

# Human Nature and The Absurd in *The Stranger*, *Caligula* and *Cross Purpose*

By Simon Lea

In this paper I will be comparing three of Camus's characters: one from a novel and two from plays. The novel is *The Stranger* and the character is, of course, Meursault. The two plays are *Caligula* and *Cross Purpose*; the characters: *Caligula* and *Martha* respectively. While *Caligula* has a real-life counterpart, the character we see in Camus's play is not supposed to be an accurate representation of the man. The actual Roman Emperor may, or may not, bear close resemblance to the title character of the play, but we are only interested in the *Caligula* Camus created, not the historical figure. *Martha* is also a work of fiction and so is Patrice Meursault. In what follows, I will be claiming that Meursault is an unreal character and that the events that occur in *The Stranger* are also unreal. Obviously, the characters and events in the two plays are works of fiction and did not occur in 'real life'. My point will be that unlike *Caligula* and *Martha*, Meursault could not exist in real life. That is, he is not real enough to be an illustration of an actual person experiencing the Absurd. In fact, this being so, it would be a mistake to take Meursault as an example; certainly not one to follow. Rather misleadingly, Camus once referred to this character with 'ironic affection' as "the only Christ that we deserve."<sup>1</sup> The person we usually associate with the title Christ, is Jesus of Nazareth. According to Christians he possesses two paradoxical qualities: a human nature and a God nature; he was the God-Man. Meursault does not contain two natures. Camus did not intend to make him a god but he didn't make him human either. In the first half of this paper (sections I-III) I will look at the character of Meursault and the unreality of the man and the events that surround him. In the second half (sections IV-VI) I will, by comparison with *Caligula* and *Martha*, look at the role human nature plays in the Absurd.

## **I** *an unreal crime*

In 1955 Camus commented on *The Stranger*, "A long time ago I summed up *The Stranger* in a sentence which I realize is extremely paradoxical: 'In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be

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1 Albert Camus, *A foreword, The Outsider* (Penguin 1982) p 118

condemned to death'. I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game."<sup>2</sup>

The way Meursault does not play the game, according to his author, is that "he refuses to lie"<sup>3</sup>. Being truthful is a virtue that can get you killed. If you commit a capital offense and don't lie to the police, you'll end up dead. Even if you didn't do it, telling the truth is no protection against miscarriages of justice and you may well be killed. The hero of *The Stranger* does not find himself condemned to death simply because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral and it wasn't because he refused to lie in court. It would be a sick joke for a convicted murderer to claim he's in prison, not because he killed a man, but rather because he got caught or because he didn't lie in court. Meursault was in court because he shot and killed a man.

Camus gives no reason for Meursault's crime; he commits a senseless murder. He doesn't have him shoot the Arab or even pull the trigger, rather, "[Meursault's] whole being went tense and [he] tightened [his] grip on the gun. The trigger gave [.]"<sup>4</sup> Compare this account of someone being shot with the following two examples:

*1. I looked him in the eye, felt the gun in my hand and lifted it to his face which twisted in horror. I pulled the trigger and shot him dead.*

*2. The sun was shining directly in my eyes blinding me. There was a noise like someone had opened the door and was walking into the room. I stuck out my arm to stop whoever had entered from walking into me but my hand knocked against a heavy object on the shelf. A loud bang filled the room. I had knocked Raymond's gun to the floor and on impact it had discharged, shooting the Arab.*

In (1) it looks as if the narrator intended to shoot and kill someone. In (2) the Arab is killed by accident. It would be incorrect to say that he fired the gun when all he did was knock it to the floor. Camus doesn't have Meursault kill the Arab by accident; however, he chooses to describe the shooting in terms of his hero tightening his grip on the gun's handle and the trigger giving way, rather than a simple point and shoot. The circumstances that lead up to the event are not incomprehensible; we may not understand exactly why Meursault shoots but we can see how he ended up standing in front of a man with a gun in his hand. There is a good reason why Meursault has a gun; that is he is not carrying a weapon because he intends to harm anyone. The Arab is described as threatening; not only is he someone who is already linked by violence to Meursault, he is carrying a weapon himself: "the Arab drew his knife and held it out

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2        *Ibid*

3        *Ibid*

4        Albert Camus, *The Outsider* (Penguin 1983) p 60

towards me in the sun. The light leapt off the steel and it was like a long, flashing sword lunging at my forehead.”<sup>5</sup>

Camus could have had Meursault involved with a different kind of killing. Perhaps, back at his apartment, Raymond asks him to look after his gun or even slips the gun into Meursault's pocket when he hears a policeman knock on the door. Later, while Meursault rides the tram, he feels the weapon in his pocket, a shard of sunlight pierces his eyes, and he pulls the gun from his pocket and fires it into the face of the old lady sitting opposite him. Or walking down the street, he discovers the gun in his pocket, a dog barks, and Meursault fires into a passing pram, then four more times into the mother, “like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness.”<sup>6</sup>

The problem for Camus is that he wants his hero to commit a crime he is then innocent of. Meursault needs to be innocent of murder so he can then be condemned to death for not crying at his mother's funeral rather than for killing a man. Of course, before he can be condemned he needs to be put on trial, so he has to commit a capital offense. If the Arab hadn't been murdered, if Meursault had returned home after an uneventful trip, he would have presumably continued to live his life, unnoticed and not condemned by society. Society does not actually condemn men for not crying at their mother's funeral; it is doubtful Society would even notice such a man at all.

Meursault's crime is unreal; he shoots an Arab but is innocent of murder. He isn't guilty of manslaughter, going too far in attempting to defend himself. A good case could have been made for the latter, but Camus needs Meursault's crime to be forgotten by the reader. Meursault has a hard time remembering that he is a criminal himself! For the second half of the novel, Meursault must have our sympathy, and this is why, I believe, Camus did not have him shooting into the face of an old lady or into a passing pram. And why Meursault is personalized but the Arab is not. Camus doesn't want us sympathizing with the victim, so he doesn't give us a victim to sympathize with. The shooting of the Arab, Meursault's unreal crime, is solely an event necessary to get us from the first half of the novel to the second.

