

Dualisms in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

By Peter Francev

Albert Camus' most famous, and easily recognizable, novel is *L'étranger* (*The Stranger*); and in the United States, it is widely read among high school students in advanced placement English courses, as well as in some introductory literature and philosophy courses at the college and university levels. While it is the opinion of the author that the vast majority of high school English teachers fail to discern and clarify the multi-layered complexities of *The Stranger* and, therefore, should not be teaching it; it does, indeed, give teachers and students alike the satisfaction, at least, of having read an existential or philosophical work, as well as a means to an end as an introduction to the broader spectrum of European literature.

What is most bothersome and troubling is how so many teachers feel that they are qualified to lead adolescents through their first discussions of philosophy based on this complex and fascinating work. Thus, it is, then, the purpose of this paper not to do what has been done so many times before, -analyze the absurd- nor is it an attempt to critique those who neglect to see the complexities of the text, but instead look at the deeper, more intricate, meanings that Camus places in the novel. Therefore, I propose that it is Camus' intention to create *The Stranger* as a novel of duality, layering it with a plethora of dualisms that enable the reader to deconstruct its hidden meanings than that of the armchair philosopher perplexed and still questioning the absurd.

As stated above, this paper will not be a re-hashing of Camus' philosophy of the absurd, but rather it will examine, under close scrutiny, how Part 1 differs from Part 2 while keeping in mind the following dualisms: the feminine Part 1 versus the masculine Part 2, the lyrical natural world of Part 1 in opposition to the real human world of Part 2 and the Dionysian Part 1 versus the Apollonian Part 2.

The over-arching theme of Part 1 is the focus on what I observe to be the feminine qualities in Meursault's life: the novel opens with the death of Meursault's mother, Maman, and transitions to his love-affair with Marie the former typist from his office. There are, of course, other characters, such as: Salamano and Raymond, who make their appearances in Part 1; however, they pass merely in-and-out through transitions within the text. For example, both men are introduced at different points by Meursault; they state their purposes and move through Part 1, reappearing with a ghost-like affinity in Part 2 when they are called as witnesses at Meursault's trial. Here, they provide an unconvincing,

For more information visit [The Albert Camus Society](#)

factual construction of Meursault's character before they are dismissed from the courtroom and as well as the novel.

Upon opening the book to its first page, readers are witness to the news of Maman's death. The immediacy with which Camus renders the first scene leaves readers with the impression that this significant event in Meursault's life is going to engage him into a kind of introspective mindset. However, as readers journey deeper into the novel, they will find that only 12%- a mere 15 out of 123 total pages- of the novel are devoted to circumstances surrounding Maman's death and funeral.

Meursault leads his readers into thinking that Maman's death *should* mean more to him than it does; but on the contrary, it means less. Her death is an (in)significant annoyance that continues to annoy Meursault even once he returns to work after his four-day weekend. With Maman's death, readers are introduced to Meursault and placed into his world- the world of indifference. Patrick McCarthy reduces *The Stranger* to "A simple psychoanalytic reading" where one could "conclude that Camus is torn between an incestuous love for his mother and hostility towards her coldness."¹ Hence, the dualism between Maman and Marie and underlying Oedipal issues shape Meursault's female relationships throughout the novel.

Part 1 Chapter Two begins with the introduction to Marie, who appears as Maman's replacement. And among Meursault's first comments, when introducing Marie, is the fact that he "brushed against her breasts."² Hence, while still comprehending the fact that Marie had been a former typist in Meursault's office, and that he had "had a thing for at the time"³; readers are introduced into her breasts- simply because Meursault is. So, on the one hand, while Marie (subconsciously) represents Maman's maternal replacement; on the other, there is the awareness of both Meursault and Marie's sexuality and the underlying tension is one of an Oedipal struggle because he is drawn immediately to her breasts.

When Meursault sees Marie at the beach, the symbolism of the water's sensual sexuality is evident; thus, he is drawn to the sexual nature of her being and quickly joins her for a swim. Throughout the sensual coyness of their beach encounter (i.e. the swimming together, Meursault sliding his hands down along her waist, observing the beads of water roll across and down her body, and her illumination in the sun), they go to the movies where Meursault is permitted to feel Marie's breasts; upon which, she goes back to his flat and they spend a romantic night together.

