the late-morning sun! Pérez, in tears, faints when he arrives at the church. The director’s blind following of the doctor’s orders shows his willingness to simply follow the rules without consideration.

The director is the first of the witnesses to take the stand during the trial. He is pressured by the prosecutor into suggesting that Meursault’s mother resented her son for putting her in a home. He also says that Meursault seemed unusually calm, and that he hadn’t cried or paid his respects at the grave. While giving his testimony the director seems cowed, staring at his shoes. This is in contrast to the domineering figure he appeared to be in chapter one. The evidence he is made to give against Meursault, making out that his mother resented him (with the implication that Meursault had done a bad thing by putting his mother in a home) is the opposite of what he said to Meursault in chapter one. Meursault tells us that after the director’s testimony ‘for the first time in years I had this stupid urge to cry, because I could feel how much all these people hated me.’

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Arab nurse

She is missing a nose. ‘I looked over at the nurse and saw that she had a bandage wrapped around her head just below the eyes. Where her nose should have been, the bandage was flat.’\(^8\) It is very hard to believe that Meursault didn’t notice this until, as he tells us, the caretaker drew his attention to her face. Later when Meursault claims that he doesn’t know his mother’s age it is also hard to believe. These moments are a possible clue that Meursault’s narrative is not an entirely straightforward account of events.

At one point Meursault sees the nurse from behind, her arms moving in a way that makes him assume that she must be knitting. This seeing the action and having to guess the meaning is an example of what could be called the glass partition effect (see Chapter 5).

Caretaker’s wife

While the caretaker is telling Meursault a rather graphic, and inappropriate, story about how

corpses need to be buried more quickly in Algeria than in Paris because of the heat, his wife interrupts him: ‘Hush now, that’s not the sort of thing to be telling the gentleman.’ This intervention embarrasses the caretaker and he blushes. Meursault kindly tells him that what he was saying interested him and made sense. Camus’ notebooks, written at the time he was planning *The Stranger*, contain several references to wives embarrassing or undermining their husbands.

**Maman’s friends**

Around ten or so residents of the home who were friends with Meursault’s mother come to keep the vigil. He has dozed off and their entrance wakes him. In another example of the glass partition effect he says ‘I saw them more clearly than I had ever seen anyone, and not one detail of their faces or their clothes escaped me. But I couldn’t hear them, and it was hard for me to believe they really existed.’ They all sit on the other side of the room around the caretaker (who Meursault has already acknowledged as an authority figure over them); they resemble a

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judge and jury, foreshadowing the trial in part two. Meursault says ‘I had the ridiculous feeling that they were there to judge me.’

One of the friends keeping the vigil is a woman Meursault doesn’t recognize; she is sobbing loudly and this irritates him. The caretaker explains that she and Mrs. Meursault had become close and that she considered Meursault’s mother to have been her only friend. The fact that Meursault doesn’t recognize the woman means that she must be relatively new to the home. Although he visited his mother less often during the last year, he was a regular visitor for two years prior to that (a fact ignored or not noticed by many commentators who seem to believe that he puts his mother in a home and promptly forgets about her). Both Meursault and the director say that the residents cry at first but then get used to the home. In the second part of the book Meursault tells us that one of his mother’s favourite sayings was that you get used to everything.

During the vigil Meursault is struck by the idea that the other residents don’t really care about

his mother but adds that ‘I think now that that was a false impression.’ This is interesting for three reasons. Firstly, it shows that Meursault is aware of a kind of pretense at the home, as if people are just going through the motions. Secondly, it makes us wonder when Meursault is telling us the story. And thirdly it shows that Meursault is interested in his surroundings and reflecting on his impressions (something some commentators claim he is incapable of).

**Thomas Pérez**

A resident in the care home and Mrs. Meursault’s ‘fiancé’. He attends the funeral (see: Director) but is too frail to keep up with the procession; when he finally arrives at the church he passes out. The treatment of his character demonstrates the lack of ‘caring’ at the care home; however, Meursault is considered a monster for appearing not to care. Pérez is also part of Mrs. Meursault’s ‘beginning her life again’ (or at least pretending to). Just as Salamano carries on going after the death of his wife (he gets a dog), Meursault’s mother carries on going by taking a boyfriend.

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He understands, in the final chapter, why she bothered. It is because she hasn’t given up on life.

Pérez gives evidence during the trial. When asked by the prosecutor if he saw Meursault shedding any tears he says no – but this is because he was crying himself and could not see Meursault at all. The prosecution tries to use this as evidence that Meursault showed no emotion at the funeral and this, rightly, exasperates the Meursault’s lawyer who asks Pérez, with irony, if he saw Meursault not crying. The spectators laugh and the lawyer cries out ‘Here we have a perfect reflection of this entire trial: everything is true and nothing is true!’

A simple example of things being true but not true is the question of Meursault not wanting to see his mother. When he first arrives at the care home he asks to see his mother (so he does want to see her) but then says he doesn’t want the coffin opened (in this case he does not want to see her).

\[14\] Camus, The Stranger (trans. Ward), p. 91
What’s in a name? Pérez, in Spanish, means son of Peter, in Hebrew it means ‘breach or burst forth’.

Figeac

The undertaker. He asks Meursault how old his mother was and Meursault says she was fairly old. At some point he must tell the director about this because Meursault not knowing his mother’s age will be used against him at the trial. In his notebooks Camus wrote ‘Gossip – unbearable and degrading.’\(^{15}\) It is Figeac’s gossip that helps the prosecution paint Meursault as a monster during the trial. Salamano also informs Meursault that the local people were gossiping about him after he put his mother in the home. Local gossip has it that Raymond is a pimp.

Priest

There is a priest towards the end of the first chapter and a priest at the end of the last chapter. Meursault notes that the priest at his mother’s funeral refers to him as ‘my son’ and

\(^{15}\) Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, p. 74
in the final chapter the chaplain wants to know why Meursault refuses to call him ‘father’.

**Gaunt nurse**

She is the duty nurse at the funeral and as the procession is reaching the village she says something that makes an impression on Meursault: ‘If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill inside the church.’

He tells us that she was right, ‘There was no way out.’

In the second part of *The Stranger*, Meursault recalls the nurse’s words and adds, ‘No, there was no way out, and no-one can imagine what nights in prison are like.’