## **II *an unreal man***

Meursault is put on trial because he murdered an Arab. Taking into account that at that time in Algeria a white man accused of killing an Arab would probably escape justice, Meursault doesn't (more unreality?). At the trial, the prosecution, in order to make sense of the crime, look to the personality of the accused. What is he like? A man who doesn't honour his

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5        *Ibid.*

6        *Ibid.*

dead mother, who is friends with a pimp, who shoots and kills a man and then shows no kind of remorse whatsoever. One of the problems many readers of *The Stranger* have is that they can not reconcile the fact that Meursault is a murderer; he is the bad guy yet Camus obviously wants us to sympathize with him. The problem is that Meursault does not just commit an unreal crime, he is an unreal person. Even the prosecutor at the trial appears to notice there is something unbelievable about Meursault:

“Raymond said that it was quite *by chance* that I happened to be on the beach. The prosecutor then asked how it was that the letter which lay behind the intrigue had been written by me. Raymond replied that it was *by chance*. The prosecutor retorted that *chance* already had a number of misdemeanors on its conscience in this affair. He wanted to know if it was *by chance* that I hadn't intervened when Raymond had beaten up his mistress, *by chance* that I had acted as a witness at the police station, and also *by chance* that the statements I'd made on that occasion had proved to be so thoroughly accommodating.” (My emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>

The prosecutor is right, there does seem to be too much riding on chance in this story. With so many chance events, all working together to get Meursault where he is, one 'suspects' an intelligent designer, an author, behind it all. Could this be a case of Camus's philosophy spilling over into his character and sticking out like a sore thumb?<sup>8</sup> If Meursault's crime seems unreal, as well as the events that lead up to it, and to his being in court – this is because Meursault himself is unreal. Meursault is *literally* an invented character, created to tell a story, but what story? Is *The Stranger* a tale of the Absurd, or an anti-capital punishment piece? Or something else?

### **III a stranger to love, friendship and remorse**

In the first section of this essay, I said that a person who had no values at all would be severely disabled [*this refers to the longer essay from which this is taken - Ed*]. Meursault does value honesty; he won't lie, but are his values enough to qualify him as a person? Remember that Camus is careful to make his hero a stranger who is one of us; Meursault is not on the outside of society through some disability. It is not that he is incapable of understanding the difference between right and wrong. Camus was strongly averse to critics who suggested that Meursault was schizophrenic or a moron. But despite this, there does seem to be something very wrong with the character.

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7 *Ibid* p.92

8 A reference to Camus's review of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* in which he writes "A novel is never anything but a philosophy expressed in images. And in a good novel the philosophy has disappeared into the images. But the philosophy need only spill over into the characters and action for it to stick out like a sore thumb, the plot to lose its authenticity, and the novel its life."

Meursault makes a conscious choice to see the world, and the people in it, the way he does. "When I was a student, I had plenty of that sort of ambition. But when I had to give up my studies, I very soon realized that none of it really mattered."<sup>9</sup> When his lawyer asks if he felt any grief on the day of his mother's funeral he replies "that [he'd] rather got out of the habit of analysing [himself]"<sup>10</sup>. At his trial, he has an experience that reminds him of the way he used to think, "for the first time in years, I stupidly felt like crying because I could tell how much all these people hated me."<sup>11</sup> At some point in his life, Meursault made his decision not to lie. He stopped analysing himself, and others, and his interactions within society. Personal ambitions, emotions, relationships are, to him, no longer worth thinking about. The question is whether as a result of this decision he ends up as a murderer, deserving Society's hatred.

An unreal crime may be impossible to properly judge. However, Meursault's behaviour and attitude after the event is something we can take into account. The trial is often criticized, as Camus intended, for the focus on Meursault's previous actions and suspected attitudes prior to the shooting rather than on the crime itself.

"But my lawyer was out of patience and, raising his arms so high that his sleeves fell back to reveal the folds of his starched shirt, he exclaimed, 'But after all, is he being accused of burying his mother or of killing a man?' The public laughed. But the prosecutor rose to his feet again, wrapped his gown about him and announced that only someone as naïve as the honourable counsel for the defence could fail to appreciate that between two such actions there existed a profound, tragic and vital relationship. 'Yes,' he exclaimed vehemently, 'I accuse this man of burying his mother like a heartless criminal.'"<sup>12</sup>

But isn't the problem not that the prosecutor points to events from Meursault's life in order to make judgments about what kind of man he is but that he picks the wrong events? It may not be correct to claim that Meursault is a monster because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral but what about saying he's a heartless criminal because he unemotionally shot a man and didn't feel remorse for his actions?

*The Stranger* can be read as a novel about capital punishment and the judicial process. It is also a novel of the Absurd (if not *the* novel of the Absurd). In this essay I am interested in the Absurd and not whether it is just and right to put Meursault to death. In what follows I will be looking

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9        *Ibid* p 44

10       *Ibid* p 65

11       *Ibid* p 87

12       *Ibid* p 93

at Meursault's awareness of love, friendship and remorse; or more accurately his lack of awareness.

Patrice Meursault is not a nice man. His sole virtue is a refusal to lie. A virtue he is lacking after his trial. Thinking about the process of killing a condemned man, he says "I imagined that they could find some chemical compound for the patient to take (I thought of him as a patient) which would kill him nine times out of ten."<sup>13</sup> Condemned men are not 'patients' but prisoners. They are not awaiting treatment but (what Society calls) justice. Thinking of himself, and people like him, as patients is hardly a lucid imagining. All of Meursault's thinking while he is in prison is about himself and his life. The life he took does not concern him. At no point after the murder does Meursault show any kind of remorse or regret for killing the Arab. Even as he is stuck in his cell contemplating life and death, and the value of the former, he doesn't think of the life he took from someone else.