¹ Patrick McCarthy, 2.

² Camus, *The Stranger*, 19.

³ Ibid.

From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, the reader can see that Marie is not only a maternal and sexual substitute for Maman, but also that she is "placed" into the novel to fill the void of an empty flat (much like the emptiness of Meursault's heart), as well as to fill the void of Meursault's sexual prowess.

The physical space of Meursault's flat is empty; thus, in terms of a subconscious implication, Meursault needs to fill the flat with a companion. Maman was the previous companion; however, since her departure to the home, Meursault is left alone. And when he meets Marie, he is able to bring her back to the flat, filling the empty space of the flat as well as his heart.

Also, it can be noted that without a companion, Meursault may feel like he is "less of a man" because of the lack of feminine companionship. So, subconsciously, as well, he may take Marie to bed to satisfy his sexual desires which would enable him to feel "more like a man."

The underlying sexual tension is overwhelming for Meursault, who seems to be oedipally fixated on Marie's breasts. More than a couple of times does Meursault refer to Marie's breasts: by brushing up against her breasts⁴; fondling her breasts⁵; not being able to resist her in the red-and-white striped dress, where he makes out the shape of her breasts⁶. Psychoanalytically, Meursault's enthrallment with Marie's breasts is invariably linked to the fact that he did not have a well-developed relationship with Maman. He yearns for the closeness that he misses out on with Maman. In fact, throughout the novel, Meursault consciously recognizes and admits, almost apologetically, that he and Maman were "bored" with one another- thus, his reason for sending her to the home.

The dualistic nature that Marie signifies is that on the one hand, she satisfies, quite simply, Meursault's craven sexual desires, and on the other, she is the oedipal replacement for Maman. Meursault's allure towards Marie's breasts stems from his subconscious desire to be close with a mother-figure. Since Meursault and Maman did not have a strong, nurturing relationship, Meursault looks to replace Maman. He does this, first, by sending her to the home- the same home that is 80 kilometers and over two hours-by bus- away. Not only is she sent to the home, but she is physically removed from the flat which creates a void, through her absence in the flat. Then, once she is dead, and he has some closure towards Maman, he runs into Marie and, almost immediately, readers receive Meursault's description of her breasts. It is as if, (un)intentionally, subconsciously, he wants the readers to acknowledge her breasts.

⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

Meursault's fascination with Marie's breasts can account for one of two subconscious, and dualistic, points: either he needs Marie to satisfy the unconscious desire for the female companionship that Maman failed to provide, or he identifies her breasts with a moment in time that he is content.

In the former instance, the mother-son relationship is lacking, and non-existent. Secretly and subconsciously, Meursault craves the attention from a mother-figure, here Marie, yet at the same time, he is apprehensive of letting her close to his heart for fear of rejection in the same way that Maman was rejecting and hostile. Thus, each and every time that Marie proposes love or marriage; it is no wonder that Meursault is going to feel a level of apprehension; for he fears rejection and pain from Marie. Therefore, he poses indifference towards Marie's advances as a way of guarding against the (in)evitable and almost certain pain that he has come to know.

Conversely, on the other hand, with the latter, we find a more blissful Meursault, who subconsciously likens the "happy times" with Marie to those of his early years with Maman before they grew apart. Meursault craves the intimacy of Marie's companionship because it is a level of intimacy that has been absent with his relationship with Maman. While most of his relationships are superficial, the one that he shares with Marie is one where Meursault wants a deeper relationship.

Marie, unlike Meursault, is a working-class girl. When Meursault mentions his acquaintance with Marie, he notes that she was "a former typist in our office"⁷. Not only does her seemingly blue-collar job provide a "source of happiness"⁸, but it helps illustrate "her enjoyment of her own body."⁹ Her carefree attitude that embraces her sexuality is a contrast to the starchiness of Meursault's indifference towards his white-collar status.

Marie's sexual awareness is like Meursault's in that it is primal, uninhibited desire. In fact, it is what brings them together; however, the difference is that the traditional roles of masculinity and femininity are reversed. While Marie is accepting of Meursault's forward advances, and willingness to leave his apartment on the morning after their first sexual encounter (and while Meursault is still asleep), it is Meursault who blissfully lies in bed, rolls over, and "tries to find the salty smell Marie's hair had left on the pillow... "¹⁰

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ McCarthy, 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Camus, 21.