**Marie Cardona**

Marie is a beautiful young woman to whom Meursault is much attracted. He frequently speaks of his desire for her body. They get together the day after the funeral although they knew of each other before when she used to

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work as a typist in his office. After meeting in the pool and swimming together, Meursault invites her out to the cinema that evening; Marie wants to see a comedy and later, in court, the decision to go and see a comedy film the day after his mother’s funeral will be used against him. When they are dressing on the beach, Marie is surprised to see Meursault’s black tie and ask if he’s in mourning. She recoils slightly after discovering that his mother was buried just the day before but soon gets over her shock. After the cinema they both return to Meursault’s apartment and spend the night together. The following week they spend the Saturday together on a beach a few miles outside of Algiers. She spends the night at his apartment and is still there the following day and overhears Raymond beating his mistress in his apartment. She asks Meursault if he loves her to which he replies that he doesn’t. She is saddened but is soon laughing again. She leaves shortly after witnessing Raymond’s humiliation at the hand of the policeman. Later that week she calls on Meursault and asks him if he’d want to marry her, to which he gives an odd reply telling her that he doesn’t take marriage seriously. She remarks that he’s a bit peculiar but that she loves him all the same; at the same time she warns him that his oddness might be
too much for her one day. They go for a walk and she declines having dinner at Céleste’s restaurant, hinting that she has a date with another man. The next Sunday she accompanies Meursault and Raymond to the beach and gets drunk over lunch. It is on this trip that Meursault shoots and kills the Arab. After his arrest Marie has one visit with Meursault, in a crowded and noisy visiting area of the prison. She tries to put on a brave face and to reassure him that everything will turn out alright. After this visit she writes a letter explaining that she is no longer permitted to visit him as she is not his wife. In court she is called as a witness but is reduced to angry tears by the prosecutor who uses her brief and sexual relationship with Meursault as evidence of Meursault’s immorality. The letters she has been regularly writing one day stop and Meursault assumes that she has found someone else. Cardona was the maiden name of his grandmother.

For a detailed analysis of Meursault and Marie’s relationship see Chapter 8.
Boss

As with all the authority figures, we never know the name of Meursault’s boss. He is simply referred to by his job title (as is the director of the home, the prosecutor, head guard, etc.) We hear of the boss in the first chapter when Meursault tells us about having to ask for time off to go to the funeral. According to Meursault the man doesn’t seem too happy about giving him two days off (Thursday, to get to the home and sit all night keeping vigil, and then Friday for the day of the funeral). Meursault even apologizes for needing the days off, saying that it’s not his fault. Interestingly, Meursault points out that the man will probably offer his condolences the ‘day after tomorrow’\(^1\) However, if today is Thursday, then the day after tomorrow will be Saturday and Meursault won’t be in work (he’ll be on the beach meeting Marie Cardona). Meursault realizes his mistake at the beginning of the second chapter but doesn’t go back and correct himself. This is to be expected if he’s writing a diary but it is not clear that he is. And besides, he appears to have written most of it quite a while after the event.

\(^1\) Camus, *The Stranger* (trans. Ward), p. 3
Meursault displays his understanding of the dynamic of the boss/employee relationship when he talks of his boss (probably) being annoyed at his getting four days off in a row. ‘And, naturally, my boss thought about the fact that I’d be getting four days’ vacation that way, including Sunday, and he couldn’t have been happy about that.’ However, when he is back at work on Monday, at the beginning of chapter 3, the boss is nice and asks him about his mother.

Meursault tells us about the soggy hand-towel in the employee restroom. He enjoys washing his hands before lunch but by the end of the day the towel is soaking wet and unpleasant (and ineffectual) to use. We are told that when he once brought this issue up to his boss he was told that the hand-towel was just a minor issue. Many commentators seem to side with the boss, suggesting that there is something unusual about Meursault’s interest in something as minor as the towels in his work place restroom. The point they are trying to make is that Meursault is more interested in immediate concerns and physical sensation. However, there is more to this than that. Meursault has

taken a legitimate complaint, the conditions of the workplace, to his boss and his complaint is simply brushed aside and dismissed. The comfort of the employees is, to the boss, a minor detail. When we couple this with his attitude towards one of his workers getting a ‘four-day vacation’ (or what Meursault imagines is his reaction), then we get an insight into Meursault’s (and Camus’) attitude to bosses.

The final time we hear about the boss is in chapter 5, after Raymond has called the office to invite Meursault to Masson’s beach chalet. When he is summoned to see the boss, Meursault is annoyed because he believes he’s about to be disciplined for taking a private call during work hours but actually the boss has, what he thinks, good news. He is planning to expand the business and this means a new position will be opening up, a job in Paris. The idea of a promotion is floated to Meursault who, much to the chagrin of the boss, is unenthused. There is a lot going on in the twenty or so lines of this scene.

The boss tells Meursault that the new job would involve living in Paris as well as some opportunities for travel, adding ‘You’re young,
and it seems to me it’s the kind of life that would appeal to you.’ Note that the boss is doing what the director of the home was doing, telling Meursault about himself and assuming what he should want rather than asking. The next line is, ‘I said yes but really it was all the same to me.’ Meursault’s first response is an example in action of a trick he tells us about in chapter one of part two; referring to his interrogation by the examining magistrate he says ‘As always, whenever I want to get rid of someone I’m not really listening to, I made it appear as if I agreed.’ However, when pressed he will say what he feels. With his boss, he says that he isn’t interested in changing his life; that one life is as good as another and he is not unhappy with how he’s currently living. This response is completely bewildering to the boss, although what Meursault is saying is not bizarre. He does appear to have a happy life, with lots of friends, an active love life, not rich but with no obvious financial worries. The boss just cannot understand why his employee doesn’t have any career or business ambitions. He doesn’t understand Meursault’s priorities and accuses him of failing to give him a straight

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answer. In *The Stranger* Meursault rarely gives anyone a straight answer. What he tells us, but doesn’t tell his boss, is that he used to have ambitions as a student but gave them up when he had to give up his studies. This is a clue about when Meursault became aware of the absurd, which obviously happened sometime prior to the first chapter. Camus, for a short time, was forced to give up his studies due to serious illness; this was a genuine brush with death and had a profound effect on Camus’ thinking.

While he was planning and writing *The Stranger* Camus made several entries in his notebooks about the humiliation of having to work for a living. He greatly resented the time that was used up by the working day. Due to his illness, he believed that his life would be short and his time, needed to complete his works, would be severely limited. A typical entry, written in April 1938, begins ‘What sordid misery there is in the condition of a man who works and in a civilization based on men who work.’\(^{21}\) A previous entry almost perfectly describes Meursault (and Patrice Mersault, hero of *A Happy Death*):

\(^{21}\) Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, p. 85
The man who showed all kinds of promise and who is now working in an office. He does nothing apart from this, simply going back home, lying down and smoking until dinner time, going back to bed again and sleeping until the next morning. On Sundays, he gets up very late and stands at the window, watching the sun or the rain, the passers-by or the silent street. The whole year through. He is waiting. He is waiting for death. What good are promises anyway, since in any case…”\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Salamano}

Salamano illustrates a possible future Meursault. He and his dog are both old and share a similar skin complaint. The dog used to have a fine coat but the illness has reduced his skin to ugly scabs and blotches. Salamano’s face is similarly marked and Meursault can feel the scales on the old man’s skin when they shake hands. The dog has mange but the ‘real’ cause of the decay is spelled out by Salamano: ‘But according to him, the dog’s real sickness was old age and there’s no cure for old age.’\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Camus, \textit{Notebooks 1935-1942}, p. 78

\textsuperscript{23} Camus, \textit{Notebooks 1935-1942}, p. 78
The conversation turns immediately to the subject of Meursault’s mother, a woman who has just succumbed to old age. Salamano, with and without his dog, turns up in the narrative whenever couples are together. We first hear of Salamano and his violent relationship with his dog just before we meet Raymond and hear about his violence towards his mistress. When Meursault leaves Raymond’s apartment, after becoming involved in the trouble between his new friend, the mistress and her brother, he stands on the landing and hears Salamano’s dog whimpering. He tells us that as he stood there ‘... a breath of dark, dank air wafted up from deep in the stairwell’ (Meursault says, during his outburst to the chaplain ‘Throughout the whole absurd life I’d lived, a dark wind had been rising towards me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living.’)