During the trial, the prosecutor asks for the death penalty because when he looks at Meursault he sees "nothing but a monster."<sup>14</sup> By contrast the defense lawyer sees a man "popular with everyone and sympathetic to the misfortunes of others."<sup>15</sup> He goes on to say that Meursault is already suffering punishment for his crime, being stricken with "eternal remorse"<sup>16</sup> We know that the defense lawyer is wrong. Far from being stricken with remorse, Meursault was at the time thinking how pointless the whole trial was and wanted simply to return to his cell and go to bed. The defense lawyer was correct, however, when he said that Meursault was popular. He has a friend at work, Emmanuel, with whom he is close enough to have lunch with and go to the cinema. Marie, his girlfriend, loves him and wants to get married. Raymond is his mate: they go out for drinks, he trusts him with the letter and he likes Meursault enough to invite him to his friend's chalet outside Algiers. Salamano, although not close enough to be called a friend, is on friendly terms with this neighbour. When the old man's dog goes missing, he feels close enough to Meursault to knock on his door for company. Meursault was more than just a customer to Celeste, "yes, but a friend as well."<sup>17</sup> The two of them used to go to the races together on Sundays. With the exception of Emmanuel (who we don't hear of again) all of his friends and acquaintances stand up for him in court. None of them, presumably, consider Meursault to be a stranger, on the outside. Marie thinks he is "peculiar" but "that was probably why she loved [him]"<sup>18</sup>; however, she

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13 *Ibid* p.106

14 *Ibid* p.99

15 *Ibid* p.100

16 *Ibid* p.101

17 *Ibid* p.89

18 *Ibid* p.45

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doesn't think Meursault is disturbed or mentally ill. No-one but the prosecutor does.

He treats Marie quite shockingly; his honesty seems almost cruel. "Marie came round for me and asked if I wanted to marry her. I said I didn't mind and we could if she wanted to. She then wanted to know if I loved her. I replied as I had done once already, that it didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't. 'Why marry me then?' she said. I explained to her that it really didn't matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. Anyway, she was the one asking and I was simply saying yes. She remarked that marriage was a serious matter. I said 'No'. She didn't say anything for a moment and looked at me in silence."<sup>19</sup>

Meursault may well be being honest with regards to how he feels but certainly doesn't understand the value of love and marriage. His lack of understanding, his inability to appreciate the love someone can offer him, appears to me as a failing, a serious flaw in his character and not a particularly believable one. I can't imagine that Meursault used to understand the importance of loving relationships but one day discovered that they don't matter. For someone to stop appreciating the love of others one would expect them to have suffered a major trauma that precipitates their new outlook. But Camus has Meursault say nothing of traumatic events in his past. As far as we can tell, Meursault simply found himself no longer appreciating loving relationships.

Certainly there is some truth in what Meursault says about love but this truth is usually coupled with a contradictory belief that love really does matter. Compare this to what Cherea says about love, death and happiness to Caligula (see below). Love is not rational, for most of us the experience of love is an experience of the Absurd. On the one hand we feel totally committed to the one we love, we treat this love with the utmost importance and believe it will last forever. But on the other hand, we accept that we don't really understand love, and that it usually doesn't last and it never remains the same. Love is impossible to clearly define; however, most of us who have loved and been loved, can recognize the experience of being in love. Something has, and is, occurring when a person is in love; for them it is a real experience, an actual event in the world. Meursault, doesn't feel this and is unaware of it. All he sees is one aspect of what love is and misses another.

What is troubling about Meursault is not so much his one-sided view of love and marriage but his lack of moral concern over how he treats Marie. He knows he doesn't love her but is not concerned that he may be using her simply for the pleasure he can get from her. He even acknowledges that he would get as much pleasure from a similar woman as he does from Marie. His most disturbing thought about Marie is later in prison when it crosses his mind that she might be ill or dead. Rather than feeling concerned he remarks that "I wasn't interested in her anymore if

she was dead."<sup>20</sup> It is most shocking when we, like Meursault, forget that he is a criminal in prison for committing an emotionless murder. Such feelings are easier for us to take if they are expressed by a psychopath, a stranger, an outsider.

The lack of concern shown to Marie indicates that he is unaware of how his actions would be received by her. Indeed, throughout the novel he often seems surprised by the reaction of others. For instance, when he displays no remorse over the murder of the Arab, he can't understand why the prosecutor "was so furious about it"<sup>21</sup> Even if Meursault had come to realize that others in Society don't tell the truth and don't refuse to lie, he ought to be aware of how they would experience him especially since before he stopped analysing the world he used to be like everyone else.

His friendship with Raymond is odd. He appears to start the friendship simply because his neighbour offers food, "I realized that this would save me having to cook for myself and I accepted."<sup>22</sup> Raymond offers friendship and Meursault takes it but without offering friendship in return. Raymond would be unaware of course that his new 'friend' is not offering any friendship back because Meursault certainly appears to. He helps him with the problem of dealing with his mistress, by not judging him over the beating and agreeing that it was the right thing to do, and by writing the letter. He also goes out drinking with Raymond and, of course, goes to the beach with him that crucial Sunday. If Meursault really were truthful, then he would be aware that he wasn't actually friends with Raymond and would not continue deceiving him by letting him think otherwise. But then again, Meursault may not be aware of this because he has given up analyzing his actions.