The significance of Meursault searching for Marie's scent on the pillow denotes his femininity. In a strange turn of events, Camus has Meursault searching and longing for Marie in what can be seen as a feminine manner. Besides that, Marie is the one who departs leaving Meursault pining for her to stay, or at least hurry back to him.

The "femininity" of the novel continues from Meursault's passive indifference to Marie's submissive acceptance of his fondling of her breasts during the Fernandel movie. And, again, Marie becomes the focal point, embodying femininity, where, seemingly, she is confused as to whether her role is one of sexual object or individual. Contrary to the blinded optimism (of her infatuation with Meursault) Marie displays throughout the course of Part 1,

The second half may be interpreted in two different ways: as a protest against Marie's idealization and as an inability to feel. ... By confusing sexual desire and love Marie is indulging in a false romanticism, which blinds her to her body and her situation as a working-class woman.¹¹

According to McCarthy, it is Marie's failure to separate her intense feelings for Meursault along with the realization that her relationship with him is nothing more than infatuation; and the feelings of infatuation are so powerful that her body is bonded to the blindness of her sexuality. Thus, unfortunately, this leads down the path of what McCarthy calls a "false romanticism" and to her realization of her working-class sexuality.

Marie's working-class sexual awareness leads her to a false romanticism that blinds her into thinking that she is in-love with Meursault when, in fact, she is merely infatuated; or at best, her infatuation is really her sexual appetite to subconsciously sexually conquer and dominate Meursault. Unfortunately, since these plausible thoughts are on a subconscious level, Marie does not recognize them and, thus is lead to a vengeful cycle of repeated sexual activity.

In the last section of the feminine analysis of *The Stranger*, we must turn our attention to the "lyrical." What I define as lyrical is the not only the musically melodious, but also the harmony of nature that seemingly infuses Meursault with hints of the sublimity. For Meursault, I define the sublime loosely as an exhilarating feeling, or, rather, sense of self brought on by exhilarating emotions. Of course, those feelings and emotions of elation are brought on through external means, such as: the music from the flute of the Arab, or a vision of Marie.

This is significant because we see the evidence of the music from the flute and the visualization of Marie combined with the description of the beach for a brief moment of bliss. One can argue that the moment of sublimity raises Meursault to the point of loftiness, where he is exalted

¹¹ McCarthy, 27.

beyond the terrestrial world. For Edmund Burke, the sublime is where beauty is "a relaxation of the bodily functions that eventually becomes disabling." (Ferguson 1231)

It is this Burkean sublime of the musical that immobilizes Meursault's cognitive processes. In fact if it were not for the simplistic music expelled from the flute, then it is certainly possible that Meursault would have been even more consumed, than he was, by the heat of the day. It is the reed's soothing lullaby that, momentarily, causes Meursault to escape the horrors of the day's reality.

For Meursault, it is not a question of seeking out the Arab in order to avenge Raymond's attack, as this would go against Camus' intentions; but, rather it is Meursault's intention to return to the alcove at the beach so that he can break away from the distractions of the day. He states, "I was thinking of the cool spring behind the rock. I wanted to hear the murmur of its water again, to escape the sun and the strain and the women's tears, and to find shade and rest again at last."¹²

The spring, in the shade, down the beach is Meursault's "little slice of Heaven" on Earth. It provides the necessary escape that he needs so that he can reorganize his thoughts. The Arab ruins the harmony of the day by trespassing on Meursault's beach, and it is this infringement, along with the "cymbals of sunlight", "scorching blade", and the "thick, fiery breath" of the sea that impede and restrict "the exceptional silence"¹³ of where Meursault's happiness is waiting. Meursault buckles under the pressure; he shoots the Arab; and before he knows it, he has "shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I'd been happy."¹⁴ Therefore, his only course of action is to "deal" with the Arab- the problem which places him in this situation- so, he releases his anger and frustration, because he realizes that his life will never be the same again, and "fires four more times."¹⁵ He takes out his anger and frustration on the Arab. The natural world, however, provides the breaking point through further antagonism.