When we next hear of Salamano he is outside Meursault’s apartment, swearing at his dog.

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Marie is round and Meursault makes her laugh with funny stories about his grouchy neighbour and his mangy dog. A minute later, Marie asks Meursault if he loves her. We then hear screams coming from Raymond’s apartment, he is beating his mistress. The police come and the beaten mistress leaves. Meursault and Raymond go out and when they return they bump into Salamano; he is distressed because his dog, that he beat every day, has run away. The chapter ends with Meursault hearing the old man cry; the previous chapter ended with the dog whimpering. He tells us ‘For some reason I thought of Maman.’

In the next chapter Meursault has his talk about marriage with Marie before going to the restaurant and seeing the robotic woman. When he gets home he finds Salamano waiting for him. We learn that the old man got the dog after his wife died. He had married late, after attempting a career in the theatre (Camus wanted such a career and was afraid of settling down). Salamano and his wife weren’t happy together but got used to each other.

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In the second half of the book Salamano appears in court to testify that Meursault was kind to him when his dog went missing. For those who claim that Meursault is indifferent to the feelings of others it hard to explain why he is so kind to his neighbour. After the dog is presumed dead, Meursault offers comfort to Salamano even though the old man’s presence is annoying him. He tells us that this is because he can find no good reason not to offer comfort; why isn’t the fact that he finds Salamano annoying sufficient reason to ask him to leave? A similar question arises when we study chapter 6 and ask ourselves why Meursault goes out on to the beach after Raymond, and why he prevents his friend from using the gun on the Arab. On these occasions, Meursault acts morally (but, of course, without explanation).

Camus compared Meursault to Christ and Salamano can be compared to the man with leprosy that Jesus cures. For a detailed discussion of this see Chapter 7.

**Raymond Sintès**

Raymond lives in the same apartment building as Meursault; he is a warehouse man and local
tough. Most people don’t like him and they say he’s a pimp but Meursault doesn’t mind spending a minute or two chatting with the man. The first real conversation he has with Meursault is on the Monday after the funeral. They share a simple meal of fried black pudding and lots of wine. Raymond tells Meursault about a fight he’d been in that day as well as the problems he’s been having with his girlfriend (see: Raymond’s girlfriend). The man in the fight was the woman’s brother – the unnamed Arab Meursault will later shoot on the beach (see: Arab). Raymond has confronted the woman over her suspected cheating and beaten her but now she’s gone he realises that he wants her back. However, he doesn’t want to resume the relationship but to trap her in a plot to sexually humiliate her. He lays out the plan and asks Meursault to help by writing a letter on his behalf that will trick the woman into returning. Meursault agrees. The plan doesn’t go according to, well, plan and the police are called. Raymond is the one humiliated, slapped in the face by the policeman in front of his neighbours. He later asks Meursault to go to the police and act as a witness on his behalf; Meursault agrees. Worried by the woman’s brother and his friends, who have started following him, Raymond telephones Meursault
at work in order to warn him about possible trouble. He also invites him to Sunday lunch at a friend’s beach chalet (see: Masson). That Sunday, he along with Meursault and Marie set out for the beach. Meursault notices that Raymond is frightened and Marie finds his beach clothes and hat amusing, laughing at him behind his back. After lunch, Masson, Raymond and Meursault go for a walk down the beach and run into two Arabs, one of whom is the brother of Raymond’s former girlfriend. There is a fight and Raymond shows off to Meursault. While he is looking away, the Arab pulls a knife and slashes Raymond’s arm and face. Although not seriously hurt, he is in a foul mood and later stalks off out of the chalet, swearing at Masson and Meursault who are trying to cheer him up. Meursault follows him out and they walk together until they come across the same two Arabs. Raymond, highly agitated, pulls his gun and wants to shoot the Arab there and then. Meursault skillfully disarms him, instructing him to take on the man hand-to-hand. The Arabs flee and Raymond’s pride is restored. Meursault will still have the gun in his pocket and will use it a short while later on the Arab. In court, Raymond stands up for Meursault and says he’s his friend. However, it is his friendship with Raymond that
is used as ‘evidence’ against Meursault, characterizing him as a criminal thug.

Raymond is a tragic character; Camus explicitly labels him as such in his notebooks. In a sketch of the character for the scene in which he lays out his plan for Meursault, Camus comments ‘There is something tragic about him in his liking to humiliate her.’ He is an unpopular local character, people around town say he’s a pimp, although there is no evidence in the novel that he actually is one. Raymond acknowledges what is said about him but insists that he’s a warehouseman. Many readers have taken his girlfriend to be one of his prostitutes; however, he acts more like a cuckolded lover than a businessman worried that one of his prostitutes is doing business for someone else. His plan to punish the woman does not appear to be intended to scare her back into line but rather to humiliate her in revenge for the humiliation he feels. It doesn’t make much difference if Raymond is a pimp or not but a further piece of evidence suggesting that he is not is that he asks Meursault if he wants to go to a brothel. If Raymond is a pimp why would he frequent a brothel? The ‘pimp’ label seems to be applied

27 Camus, Notebooks 1935-1942, p. 100
to him more as an insult from the people in town who dislike the man. There is certainly a lot to dislike about Raymond yet Meursault enjoys being his friend. Even so, the portrait of the man painted by Meursault is hardly flattering.

Raymond is a show-off and a bit of a coward. The first thing he does when Meursault joins him for dinner in his room is regale him with a macho tale of a street-fight he was just involved in. The other man turns out to be the brother of his mistress, the man Meursault will later shoot on the beach. According to Raymond this man was looking for trouble and despite warnings insisted on provoking him. Raymond knocks him down and then gallantly attempts to help the man up but gets kicked at for his trouble. Enough seems to be enough and Raymond punches the man bloody. This story was actually overheard by Camus on a tram; he noted it down and used it almost word-for-word. Despite his story, in which he deals with this man with ease, he is afraid of him later. Meursault expresses no fear when Raymond telephones him at work to warn him that this man, along with his friends, may be lurking outside their apartment building. When, in chapter six, they leave for the beach Raymond
looks worried at the sight of the Arabs and checks that they are not being followed. Meursault tells us that his friend ‘seemed very relieved’ once they were on the bus. Later, when Raymond’s fears are confirmed and they discover they have been followed by two Arabs, there is a fight on the beach. Raymond obeys the code laid out by Camus in his essay *Summer in Algiers* and tells Meursault to hang back, only he and Masson will fight. It was a wise choice; Masson has already been described as huge. Raymond gets in a good punch and bloodies the face of his man; however, he is unable to resist showing off to Meursault; he turns away from the Arab who takes the opportunity to pull a knife. Raymond is slashed in the face and on the arm. When he stalks back out onto the beach after having his wounds bandaged and looks for revenge he has no interest in a fair fight. Had Meursault not managed to talk him out of it, Raymond would have been quite prepared to shoot the Arab where he lay on the beach. Interestingly it is Meursault, so often characterized as amoral in the commentaries, who is the arbiter of fair play.