When he writes the letter for Raymond, he does so "to please Raymond but because [he] had no reason not to please him"<sup>23</sup> A good reason not to please him would be the sense that helping orchestrate the physical and emotional abuse of a girl he has never met is morally wrong. But Meursault doesn't care about what is right and what is wrong. But what reason does Meursault have to please Raymond? The only answer in the text seems to be that he finds Raymond's stories interesting<sup>24</sup> and that if he didn't please the man then presumably he wouldn't get to hear them any more. Unlike Raymond, Meursault doesn't consider them both to be friends. Rather, Raymond is at best a interesting distraction for him. After his outburst in prison to the priest, Meursault says "What did it matter that Raymond was just as much my mate as Celeste who was

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20 *Ibid* p.110

21 *Ibid* p.97

22 *Ibid* p.32

23 *Ibid* p.38

24 *Ibid* p.32

worth more than him?"<sup>25</sup> As with love, Meursault does not value friendship. And this appears to be because Meursault is not experiencing friendship. Instead he simply looks and acts like a friend, does a passable impression, without actually being a friend.

The most troubling thing about Meursault is his lack of remorse over the killing of the Arab and his lack of understanding that some expression of regret is expected by others. He finds it difficult to accept that he has committed a crime and is a criminal. He admits to not being able to take the examining magistrate seriously. "On my way out I was even going to shake his hand, but I remembered just in time that I'd killed a man."<sup>26</sup> On a later occasion he feels a bit frightened by the magistrate but "realized at the same time that this is ridiculous because, after all, I was the criminal."<sup>27</sup> I have already mentioned above how Meursault in prison doesn't see himself as a prisoner guilty of murder awaiting execution but as a patient awaiting some kind of procedure. When asked outright if he regrets what he's done, his reply: "I thought it over and said that, rather than true regret, I felt a kind of annoyance."<sup>28</sup>

Meursault is not seen as strange or an outsider by the people who know him. We have seen that they like him, enjoy his company and consider him to be a man of the world (as opposed to a stranger to the world?). But this is because they mistakenly assume him to be capable of love and friendship. He doesn't see himself as a stranger either. A most telling statement by him on the subject occurs when he reflects on a meeting with his lawyer, "I wanted to assure him that I was just like everyone else, exactly like everyone else. But it was all really a bit pointless and I couldn't be bothered."<sup>29</sup> How could Meursault make a choice to be different, to stop analysing life, to cease appreciating love and friendship and to be unable to feel either horror or remorse over the killing of another man and then think he's just like everyone else?

Meursault appears to be completely unaware of those aspects of love, friendship, and justice that are not rational. The experience of being in love, of having friendships with others, of justice is completely alien to him. As a result, Meursault is incapable of sharing these things with other members of his society. He is a pure individual with no sense of solidarity with others. In this sense he is an outsider. He can not identify with us and we can not identify with him. He is a stranger.

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25      *Ibid* p.116

26      *Ibid* p.64

27      *Ibid* p.68

28      *Ibid* p.69

29      *Ibid* p.66

## **IV** *thought experiments*

Consider the following: I can rationally argue that once a human being is dead they can suffer no harm to their body. In fact, I can argue that once a person is dead, they no longer have a body. Pointing to a cadaver, how can I say it *belongs* to a dead person? Yet despite knowing this, if someone I am eating dinner with suddenly drops dead to the floor, I would feel it to be morally wrong to put 'their' hand under the table leg to stop the table wobbling; or to roll the body against the door to prevent a draught coming in. You wouldn't believe it if someone claimed that they did such a thing because they accepted the rational truth that the deceased was not harmed by the body being used as a draught excluder. You wouldn't expect to be able to persuade an otherwise rational person to use the body of a recently deceased person in such a way. We know that rational argument has never been so successful as to prevent such a strong emotional response from taking precedence. In fact I am inclined to believe that a person, who on the strength of rational argument, can use a dead body to temporarily stop a table from wobbling simply doesn't understand the full reality of the situation.

A less extreme thought experiment will be helpful. When someone close to you dies it is natural to suffer grief. It is very painful at first and then this initial grief becomes less acute and we can start to remember the person we've lost without feeling intense pain. Imagine that a woman in her late thirties loses her husband in an accident. She feels terrible, intense, grief and suffering. However, rationally, she is aware that (a) in thirty years time she won't feel so bad and (b) her husband wouldn't want her to suffer. She can imagine herself sitting on a beach in thirty years time, with a new man she meets ten years from now. They have been married for twenty years and are on holiday celebrating their retirement and looking forward to spending their twilight years together. She looks at her second husband and feels the warmth of her love for him. She remembers her first husband and how much she loved him too. At this moment she realizes that it is truly possible to lose someone you love and love someone else without pain and contradiction. Now if it were medically possible to create a pill that would eliminate the intense pain the woman feels when loss of her husband is fresh and raw and replace it with the feeling she has thirty years later, should she take it? Why would she want to?

There is a sense that it would be wrong to avoid the pain and suffering of grief. What a person feels when the bereavement is fresh and what they feel years later is just as true. However, without feeling the former it seems impossible for someone to experience the latter. That is, if a person didn't feel intense loss it is difficult to accept that they felt intense love. The pill medically removes the 'early' feelings and replaces them with the 'later' ones but someone taking this pill will not be feeling emotions they ought to feel now and will feel emotions they shouldn't be feeling yet. Creating such a pill in real life is impossible. Just as impossible would be someone, when newly bereaved, choosing to experience the 'later' emotions.

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Suppose you bumped into a friend whose partner had recently died but he appeared bright and cheery. When you inquire after his good mood he claims that his partner asked him not to suffer grief after her death and he's honouring her wishes. You simply would not be able to believe that he chose not to suffer. Either he is putting on an elaborate show of not feeling the grief he does, or, more likely, he didn't actually love his wife and genuinely doesn't grieve her passing.

Someone who doesn't grieve after the loss of a loved one never had a loved one. Without the appropriate emotional response one can not understand the truth of certain things in the world. Loving someone, being friends with someone, requires an emotional understanding of what love and friendship is. When someone has the wrong emotional reaction to an event we assume, correctly I think, that they don't understand what is going on. If a child runs out into the road and is run over and killed, even if the driver could have done nothing to prevent it, if they are completely blameless, we will still expect them to feel some kind of guilt. If the driver had the same emotional response to the tragic accident as someone else, who merely read about it in the paper, we would think there was something wrong with the driver's understanding of events. Although, I believe, it can not be rationally argued why the driver should feel worse than the newspaper reader.