Now that we have examined the Feminine dualism in *The Stranger*, it is time to turn to look towards the polar opposite- the Masculine dualism. If Camus proposes that the feminine is a complex analysis of a man and his (sub)conscious psychological relationship with his mother and love-interest, then the Masculine must then focus on the casual observations made by an indifferent individual in regards to his male

¹² Camus, 57.

¹³ Ibid., 59.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

associations. This is what we can refer to as the Masculine dualism- an analysis of Meursault's male associates.

Almost precisely, and seemingly intentional, Part 2 of the novel focuses on two different, but related scenes: Meursault's time in jail and his trial. Both instances illustrate Meursault as an observer and not a participant, and they are in direct opposition to Meursault's activity in Part 1.

On the day of his arrest, Meursault is "put in a room where there were already several other prisoners, most of them Arabs."¹⁶ The moment that he is placed in the holding room with the Arabs, Meursault still retains, intrinsically, his French-Algerian identity; however, as soon as one of the Arabs shows Meursault how to fix the mat, extrinsically, he becomes one of them. His individuality is taken from him, and he becomes a "common" criminal, no better or worse than those he is imprisoned with.

During his trial, Meursault takes an active role as an observer. While he may not understand every single detail about the trial, he does, in fact, take an active interest in its happenings. Although he may not agree with the testimonies, or the portrayal by the prosecutor, Meursault is genuinely interested in the details of his trial- both the legal details as well as the physical details of the courtroom environment.

There is a reality of concrete, unpoetic stark descriptions of the courtroom: the light of the day passes through the flimsy curtains; there is the stifling heat of the courtroom; the wiping of sweat from his face, and the awareness of the jury and reporters who are assigned to his case. It is as if there is a surreal spatial modal where Meursault exists outside of the inside of the courtroom. Where the courtroom trial is the center of the universe and Meursault is an observer looking in on the action, he is removed away from the action via the lack of his participation. This allows him the opportunity to view the recalled events of his life "flash" before him during his trial.

Meursault notices the minute nuances of those called to prosecute, or defend, his character. Only the director and caretaker answer their questions in a matter-of-fact-sort-of-way, whereas Thomas Pérez cannot afford the prosecution any evidence because of the negation of his testimony; Céleste's nervousness is apparent when he looks at Meursault and fiddles with his Panama hat. And poor, unfortunate, Marie is next, and in an ironic twist of fate, their relationship is turned inside-out and labeled as a "liaison." The bastardization of Marie's testimony figuratively forces her into a corner and, pushes her to the brink of an emotional breakdown; and she is dismissed off from the witness stand sobbing either an admittance of guilt in the liaison, or the vilification of her (self) and the testimony.

¹⁶ Ibid., 72.

At this point, no one listens to Salamano and the final witness called to the stand is Raymond- the abusive and cowardly pimp- who blurts out that Meursault is innocent. The weight of his testimony is weak at best, and he is promptly reprimanded by the judge.

It is here that the trial adjourns, and Meursault realizes that his defense is not going well. And in this moment of pessimism, Meursault finds happiness in the "languid air" of the "summer evening"¹⁷; and it is here, through this brief moment in time, that we find and see, Meursault "perfectly content" and what awaits him is the "sleep of content"¹⁸. Twice, within words of each other, does Meursault remark that he is content, and it seems that for the first time he is just that.

Before we examine the final dualistic element in *The Stranger*, we must look at the impact of Nietzsche on Camus. While in high school, Camus took a philosophy course with Jean Grenier; and it was Grenier who introduced Camus to Nietzsche (and would later be his mentor at the University of Algiers). Nietzsche's influence on Camus can be seen throughout his work. In fact, Nietzsche figures prominently in Camus' treatise on the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

There is a synthesis, albeit subtle, of Nietzschean thought in *The Stranger*. In his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche postulates his theory of the origins of tragic art-the Dionysian and Apollinian. For the examination of Part 1, we are concerned with the Dionysian which has been clearly and concisely defined as "representing the passionate side of humans"¹⁹.

The Dionysian is a primal unity which absorbs the individual into original being and affirms god's existence. It is an intoxication, a revelry, and an orgiastic blissful state of being where the primal world of non-individual experience occurs. Here, the creation and destruction, the change and the feelings of ecstasy overwhelm the individual, who is not seen as an individual, as part of the collective whole.