It is interesting that when Camus describes Raymond’s physical appearance we learn that
he is short with white skin. Meursault, when asked by Marie to describe Paris, says that it’s dirty and that the people have ‘washed-out, white faces.’

On the day of the murder, the sight of Raymond’s white arms disgusts Meursault; in *Summer in Algiers* Camus idealizes the young Algerian men as ‘tawny gods’ Raymond is no tawny god. Nor is he dressed well for the beach. His choice of hat must look ridiculous because it’s enough to make Marie laugh at him behind his back. To further illustrate his not fitting in with the beach life-style, while Meursault, Marie and Masson all go swimming in the sea Raymond doesn’t join them.

What’s in a name? Sintès was the maiden name of Camus’ mother.

For a detailed analysis of Meursault’s relationship with Raymond see Chapter 7.

**Arab**

Forever nameless, known only as ‘the Arab’, he is the brother of Raymond’s girlfriend. She has

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29 Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 84
a name; Meursault discovers it when writing the letter for Raymond, but he doesn’t see fit to tell us what it is. The Arab is seen by most as little more than a victim of European violence. In a specific sense he is a victim of Raymond’s brutality, but in a more general way he represents the treatment of the Arabs by the French Europeans who were running the show in Algeria. During Meursault’s trial, the victim is never mentioned (at least, Meursault doesn’t mention him) and, for Meursault’s friends, it is he rather than the Arab who is the victim, in particular the victim of circumstance. Céleste, for example, claims that Meursault is being blamed for a mishap. O’Brien, in his highly influential study of Camus, brings up the unlikeliness of a European being condemned to death for the killing of an Arab, especially one that has previously attacked him and his friends with a knife, slashing the friend in the face. O’Brien’s observations are on point but in his zeal to condemn Camus for perpetuating a myth of French justice (in pretending that such a sentence would be passed down) he overlooks the fact that it never occurs to Meursault that he’d be sentenced to much more than a few years or that Camus is drawing attention to the prosecutor’s sophistry in persuading the court that the defendant merits the guillotine.
There is a sense in that those who want to label the Arab as victim are acting with the same kind authoritarian paternalism that the director of the home, or Meursault’s boss, direct towards him. It is as if the commentator is saying to the Arab, ‘You have no need to justify yourself, my dear boy, you were acting to protect your sister’s honour. Your violence directed towards her abuser and his friends was a direct response to the abuse you and your kind have suffered from their kind.’ The fact that the Arab and his friends, armed with a knife, stalked Raymond and his friends to the beach, with the intention of doing them harm is rarely if ever reflected upon in the commentaries. This isn’t to say that the man is to blame for his death or that his killing is in any way justified (it clearly is not) but rather that his intentions, motivations, opinions, hopes and desires are ignored by those who dismiss him as just a victim (of Meursault or Camus).

**Raymond’s girlfriend/Arab’s sister**

Raymond may or may not be a pimp but it is not at all clear that his Arab girlfriend is a prostitute. Perhaps the part-time job he’d like her to get is prostitution, but she doesn’t have
any kind of job and he pays all her bills and gives her spending money. He suspects her of cheating on him and is hurt by her betrayal. From the text, it seems obvious that he is smarting with sexual jealousy and not simply annoyed because an ‘employee’ is moonlighting. The lottery ticket and bracelet come from another boyfriend rather than from money she’s earned as a prostitute. He accuses her of sleeping around and only being interested in ‘getting into the sack’. If he was annoyed at her not declaring earnings from prostitution then presumably he’d accuse her of only caring about money. Having Raymond consumed with sexual jealousy makes a good contrast with Meursault who doesn’t seem similarly afflicted. Sexual jealousy is a major part of *A Happy Death* and Patrice Mersault suffers from it intensely.

Raymond wants to punish his girlfriend and all his options revolve around public humiliation: having her registered as a prostitute, branding her, and spitting in her face during sex. The latter is public in the sense that he shares his plan with Meursault, to get his advice but also so that someone else will know what has

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happened. He has been going around asking people’s advice on what to do and probably intends on telling them what he did after the event; there is a good chance that they might ask what happened in the end. In Camus’ notebooks he sketches out some of this scene and adds the comment ‘There is something tragic about him in this liking to humiliate her.’ In the end, he fails. Instead of things going to plan, she fights back and the noise alerts the neighbours, one of whom calls the police. The policeman, in response to what he sees as disrespect, humiliates Raymond with a slap to the face. The girlfriend’s brother later humiliates him during the fight in chapter six when he slashes him across the mouth with his knife. Raymond is showing off to Meursault and is distracted; this gives the Arab the opportunity to cut him in the mouth, an ironic punishment.

Cop

As mentioned above, the noise of Raymond and his girlfriend fighting alerts the neighbours who call the police. Marie is in Meursault’s

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31 Camus, Notebooks 1935-1942, p. 100
apartment and asks him to call the police, but he refuses saying that he doesn’t like cops. This is a reference to one of Camus’ earlier essays, *Summer in Algiers*, in which he paints a glowing portrait of young Algerian men; one of the things he talks about is their animosity towards the police. The cop tells Raymond that he should be ashamed of himself, not for beating a woman, but for being so drunk that he was shaking. Raymond replies that he isn’t drunk but that the policeman’s presence was making him shake (presumably with nerves).

It is interesting that when he is taken to court Meursault gets on quite well with the policeman despite telling Marie that he doesn’t like cops.

**Robotic woman**

The robotic woman is a form-filling, list-ticking machine. In a series of jerks, ticks and nods she works her way through Céleste’s menu and the radio listings in a magazine. Her food is wolfed down, without pause to taste and enjoy, and the radio programmes are chosen apparently without discrimination. Meursault is fascinated by her; he follows her, but ‘fairly soon’ forgets about her. Why? Is it a case of the out-of-sight-
out-of-mind attitude described by Richard Kamber? (see Chapter 4) More likely, the only thing that makes her interesting, temporarily, is the lack of anything interesting about her. Unlike Meursault, who stops to enjoy his coffee, even during his mother’s vigil, and who pauses to appreciate the countryside the morning afterwards, this woman appears oblivious to her surroundings. Meursault takes great interest in the people around him, the robotic woman included, but she, after asking to sit at his table, is then completely absorbed with checking off information from lists. Her modern day equivalent would probably eat dinner staring at her phone and ticking off the posts she ‘likes’ on Facebook. She reappears later during the trial watching Meursault’s irritation at having to check off administrative details, in minute detail; and then again, just before the men from the old people’s home, the director, caretaker and Pérez give their witness testimony. Note how unlikely it is that this woman, who completely represents what Meursault is against, just happens to be at his trial. It is more likely that Meursault creates her for his narrative – if his account is designed to get an idea across then why not create characters that will help make his point (see Chapter 3).
Masson

He is Raymond’s friend. Masson and his wife own the beach chalet that Raymond takes Meursault and Marie to in the last chapter of part one. It will be while he is Masson’s guest that Meursault will shoot and kill the Arab. When Raymond, Meursault and Masson bump into the two Arabs on the beach, Raymond picks Masson to join him and asks Meursault to hang back. This is a wise choice as Masson is huge (sunbathing on the sand he resembles a beached whale) and he tackles his man with ease.