If a friend of yours was in this situation; was suffering from terrible guilt and you told them not to feel guilty, that there was nothing they could have done, you wouldn't believe that they could simply choose to stop feeling guilty. If they did, you would think something was wrong with them, even though they were following your advice.

A final example. Imagine a man who worries every time his wife or child travels home alone at night on their own. He learns that a pharmaceutical company has developed a pill that will replace this worry with the worry similar to that a person feels at the idea of women and children in general traveling alone at night. He buys some of these pills and the next time his wife tells him that she'll be coming home late on her own he takes one. His worry for her in particular is reduced to a lesser concern for women traveling home late at night in general. The pill works a treat and he spends a comfortable night at home. A few months later he discovers that the pharmaceutical company has developed more pills. There is one that replaces the worry that his family are happy with the worry that the family across the street are happy. Another that replaces the feeling one gets when learning of a disaster that occurred in a town nearby with one that has happened on the other side of the world. They even have a pill in development that will remove all feelings of ambition and there's a suggestion of a pill that can replace a feeling of revulsion in the face of injustice with cool indifference.

I doubt whether someone who took these pills would continue to be a fully functioning person. I am certain that no-one could simply choose to

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replace these feelings. They could think about their wives in a different way, stop caring about her as a person and lose concern for her traveling home alone on her own. However, no-one could love someone just as much as ever but simply choose to not be concerned for their welfare in certain situations they now to be dangerous. Not, convince themselves that the situations are not dangerous, but simply choose not to be concerned.

According to Camus, Meursault used to understand the world in the same way most of us do but then he chose to understand it differently. It simply isn't believable that such a decision is possible. One would expect a person who was capable but is now *incapable* of being in love, experiencing friendship or feeling remorse after causing the death of another, to have undergone some terrible trauma that precipitated the change (Caligula and the loss of Drusilla). Or a long chronic unhappiness that slowly destroys the person they used to be (Martha and her need to escape to the sun). However, Camus can not have his hero be an outsider because he is disabled or suffering from a mental illness. He wants us to see Meursault's point of view as a legitimate choice not as the ravings of a man deranged (and therefore easy to dismiss). In *The Stranger* Meursault suffers no trauma (except at the end) but makes a choice instead. A choice I don't think a person can realistically make which is why I claim Meursault is a unreal character. And his story, unreal also. In the next section I will explore the idea that Meursault is a human without human nature.

## **V Meursault may be unreal but he is not absurd**

There are two ways of looking at such things as love, friendship, and morality. We can look at these things rationally and discover 'truths' that we don't appreciate. For example, with morality, we can discover that although we treat our moral decisions with the utmost seriousness they rest on arbitrarily chosen beliefs. How can we continue to take such beliefs seriously? We could, like Meursault, stop taking them seriously (that is if it is under our control to do so). However, if we don't, if we continue to take our moral beliefs seriously despite being aware of the arbitrary nature of them, then we are absurd.

Most people do not look at such things as love, friendship, and morality lucidly. Rather than facing up the arbitrariness of things, they simply assume that these things are founded in fundamental rational truths that justify them. They continue to treat them with the utmost seriousness and believe that it is normal and right to do so. As we shall see below, they are like Cherea in *Caligula* avoiding looking too deeply because they want to live and be happy. However, when we do so, we miss something. Like Meursault we are unaware of the whole picture but the bit we don't see is the only thing Meursault does see. The Absurd involves a clash of two conflicting beliefs. If we arbitrarily label these beliefs (a) and (b), we can say that while most of us are only aware of (a), Meursault is only aware of (b). To be absurd, one would need to be

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totally lucid, aware of both (a) and (b). Thus, since Meursault is only aware of one, he is not absurd.

## **VI *emotion, sentiment, human nature and the Absurd***

In *The Rebel* Camus recognizes rebellion as beginning with an emotional reaction to injustice.

"In every act of rebellion, the man concerned experiences not only a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights but also a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself."<sup>30</sup>

When someone rebels, becomes a rebel, she "tacitly invokes a value."<sup>31</sup> This comes about suddenly when confronted with an injustice (either suffered by the rebel personally or witnessed as the suffering of others). When this feeling of revulsion at injustice occurs and a person feels what Camus calls an "awakening of conscience" there is a value created "with which the rebel can identify himself – even if only for a moment."<sup>32</sup> There is no period of reflection; that, if it comes at all, comes later. All the individual is aware of is a confused feeling that there is something they value and that it has been violated. Camus refers to this aspect of a person, this spontaneous emotional response to injustice, as "the passionate side of his nature that serves no other purpose but to help him to live."<sup>33</sup> For Camus, unlike his existentialist contemporaries, analysis of this kind of rebellion "leads us to the suspicion that, contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought, a human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed. Why rebel if there is nothing worth preserving in oneself?"<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it is this part of human nature that Camus asserts "must always be defended."<sup>35</sup> How unlike the attitude of his character Meursault. Or that of Martha, from his play *Cross Purpose*. Let's take a look at Meursault's speech made during his outburst to the priest.