According to the definition of the Dionysian, one can presuppose that Part 1 would be "Dionysian" in account of Meursault and Marie's relationship. One imagines that the element of passion in the bedroom- that both Meursault and Marie are "drunk" with the intoxication of the moment- that both share in orgiastic ecstasy where they are overcome with feelings and emotions. He lives the Dionysian lifestyle- one that is non-reflective and immediate- and as such, is able to negate any meaningful thoughts or inquiries because his cognitive abilities are focused elsewhere.

¹⁷ Ibid., 97.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ L. Nathan Oaklander, 115.

The Apollinian, on the other hand, grows comes from the Dionysian and it is not: rational, intellectual, or emotional; it is a dream-like state that takes the participant away from the difficulties of existence and presents an ideal world through captivating images of beauty.

The Apollinian would need to be associated with Part 2, respectively. Unfortunately the descriptions of the Dionysian and Apollonian, as necessitated for Camus, cannot adhere to the "neat" divisions as formerly postulated. It is difficult to argue which half of Camus' novel would be associated with which Nietzschean aesthetical entity. Therefore, it is imperative to examine Meursault as a kind of Nietzschean satyr.

In sections 7 and 8 in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche uses the image of the satyr to illustrate the comparison of the Apollinian-Dionysian dualism. The satyr is the mythological torso-ed half-man, legged half-goat beast. If one looks at the symbolism that the satyr provides, then one can see the rational, intelligent thinking of humans juxtaposed to the frenzied sexual animal underbelly.

It is this contrast that Camus is interested in examining in *The Stranger*. Meursault symbolizes the "Dr. Jekyll- Mr. Hyde" of the satyr through the novel, including his transformation at the end of Part 2. Throughout Part 1, Meursault is an individual governed by the sexual appetite of his genitals. His sexual prowess is seen, at times, as being animal-like with the way that he takes Marie to bed. It is his lust that conquers both him and Marie, and it leads, ultimately, to Meursault becoming infatuated with the idea of Marie. Hence, his inability to commit to Marie's forwarded advances directs Meursault's rationale to not have a serious relationship, but rather to subjugate Marie in part to her sexuality as we examine in the first part of the essay.

While Meursault awaits his trial, and eventual death penalty, he is afforded the opportunity to meditate on his actions. Here, in Part 2, does Meursault undergo his transformation from irrational, apathetic sexual being to a contemplative, resolute intelligent young man. When Meursault reflects on his life, he sees himself as a satyr- a sexual Dionysian individual combined with the intelligence of an Apollinian. And, at once, we must like Sisyphus, imagine Meursault happy.

The trio of Camus' works: *Caligula* (1938), *The Stranger* (July, 1942) and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (October, 1942) provide the backbone of Camusian Absurd philosophy. While *Caligula* is a dramatic work and *The Myth* is a philosophical treatise, Camus experiments with a philosophical revolt of the absurd in "real life" with Meursault.

The moment that Meursault shoots the Arab, he becomes acutely self-aware of the absurdity of the universe. And it is this beginning of thinking and beginning of being understood (by the gods, Fate and the universe, etc.) that grants the foundation of Camus' exposition on the absurd in *The Myth*. Therefore, it should be of no coincidence that both

For more information visit [The Albert Camus Society](#)

The Stranger and *The Myth* be published in 1942 within three months of one another and compliment each work.

For more information visit [The Albert Camus Society](#)

Bibliography

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. New York: Vintage, 1988.

Ferguson, Frances. "Sublime." *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan. Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1993.1230-33.

McBride, Joseph. *Albert Camus: Philosopher and Litterateur*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1967.

- - -. *The Will to Power*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1967.

Raskin, Richard. "Camus's Critique of Existentialism." *Minerva- An Internet Journal of Philosophy*. 5 (2001): 156-65.

Skirmshire, Stefan. "A Political Theology of the Absurd? Albert Camus and Simone Weil on Social Transformation." *Literature & Theology*, Vol. 20, No. 3, September 2006, 286-300.

Sleasman, Brent. "The Philosophy of the Absurd: Albert Camus and the Ethics of Everyday." www.camus-society.com. 22 April 2009.