Meursault tells us that Masson has a strange verbal tick, adding, often unnecessarily, the words, ‘and I’d even say’ to his sentences. In court, Masson speaks up for Meursault’s character saying that he was an honest man ‘and I’d even say a decent one.’

Mrs. Masson

Meursault tells us that Mrs. Masson is a ‘plump, sweet little wife with a Parisian

accent’. She appears to be very friendly, laughing with Marie and, according to her husband, likes Meursault. As a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Masson seem to be happy, spending as much time as possible together enjoying the beach chalet. It is interesting to compare their enjoyment of each other with Salamano and his late wife (and later him and his dog) as well as the caretaker and his wife. Meursault is not saying simply that young love is happy but people grow apart; Raymond and his girlfriend are anything but happy. However, seeing his girlfriend laughing and joking with Mrs. Masson makes him think ‘For the first time maybe’ that he and Marie really might get married. This means, of course, that earlier when he and Marie were talking about marriage he never really thought of it as a real possibility.

After the first fight on the beach, the one in which Raymond is cut, Meursault is left with Marie and Mrs. Masson while Raymond and Masson go off to find the doctor. The two women are understandably upset and want to know what has happened. The whole story

34 Camus, The Stranger (trans. Ward), p. 50
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would come out, including why the Arab attacked Raymond in the first place. Meursault tries to avoid any discussion by keeping quiet and staring out of the window. After the next altercation, the one in which Raymond goes back out with his gun, Meursault doesn’t want to go back into the chalet ‘unable to face the effort it would take to climb the wooden staircase and face the women again.’ Some commentators are puzzled as to why Meursault would walk back out onto the beach; however, he says quite clearly why he doesn’t want to go back into the chalet.

**Examining magistrate**

The examining magistrate is an older man, with a head of white hair and a grey moustache. In contrast, Meursault’s lawyer is described as young with slicked back hair. In fact, all the authority figures in *The Stranger* are either described as old or hold senior positions (his boss, the head guard) that suggest they are older men. Roughly half the characters in the book are elderly and this is deliberate; Camus wants to show how we are all condemned to death

since we all age and die. Salamano, who is old and decaying (with the skin condition he seems to share with his aged dog) makes the point explicitly when he tells Meursault about his dog’s affliction ‘But according to him, the dog’s real sickness was old age, and there’s no cure for old age.’ Patrice Mersault, in *A Happy Death*, sees his reflection in a mirror at Céleste’s restaurant and realises that he’s getting old. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus says that awareness of your age can bring about an awareness of the absurd.

When Meursault first meets the examining magistrate he finds it hard to take the interrogation seriously; the single lamp on the desk shining in his face while the interrogator stands in the shadows seems too much like the pulp fiction Meursault has read. He says ‘it all seemed like a game to me.’ And in fact it does seem that way; it is almost as if the examining magistrate is just playing a role. When Meursault doesn’t play along, things start going badly for him.

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The magistrate is not really interested in the first shot, the one that killed the Arab. The fact that a man died doesn’t really seem important to anyone; Meursault tells us that when he was first arrested ‘nobody seemed very interested in my case.’ The magistrate wants to know why Meursault fired the extra shots. He asks if all the shots were fired at the same time and presumably if Meursault lied and said they were then all that followed could have been avoided. But he tells the truth and says that he fired once, paused, and then fired into the corpse. It is these unnecessary shots that disturb the magistrate. He appears to like Meursault and wants to help him but cannot let go of the idea that he didn’t just kill a man (an act that could be explained away) but violated the corpse. The Magistrate, a deeply religious man, calls on God’s help and is dismayed by Meursault’s atheism.

Camus infamously compared Meursault to Christ; when he has him remain silent three times as the magistrate asks him about firing the extra shots we are reminded of Jesus remaining silent before Pilate. After Meursault refuses to weep before the crucifix the magistrate finally gives up and directs all his

questions to the lawyer. After a while the magistrate starts calling Meursault by an affectionate nickname, Mr. Antichrist.

For a detailed discussion on Meursault as Antichrist see Chapter 7.

**Meursault’s lawyer**

When we first meet the lawyer he is annoyed with Meursault because his client refuses to lie about his feelings during his mother’s funeral. The lawyer knows that the prosecution will make much out of his apparent lack of feeling (and they do). He wants Meursault to simply play the game and say whatever he needs to in order to win a favourable result. Much has been made of the lawyer’s incompetency; indeed Meursault describes him as inferior to the prosecutor. Almost all commentators have wondered why the lawyer doesn’t bring up self-defence as an explanation for Meursault’s actions. Remember that the court is not interested in whether or not Meursault killed the Arab, that is without question; what is at issue is whether there were any mitigating circumstances. The lawyer could have made a big deal out of the fact that the dead man was
armed and had already attacked and wounded Meursault’s friend. Despite what many commentators have claimed, the lawyer does bring up self-defence, although Meursault tucks this away in one short sentence: ‘He rushed through a plea of provocation’.

So the question is really not why he didn’t think of this strategy, but why he hurried through it. We should also be careful when analysing the trial because Meursault only offers the gist of what happened. He tells us that much of what was said he is leaving out because he wasn’t listening. Some commentators have taken this as further proof of Meursault’s indifference, that he was scarcely paying attention to events in which his life is at stake; however, it must be remembered that at no point during the trial does Meursault suspect that he might receive the death penalty.

Little old woman and her son

When Meursault is visited by Marie in prison he is distracted by the other visitors in the room. Next to him is a young man with ‘thin, girlish hands’ being visited by his mother.

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is Meursault so interested in this couple? The answer is likely to be because he is thinking of his own mother, who he used to visit when she was an inmate in the care home. Gilbert’s translation is interesting in that he adds an Oedipal overtone:

GILBERT: Meanwhile the prisoner on my left, a youngster with thin, girlish hands, never said a word. His eyes, I noticed, were fixed on the little old woman opposite him, and she returned his gaze with a sort of hungry passion.\textsuperscript{40}

WARD: The man on my left, a small young man with delicate hands, wasn’t saying anything. I noticed that he was across from the little old lady and that they were staring intently at each other.\textsuperscript{41}

This mother and son never say a word, other than to say goodbye; Meursault has already told us that he and his mother had run out of things to say to each other and Camus and his own mother (who he loved dearly) also had trouble finding things to say. In his essay, “Between

\textsuperscript{40} Camus, \textit{The Stranger} (trans. Gilbert), p. 58
\textsuperscript{41} Camus, \textit{The Stranger} (trans. Ward), p. 74-5
Yes and No”, Camus writes about his own mother:

They sat down facing each other, in silence. But their eyes met:

“Well, mother.”