"I'd been right, I was still right, I was always right. I'd lived a certain way and I could just as well lived a different way. I'd done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done one thing whereas I had done another. So what? It was as if I'd been waiting all along for this very moment and for the early dawn when I'd be justified. Nothing, nothing mattered and I knew very well why. [The priest] too knew why. From the depths of my future, throughout the whole

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30      A bert Cam us, *The Rebel* (Penguin 2000) p.19

31      *Ibid* p.20

32      *Ibid*

33      *Ibid* p.25

34      *Ibid* p.22

35      *Ibid* p.25

absurd life I'd been leading, I'd felt a vague breath drifting towards me across all the years that were still to come, and on its way this breath had evened out everything that was being proposed to me in the equally unreal years I was living through. What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me, what did his God or the lives people chose or the destinies they selected matter to me, when one and the same destiny was to select me and thousands of millions of other privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers. Didn't he understand? Everyone was privileged. There were only privileged people. The others too would be condemned one day. He too would be condemned. What did it matter if he was accused of murder and then executed for not crying at his mother's funeral?"<sup>36</sup>

Now let's compare this murderer's speech with another's, Martha. In the third act of *Cross Purpose*, Martha, the sister of Jan, whom she has murdered in order to steal his money, is confronted by Maria, Jan's wife.

MARIA [*in a sort of reverie*]: But why, *why* did you do it?

MARTHA: What right do you have to question me?

MARIA [*passionately*]: What right?... My love for him.

MARTHA: What does that word mean?

MARIA: It means – it means all that at this moment is tearing, gnawing at my heart; it means this rush of frenzy that makes my fingers itch for murder. It means all my past joys, and this wild, sudden grief you have brought me. Yes, you crazy woman, if it wasn't that I've steeled my heart against believing, you'd learn the meaning of that word, when you felt my nails scoring your cheeks.

MARTHA: Again you are using language I cannot understand. Words like love and joy and grief are meaningless to me.

MARIA [*making a great effort to speak calmly*]: Listen, Martha – that's your name isn't it? Let's stop this game, if game it is, of cross-purposes. Let's have done with useless words. Tell me quite clearly what I want to know quite clearly before I let myself break down.

MARTHA: Surely I made it clear enough. We did to your husband last night what we had done to other travelers, before; we killed him and took his money.

MARIA: So his mother and sister were criminals?

MARTHA: Yes. But that's their business, and no one else's."<sup>37</sup>

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36 Albert Camus, *The Outsider* (Penguin 1983) p.115-116

37 Albert Camus, *Cross Purpose, A Albert Camus: Caligula and other plays* (Penguin 2006) p.157

Martha is different to Meursault in that she took people's lives deliberately and with a purpose. The deaths were necessary so that the men could be robbed and Martha and her mother would have enough money to escape to the sea. Certainly, Martha feels no malice towards her victims, except for Jan when he humanizes himself, making it harder to murder him without conscience. She seems to have steeled herself against weakness, in order to be able to do what she needs to do to get what she wants. Meursault, as we have seen, simply made a choice to be the way he is and has no ambition. When Martha's mother doesn't show her the love she believes she deserves, Martha is distraught.

"MARTHA [*burying her face in her hands*]: But what, oh what can mean more to you than your daughter's grief?

THE MOTHER: Weariness, perhaps... and my longing for rest."<sup>38</sup>

Meursault on the other hand cares little for his mother's love. He did his duty by her, or didn't, depending on your attitude to putting relatives in care homes and proper funeral etiquette. What the two killers have in common is that they fail to recognize the value of others. They are pure individuals (Martha wants to take her mother away with her but not for her mother's sake) and can not think in terms of how their lives impact others and vice-versa. One would have thought that even a killer would be able to understand that the wife of their victim can expect an explanation. Or that people in a court-room would want to know why a man was killed and what the killer thought about his actions. Both Martha and Meursault are outsiders because they have no sense of the solidarity that the rest of us value.

A third outsider is Caligula. *Caligula* was written around the same time as *The Stranger* and performed within a year of *Cross Purpose*. Both plays were published along side each other in 1944, a couple of years after the 1942 publications of *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In order to understand what Camus is trying to do with his character Meursault, we need to compare him (Meursault) with his contemporaries, Martha and Caligula.

Caligula, after the death of Drusilla, wants solitude. He is overcome with grief (after a trauma, unlike Meursault) and is haunted by thoughts of his past and concerns about his impending future. These future concerns are not about ambition, he is, after all, the most powerful man in Rome. Sick with the world and things in the world, he tells Helicon, his friend, that what he wants is the moon. "Really, this world of ours, the scheme of things as they call it, is quite intolerable. That's why I want the moon, or happiness, or eternal life – something, in fact, that may sound crazy but isn't of this world,"<sup>39</sup> However, he knows that getting his hands

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38 *Ibid.* p.153

39 Albert Camus, *Caligula*, *Albert Camus: Caligula and other plays* (Penguin 2006) p.40

on the moon is impossible and so he seeks escape from the world. He goes about his escape in two ways. Firstly, he escapes from other people by living outside of human solidarity. Secondly, he is well aware that this choice will ultimately end in his death. It is first his mind, then his body, that will be leaving the world. In an argument with Scipio at the end of the second act, the boy expresses his pity (as well as his hatred) for Caligula and the loneliness he must feel. Caligula fires back:

"Loneliness! What do *you* know of it? Only the loneliness of poets and weaklings. You prate of loneliness, but you don't realize that one is *never* alone. Always we are attended by the same load of the future and the past. Those we have killed are always with us. But *they* are no great trouble. It's those we have loved, those who have loved us and whom we did not love; regrets, desires, bitterness and sweetness, whores and gods, the gang celestial! Always, always with us! [*He releases Scipio and moves back to his former place.*] Alone! Ah, if only in this loneliness, this ghoul-haunted wilderness of mine, I could know, but for a moment, real solitude, real silence, the throbbing stillness of a tree! [*sitting down, in an excess of fatigue*] Solitude? No Scipio, mine is full of the gnashings of teeth, hideous with jarring sounds and voices. And when I am with the women I make mine and darkness falls on us and I think, now my body's had its fill, that I can feel myself my own at last poised between death and life – ah, then my solitude is fouled by the stale smell of pleasure from the woman sprawling at my side."<sup>40</sup>

Caligula talks again of his 'glorious isolation' as he strangles to death his mistress Caesonia. but before we come to that, it will be helpful to look at the exchange between Caligula and Cherea at the end of Act Three. The emperor has called in Cherea in order to have a frank exchange of ideas. This clash of ideas will result in death; while Caligula obviously has the power to have the other man killed on the spot, Cherea can, and will, plot the assassination of the emperor. We join the discussion just after Cherea has told Caligula why he wants him dead. Caligula pushes him to say more:

"CHEREA: There's no more to say. I'll be no party to your logic. I've a very different notion of my duties as a man. And I know that the majority of your subjects share my view. You outrage their deepest feelings. It's only natural that you should... disappear.

CALIGULA: I see your point, and it's legitimate enough. For most men I grant you, it's obvious. But *you*, I should have thought, would have known better. You're an intelligent man, and given intelligence, one has a choice: either to pay its price or disown it. Why do you shirk the issue and neither disown it or consent to pay its price?

CHEREA: Because what I want is to live, and to be happy. Neither, to my mind, is possible if one pushes the absurd to its logical

conclusions. As you see, I'm quite an ordinary sort of man. True, there are moments when, to feel free of them, I desire the death of those I love, or I hanker after women from whom the ties of family or friendship debar me. Were logic everything, I'd kill or fornicate on such occasions. But I consider that these passing fancies have no great importance. If everyone set to gratifying them, the world would be impossible to live in, and happiness, too, would go by the board. And these, I repeat, are the things that count, for me.

CALIGULA: So, I take it, you believe in some higher principle?

CHEREA: Certainly I believe that some actions are – shall I say? – more praiseworthy than others.

CALIGULA: And *I* believe that all are on an equal footing."<sup>41</sup>

Cherea points out the effect of outrage Caligula's injustice has on the ordinary people. They are revolted by him and will want him dead. Caligula agrees but he thinks a man of Cherea's intelligence should be able to rise above this sentimental, emotional reaction. Unlike Caligula, Cherea can categorize things in the world into good and bad, rankings in order of moral preference, and so on. What he shares with Caligula is that he can not find a logical reason to defend his choices. The only reason he makes them is because he wants to live and be happy. Caligula, on the other hand, wants neither. There is no logical reason Caligula can find for killing or not killing; doing this action or that; all are on an equal footing: the very approach to the world that Meursault takes. However, unlike Meursault, Caligula is aware of that spark of human nature that is sentiment, emotion. Which is why Caligula is unhappy and Meursault isn't. Let's explore this idea more closely.

Caligula, just before strangling his mistress to death, claims that he *is* happy. He has discovered that "beyond the frontier of pain lies a splendid, sterile happiness." Once he discovered that nothing lasts, once he is free of illusion, free of memories of the past and thoughts for the future he is finally free. Exclaiming this with bitter laughter he says, "there have been just two or three of us in history who really achieved this freedom, this crazy happiness [...] But for this freedom I'd have been a contented man. Thanks to it, I have won a godlike enlightenment of the solitary [...] And this, *this* is happiness; this and nothing else – this intolerable release, devastating scorn, blood and hatred all around me; the glorious isolation of a man who all his life long nurses and gloats over the joy ineffable of the unpunished murderer; the ruthless logic that crushes out human lives [*he laughs*]"<sup>42</sup>

His happiness is false. Happy people don't laugh bitterly, nor do they describe their feelings as 'sterile'. Caligula refers to 'this crazy

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41 *Ibid* p82-83

42 *Ibid* p.102

happiness'. He recognizes that all is possibly not well and that he is not happy. As he squeezes the life out of Caesonia he says, "No. No sentiment. I must have done with it, for the time is short. My time is very short, dear Caesonia."<sup>43</sup> Is he talking to her or himself when he calls out for no sentiment. No sentiment as he kills his 'dear Caesonia'. Moments later, when he knows his assassins are coming and that his plans have worked – worked in the sense that men are coming to take him out of the world – he calls out "I have chosen the wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn't the right one..."<sup>44</sup>

Now let us compare Caligula's 'sterile happiness' with Martha's desire to escape somewhere where the sun burns everything up.

"MARTHA: I read in a book that it even burns out people's soul and gives them bodies that shine like gold but are quite hollow, there's nothing left inside.

THE MOTHER: Is that what makes you want to go there so much?

MARTHA: Yes, my soul's a burden to me, I've had enough of it. I'm eager to be in that country, where the sun kills every question. I don't belong here."<sup>45</sup>

Like Caligula, Martha is seeking a sterile happiness, hers to be sterilized by the heat of the sun. She wants to escape all questions and live a life plagued by none. Like Caligula, she appears to be bothered by sentiment. She does everything she can to avoid getting intimate with Jan. Ironically, it is during an intimate conversation with her brother that she makes up her mind to kill him. Rather than thinking things through with cold logic and choosing the rational answer, she is motivated by her emotional desire to step foot on the scorching beaches of the coast. Her and her mother also rationalize their murders, making out that they are in fact doing their victims a favour. The murdered guests are drugged beforehand and neither predict nor suffer their actual deaths. This, to Martha and her mother, makes their victims fortunate and hides the horror behind the reality of their actions. Sentiment is acknowledged and overcome with philosophy.

Caligula and Martha are much more believable characters than Meursault. They are both human, and feel human emotions. Sure, they devise strategies to overcome human nature but this proves that they are more aware, more lucid of events, than Meursault who appears to be without human nature. What I mean by overcoming human nature is managing to suppress the feeling of sentiment that rises in the face of injustice as well as similar emotions that appear when confronted with

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43      *Ibid*

44      *Ibid* p.103

45      *A lbert Cam us, Cross Purpose, A lbert Cam us: Caligula and other plays* (Penguin 2006) p.111

love and friendship. Note that both Caligula and Martha want a sterile happiness, purged of emotion and sentiment. You don't want to be purged of something you don't have.