“Well, here we are.”

“Are you bored? I don’t talk much.”

“Oh, you’ve never talked much.”

And though her lips do not move her face lights up in a beautiful smile. It’s true, he never talked much to her. But did he ever need to?42

Head guard

Meursault tells us that he becomes friends with the head guard in the prison. He is clearly a friendly guy; even the examining magistrate has an affectionate nickname for him. Meursault talks to the guard about the things he feels deprived of in prison, in particular smoking and access to women. The guard explains that these privations are part of the punishment, which to Meursault makes sense. However in the case of

42 Camus, Lyrical and Critical Essays, p. 37
smoking the desire diminishes over time until the prisoner no longer wants to smoke. This is another example of his mother’s favourite saying, that one gets used to anything. The need for a woman is not as easily overcome. It is interesting that in the Gilbert translation, Meursault masturbates, whereas in the others it is implied that he does not. Compare Gilbert’s translation with Matthew Ward’s:

GILBERT: The jailer nodded. “Yes, you’re different, you can use your brains. The others can’t. Still, those fellows find a way out; they do it by themselves.” With which remark the jailer left my cell. Next day I did like the others. 43

WARD: “Right. You see, you understand these things. The rest of them don’t. But they just end up doing it by themselves.” The guard left after that. 44

Old reporter

Meursault is initially fascinated by the courtroom. He tells the policeman guarding him that he thinks it will be interesting to watch the trial (the policeman replies that it gets boring after a while). One of the things he notices is how everyone involved gets on as if they are ‘in a club where people are glad to find themselves among others from the same world.’⁴⁵ He tells us that this is how he explains, to himself, the strangeness of what he sees – in other words, his reflections on what is happening. For the commentators who claim that Meursault is incapable of reflection this will be difficult to explain away.

The old reporter who introduces himself to Meursault is friendly, wishes him good luck, and tells him that because it’s a slow time for news that his case has been blown up a bit. He points out another reporter, from a Paris newspaper, that is down to cover the next trial – a much more sensational case of a man accused of murdering his own father. A Parisian newspaper would not ordinarily bother to cover a case like Meursaults, so the story must have


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been blown up substantially. That there is so much attention (and the opportunity of a favourable write-up) must provide strong motivation for the prosecutor to pull out all the stops in order to get a favourable write-up. (see: Prosecutor)

Meursault thanks the reporter for wishing him good luck and before he leaves almost thanks him again for talking to him but then realizes that this would sound ridiculous.

Prosecutor

A tall, thin man who wears a pince-nez. His job is to persuade the court that Meursault deliberately went out to kill the Arab that day. Remember that there is no question of his innocence, that he killed the Arab is not at issue, it is whether or not there were any mitigating circumstances. In order to show that Meursault is a bad man, the type of man who would shoot someone in cold blood, the prosecutor shows the court three things: that Meursault was unmoved at his mother’s funeral; that the very next day he picked up a woman (of loose morals) on the beach and took her to see a comedy before taking her home;
and that he and Raymond are involved in prostitution and that Meursault helped his friend discipline one of the working girls. We read in the text how he twists the testimonies of the witnesses in order to paint this picture. Céleste and Marie are left in tears and the director and caretaker cannot look Meursault in the eye.

Once the prosecutor has established that Meursault is a bad man he then suggests a motive for the killing. The dead man was the brother of the ‘prostitute’ that Meursault helped punish. This man was causing trouble and, worried about any problems this may bring to their wicked business, Meursault takes Raymond’s gun and executes the Arab on the beach. The prosecutor goes on to argue that because Meursault exhibits no remorse for taking a life he is more than simply a bad man, he is a monster.

Meursault’s lawyer could have limited himself to challenging the prosecutor’s account of Meursault’s involvement with Raymond. He could have argued that the victim’s sister was not a prostitute and that the Arab wanted to take revenge on Raymond over a previous fight he had lost. Meursault found himself at the wrong
place at the wrong time, facing a man armed with a knife, who had already proved that he was quite prepared to use it. Meursault only drew the gun to get the Arab to back away. Tragically, however, the gun went off and the Arab lost his life. If Meursault was willing to play the game, he could have put on the waterworks and told the court how upset he was over taking a life. When the prosecution brought up his behaviour at his mother’s funeral he could have told the court that he did feel terribly upset but he controlled his emotions on the day (which is what his lawyer advises him to say). But, as we know, this isn’t how things went on the day. (See: Lawyer)

After establishing how and why Meursault murdered the Arab, the prosecutor moves onto the punishment. It is in arguing for the death penalty that he puts on the biggest show. As pointed out by O’Brien and others, a sentence of death for a white European killing an Arab in Algeria would be most unlikely. So why does the prosecutor seek the death penalty? A clue can be found in what the old reporter says to Meursault shortly before the trial, that the case has been blown up in the newspapers. (See: Old reporter) There is even a correspondent from one of the Paris newspapers in the press box. It
is likely that the reason that the prosecutor pulls out all the stops for this trial is because he is seeking a favourable write-up for himself in the papers. He had exactly the kind of ambition that Meursault’s boss would approve of.

The argument for the death penalty is as follows:

Meursault has no soul, he is a monster. He cannot be blamed for this; it is just the way he is born. Justice, however, requires that he be punished. Meursault’s heart is so empty that the void in its place threatens to swallow up society. In order to prove these two points, that he is a sociopath and justice demands that he is punished, the prosecutor talks at length about the funeral. We don’t know exactly what was said because Meursault doesn’t tell us; however, we do know that it ends with the prosecutor equating the killing of a father (the case being tried the next day) with Meursault’s heartless burying of his mother:

“I am convinced, gentlemen,” he added, raising his voice, “that you will not think it too bold of me if I suggest to you that the man who is seated in the dock is also guilty of the murder
to be tried in this court tomorrow. He
must be punished accordingly.”  

Young reporter/Camus

As a journalist Camus worked as a court reporter many times and was very familiar with the court-rooms of Algiers. He gives himself a brief cameo as a reporter covering Meursault’s trial:

The reporters already had their pens in hand. They all had the same indifferent and somewhat snide look on their faces. One of them, however, much younger than the others, wearing grey flannels and a blue tie, had left his pen lying in front of him and was looking at me. All I could see in his slightly lopsided face were his two very bright eyes, which were examining me closely without betraying any definable emotion. And I had the odd impression of being watched by myself.  

Before Meursault is sentenced he looks around the courtroom and notices that the young

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reporter, who had previously been scrutinizing him carefully, has turned away. When the caretaker and the director of the care home give testimonies that do not fairly represent the truth they also turn their eyes away from Meursault.

**Chaplain**

Meursault is frightened by the chaplain’s unannounced and uninvited appearance in his cell; he has been consistently refusing to see the chaplain and now that the man is here, he’s worried that it is to read him the last rites. However, it turns out that the man just wants to talk. Meursault is polite at first but soon resents the chaplain’s presence. His annoyance is not based so much on any special animosity towards the Church but rather that Meursault feels that his time, limited and precious, is being squandered talking to his man. It is likely that Meursault would be just as irritated if Raymond had turned up just to boast about his macho exploits, or if Marie wanted to continue her fantasies about marriage. To properly understand Meursault’s anger at the chaplain one must take into account his prison meditations.
Meursault has spent his time meditating on two conflicting ideas/sensations. Meursault does not want to die but accepts that he will die – whether he is pardoned or not. If he is pardoned and allowed to return home all he has been given is a temporary reprieve, his death is still a certainty. Intellectually, he believes that it doesn’t matter if he dies ‘now or twenty years from now’\(^{48}\) but whenever he imagines being pardoned, or otherwise escaping the guillotine, he can’t help but feel a surge of delirious joy. In order to understand this conflict Meursault restricts himself to thinking only about the first idea, that his death is a certainty and that this certainly renders everything meaningless, and then (and only then) he allows himself to imagine that he is pardoned. These meditations take place at night, so that he is still awake at dawn which is when he believes that they will come for him (to take him to his death). When dawn passes without a visit he feels he has ‘gained another twenty-four hours.’\(^{49}\) It is then that he feels an hour or so of calm.

Before the calm, Meursault experiences terror. This point is often overlooked. As dawn

\(^{49}\) Camus, *The Stranger* (trans. Ward), p. 113
approaches the slightest noise from outside his cell would plunge him into sheer panic. His biggest fear is that he will hear footsteps. Fortunately for him, there were only slight shuffling sounds but his description of how he believes he would react to the sound of footsteps illustrates his state of mind:

Because I might just as easily have heard footsteps and my heart could have burst. Even though I would rush to the door at the slightest shuffle, even though, with my ear pressed to the wood, I would wait frantically until I heard the sound of my own breathing, terrified to find it so hoarse, like a dog’s panting, my heart would not burst after all, and I would have gained another twenty-four hours."  

It is after another night of terrified anxiety, and meditations on life and death, that Meursault is experiencing one of his hours of calm when he is disturbed by the chaplain. When we appreciate how hard-won these moments of calm are, we can imagine that anyone intruding on the calm would be unwelcome.

50 Camus, The Stranger (trans. Ward), p. 113
The chaplain attempts to get Meursault to conform to the role of condemned man; he wants him to give up all thoughts of this life and think only of the life to come. He is disturbed by Meursault’s refusal to address him as ‘father’ and asks permission to pray for him. This is the last straw for Meursault who snaps. He grabs the chaplain by the collar and begins his outburst of rage. Ward’s translation has him saying ‘I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him and told him not to waste his prayers on me.’\(^\text{51}\) Gilbert’s translation says much the same thing but adds ‘… it was better to burn than to disappear.’\(^\text{52}\) In his notebooks, while he was still in the planning stages of *The Stranger*, Camus put down three ideas on ‘The consolatory power of Hell’ the third of which is ‘In Hell, we are still alive with this body – and this is better than annihilation.’\(^\text{53}\) His *Myth of Sisyphus* ends with Sisyphus in Hades alive in his body and aware of his physical sensations. Meursault has spent his time trying to harmonize his body and his mind and now the chaplain is asking him to forsake the body.

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\(^{51}\) Camus, *The Stranger* (trans. Ward), p. 120


\(^{53}\) Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, p. 37
Meursault has discovered something, that he is alive, and he wants to preserve this whereas the chaplain ‘... wasn’t even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man.’\textsuperscript{54} Gilbert has Meursault say that the chaplain was ‘living […] like a corpse’.\textsuperscript{55} What follows next is not an account of Meursault’s philosophy. He does not lay out any arguments to support his ideas. Instead he angrily fires out some questions to the chaplain – without pausing for the answers. The guards eventually wade in and pull the two men apart, the chaplain leaves in tears. It is important to bear in mind that Camus intended this scene to be a surging of rage that drops some clues about Meursault’s ‘deeper attitude’. It is the only point in novel in which Meursault asks questions of anyone else. In an angry letter written to a critic of the book (written but never sent) Camus takes to task the critic, known only as A.R., for not taking into account ‘the sole moment when [Meursault] talks about himself and entrusts the reader with some of his secret’.\textsuperscript{56} Camus goes on to say that the only time the reader can make assumptions about Meursault’s deeper attitude is during this

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\textsuperscript{54} Camus, \textit{The Stranger} (trans. Ward), p. 120
\textsuperscript{55} Camus, \textit{The Stranger} (trans. Gilbert), p. 94
\textsuperscript{56} Camus, \textit{Notebooks 1942-1951}, p. 20
\end{flushright}
scene. In an earlier letter, to someone referred to as J.T., Camus writes ‘With the Chaplain, my Stranger does not justify himself. He gets angry, and that’s quite different.’

It is only here that Meursault asks questions, so what are these questions?

1. People live their lives one way or another; they do some things and do not do other things. What difference does it make how people choose to live?

2. What do the deaths of others matter to the living?

3. What do plans for the future, fate, destiny, and so on matter when we are all going to end up the same way?

4. In what way do the things we do matter, the decisions we make and how we treat people?

5. What does it mean to say that Meursault is ‘guilty’ and deserves to die? In what way is he different to

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57 Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, p. 18
anyone else in that everyone does pretty much the same thing: live life this way or that, choose to do this thing or not to do that thing and all the while is destined to die?

It is vital, to properly understand *The Stranger*, that we remember that these questions are questions not statements. When he asks ‘What did it matter that Raymond was just as much my friend as Céleste, who was worth a lot more than him?’ this is something he’s been thinking about, a problem that he is looking to solve. He feels that Céleste is a better man, worth more than Raymond but if everything is meaningless then on what grounds can he say this? *The Myth of Sisyphus* is an essay on the absurd that raises questions of ethics (how a form of ethics can be found outside philosophy) and Meursault’s outburst reveals his concern over this problem. He never says that he is innocent or that he shouldn’t be punished for killing the Arab but his question to the chaplain asks, on what grounds can we say that a killer is morally worse than a shipping clerk, or that a good-natured restaurant owner is better than a cowardly thug.

Chapter 3: What is The Stranger?

Are we supposed to be reading a diary or a collection of thoughts written whenever Meursault gets the chance to put pen to paper? Certainly, the text is not in the tradition diary format, unlike, say, Sartre’s Nausea that includes touches like the date and time as a heading, such as Sunday, noon; references to writing a diary, ‘The best thing would be to write down everything that happens from day to day. To keep a diary in order to understand.’\textsuperscript{59}; and a note as to how this diary ended up as a published work, Nausea has an Editor’s note to explain how the notebooks were found among Antoine Roquentin’s papers. Sartre even adds realistic touches such as footnotes to show ‘illegible words’. Hugo’s Last Days of a Condemned Man explains how the narrator found the pens and paper and how he hopes that his writings will end up as a published work. Hugo gets around the problem of a first-person narrative that ends with the narrator’s death by

\textsuperscript{59} Sartre, Nausea, p. 9
having his creation scribble a few last notes moments before his execution. In *The Stranger* Meursault’s day of execution never comes. In fact, it is not clear whether he is finally executed or his pardon is actually granted. Meursault makes no mention of his ‘diary’ or his hopes for what will happen to the final manuscript. Indeed, he doesn’t explain how or when the last pages are written; there is no mention of him asking for or being given pen and paper.