The other people around Caligula and Martha recognize their madness. Although it is not the politically correct term by today's standard, we know what Maria means when she says Martha is crazy. The patricians understand that Caligula is beside himself. Cherea makes a point of not hating him because he doesn't think Caligula is happy. He recognizes that the man is "noxious and cruel, vain and selfish"<sup>46</sup> Obviously, he is aware that Caligula has these negative qualities but does not blame him for them; he can not hate the man even though he knows he is noxious and cruel. Why? Because he doesn't think it is Caligula's fault; he believes Caligula to be beside himself with grief over the death of Drusilla. It is easy to see Caligula and Martha as different because in their effort to suppress their emotions, in order to overcome the Absurd, they come across to others as mad. Meursault doesn't appear mad (until he is questioned about the murder of the Arab then he only comes across as mad because he seems so unaffected by his actions) because Meursault isn't tormented by a confrontation with the Absurd. He can not look at the world and his place in it lucidly because he is blind to the understanding human emotion gives us. Thus there is no clash, no conflict, and nothing is absurd.

Unlike Meursault, Caligula and Martha experience and understand the world through emotion: grief, anger, scorn, longing, despair. They develop strategies to overcome their human instincts and end up in isolation, murder and death. Meursault is also isolated but does not have the same understanding of the world as the other two because he is incapable of experiencing the world around him and the people in it emotionally. More accurately, he is not entirely emotionless, he has no reason to lie when he says (to Salamano and us, the readers) that he is upset about the dog going missing. The emotions he is lacking in are what is needed to desire and feel solidarity with others. The emotions that, according to Camus, make being human beings what they are. In *The Rebel*, he observes that rebellion (an emotional response to injustice) is "the common ground on which every man bases his first values. I *rebel* – therefore we *exist*."<sup>47</sup>

It is interesting to note that in his cell Meursault discovers a scrap of newspaper on which he can read a report of a crime very similar to Martha's. There are slight differences: in the news report the son is beaten to death with a hammer rather than drugged, the mother hangs herself rather than drowns herself and the Martha character throws herself down a well. Meursault comments, "I must have read this story thousands of times. On the one hand, it was quite improbable. On the

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46 A lbert Cam us, *Caligula*, A lbert Cam us: *Caligula and other plays* (Penguin 2006) p 82

47 A lbert Cam us, *The Rebel* (Penguin 2000) p 28

other, it was quite natural. Anyway, I decided that the traveller had deserved it really and that you should never play around."<sup>48</sup> He might not have an emotional connection to Martha and her crime, but there is something like sympathy for her situation.

### **Conclusion**

Camus was averse to any criticism of Meursault's humanity. He claims that Meursault is a passionate man who refuses to lie. And because he refuses to lie, to say more than what he feels in his heart, society feels threatened. It is Meursault "who agrees to die for the truth."<sup>49</sup> I have already mentioned in my introduction that Camus considers his character to be Christ-like. Perhaps when he refers to Meursault's passion, it is in terms of his sufferings as a martyr – dying, as Camus claims he does, for the truth. But dying because you refuse to lie is not the same thing as dying *for* the truth. And Meursault does not agree to die but at best simply goes along with it. Society doesn't kill him because it is threatened by his refusal to lie but because he killed a fellow man in cold blood. For sure, Meursault won't lie and say that he feels guilt or remorse when he only feels a sense of annoyance and it is this that probably seals his fate in court. However, he is not condemned simply because he refuses to say more than he feels or because he will only tell the truth – if that were so, simply telling the truth, no matter what the content of that truth happens to be, would be a capital offence. The truth is that he is a remorseless killer. Yes, everything is simple. It is Camus who complicates things. Don't let him say about the man condemned to death: "He is put to death because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral," but: "They're going to chop his head off." It may seem like nothing. But it does make a difference.<sup>50</sup>

So far, I have mentioned Caligula's acute crisis, the death of Drusilla, that brings about in him a lucidity of the Absurd. I have mentioned Martha's chronic isolation and resentment that allows her to be lucid of the Absurd. But I have not mentioned Meursault's realization, in the last few pages of the novel, of why his mother chose to take a fiancé when she was so close to death. I wonder if it would have made a difference to me, as the reader, if he had awoken in his cell and realized why he didn't deserve crowds of spectators crying their hatred at his execution. Not due to his innocence but because it seems more just that his death be met with the same indifference he feels toward the man he killed.

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48 Albert Camus, *The Outsider* (Penguin 1983) p.78

49 Albert Camus, *Afterword*, *The Outsider* (Penguin 1983) p.119

50 See *Between Yes and No* in *The Wrong Side and The Right Side*. Camus says "I need my lucidity. Yes, everything is simple. It's men who complicate things. Don't let them tell us any stories. Don't let them say about a man condemned to death: "He is going to pay his debt to society," but: "They're going to chop his head off." It may seem like nothing. But it does make a difference. There are some people who like to look their destiny straight in the eye.

*The Stranger* is an uncomfortable read and Meursault an incomprehensible character. The Absurd arises in a moment of lucidity, when we are aware of a clash between two conflicting beliefs. The world seems absurd because we are part of nature and yet able to take a step back from nature and rationalize our place in the world. We become aware of what we call the Absurd when we can not reconcile the two experiences: what we instinctively feel to be true and what we rationally believe to be true. In *The Rebel* Camus looks to human nature to make sense of what we are to do about the problem. The hero of his novel of the Absurd, arguably *the novel of the Absurd*, doesn't have a problem with it. If he had had a cold that fateful Sunday and stayed at home, then the killing would never have happened and he would presumably live the rest of his life untroubled by the Absurd – or the rest of society. Caligula and Martha struggle with their confrontation but they are more human, more real, than Meursault. *The Stranger* gives the reader the sense of confusion and isolation one feels when looking for meaning, in, what very well could be, a meaningless universe. However, *Caligula* and *Cross Purpose* give us a better understanding of the Absurd.

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