There are problems accepting Meursault’s account as a diary, not least because the timing often doesn’t make sense. For example, he will begin an entry with ‘Today’ and pass straight through into the next day, after sleeping, in the same continuous piece of writing. In chapter one, he says that he will take the two o’clock bus then, in the same chapter, says ‘But I think now that that was a false impression.’ When is *now*? In the final chapter he refers to ‘a dark wind’ rising towards him from his future; a remarkably similar wind is mentioned rising up the stairwell at the end of the third chapter, just after he has agreed to write the letter for Raymond that sets into motion the events that

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will lead him to the condemned cell. It is difficult to believe that Meursault ‘wrote’ this passage almost a year before his confrontation with the chaplain.

If *The Stranger* is not a diary, then what is it? This chapter explores why Camus/Meursault tells the story in such a perplexing way.
Chapter 4: Meursault of the Commentaries

Conor Cruise O’Brien observed that ‘the Meursault of the actual novel is not quite the same person as the Meursault of the commentaries.’ And David Sprintzen challenges what he calls the ‘normal reading’ of this character as ‘indifferent to life’ arguing that this interpretation says more about the reader than Meursault. Camus himself jotted an idea in his notebook for what he wanted to create: ‘Story – the man who refuses to justify himself. Other people prefer their idea of him.’

In this chapter I look at the various commentaries on The Stranger and how much they differ in their understanding of Meursault and what he is trying (or not trying) to do. Further, I look at the extent to which these different opinions are justified by the text and how, when the textual evidence is lacking, the commentators overcome this.

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61 O’Brien, Camus, p. 21
62 Sprintzen, Camus: A Critical Examination, p. 37
63 Camus, Notebooks 1935-1942, p. 32
Finally, I look at the more disingenuous commentaries that include such things as:

- Dubious interpretations of events that take place in the book
- Selective quoting (including omissions that alter the meaning the text)
- Omissions of anything that contradicts the view being presented
- Changing order of events to make Meursault appear to be less human
- Entirely unsupported claims

The chapter concludes with a look at why commentators ignore Camus’ own interpretation of the book (Solomon accuses him of not reading his own work) and why people prefer their own idea of Meursault.
Chapter 5: Infamous Explication

Sartre’s Explication of The Stranger has the distinction of being the most influential essay on *The Stranger*. Camus scholar Germaine Brée included it in her 1962 collection of critical essays on Camus with a note that of the essays ‘...none except Sartre’s study of *The Stranger* can be considered definitive’. And Sartre’s *Explication* has, with a few exceptions, been taken as the final word, the authoritative and complete explanation of what Camus intended with not only *The Stranger* but also *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

This view is problematic for a number of reasons and the purpose of this chapter is to address these reasons, in particular:

- *The Myth of Sisyphus* was not intended to be read as a guide to *The Stranger*
- Sartre interprets *The Myth* according to his own philosophy and not according

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64 Brée, *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 1
to Camus’ intentions (and only focuses his attention on the first third, ignoring bulk of the essay)

- Commentators fail to question the extent to which Sartre’s essay is self-serving

The chapter is not entirely focused on the negative. Despite the failings of Sartre’s Explication there is still plenty worth taking from it. Camus himself, in a letter to Jean Grenier, complained of Sartre’s ‘acid tone’ but conceded ‘… on several occasions he enlightened me about what I wanted to do.’

The rest of the chapter focuses on what I call the glass partition effect, based on Sartre’s claim that Camus’ method is to ‘insert a glass partition between the reader and his characters.’

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65 Camus, *Correspondence*, p. 66
Chapter 6: Meursault’s Rules

1. Keep silent. Abolish audiences and learn to be your own judge.
2. Keep a balance between an active concern for the body and an attentive awareness of being alive.
3. Abandon all claims and devote yourself to achieving two kinds of freedom: freedom from money and freedom from your own vanity and cowardice.
4. To have rules and stick to them.
5. Two years is not a long time to think about one single point.

These rules were written amid a longer entry in Camus’ notebook, dated April 1938. They are notes for himself but apply to Meursault. Each of these rules can be seen, easily, to fit with Meursault’s account. (1) He refuses to explain himself; his narrative is audience-unfriendly in the extreme. (2) Throughout the novel he contrasts his physical sensations with his awareness of being alive. (3) This rule is more obvious in A Happy Death but can be clearly
demonstrated in *The Stranger*. (4) Meursault refuses to lie and ‘play the game’; his meal with Raymond in chapter three is vivid test of these rules. (5) In a letter written to J.T. on *The Stranger* Camus says that he ‘… wanted [his] character to be led to the single great problem’.  

68 Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 337

In this chapter I examine these rules as well as the claims Camus made about Meursault in his 1955 preface to *The Stranger*. This leads into the next chapter which is devoted to Camus’ claim that Meursault is ‘… the only Christ we deserve.’  

68 Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 337

We see these rules in action with Meursault’s reaction to:

- Habit
- Ambition
- Old age
- Indifference
- Chance
Chapter 7: Mr. Antichrist

In this chapter I first explore how Antichrist figures (and references to Hell) appear in almost all of Camus’ essays, fiction and plays. Antichrist can refer to three things: against Christ, opposite of Christ, and in place of Christ. For Camus, it is the last of these meanings that is the most applicable for his Antichrist characters of which Meursault is just one.

After a brief diversion in which, in order to demonstrate how the Antichrist figure fits a recurring theme in Camus’ work, I examine the plays Caligula and Cross Purpose and then The Fall, I turn my attention back to Meursault and The Stranger. Drawing on the discussion in the previous chapter I look at Meursault as ‘the Christ we deserve’ and compare events in his life that are parallels to the events in the Gospels. These include but are not limited to:

- His dinner with Raymond. The temptation of Christ; Jesus eats with the sinners; Jesus and the adulterous woman
• Comforting Salamano. Jesus heals the leper, Apollonius of Tyana
• Refusing to answer the magistrate three times; Jesus before Pilate
• Meursault’s last words ‘for everything to be accomplished’; Jesus’ last words ‘Tout est accompli’ [Jean, 20:30]

There has been a fair amount of study on the idea of Meursault as Christ (although almost exclusively coming from theology departments) but the tendency is to consider Meursault as a failed Christ rather than an Antichrist. I am concerned here with showing how Meursault represents an alternative to Christ rather than a failed attempt to be Christ.
Chapter 8: Not Playing the Game

In this chapter I explore what games Meursault refuses to play and why he won’t play them. The previous chapter was mainly focused on his relationship with Raymond; this chapter focuses on his relationship with Marie. But before this analysis I first look at the games themselves, which are:

- Funerals
- Careers
- Lovers
- Cops ‘n robbers

In my analysis of Meursault’s relationship with Marie I focus on their possible marriage and the ease with which he accepts, once in prison, that she has found another Meursault to kiss.


