

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Stranger

by Albert Camus

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The Stranger

Background Notes

The Stranger, by Albert Camus, was written during World War II, in French and published in 1942. The setting of the novel is the north African country of Algeria and its capital, Algiers, which is near where the author was born and raised.

The Stranger has been called an “existential” or “nihilistic” novel. Existentialism is a philosophy professing the belief that the universe is indifferent to mankind and that most of life is futile, absurd, and incomprehensible. Existentialism sees the individual as existing in a meaningless universe where events are beyond his or her control. Nihilism is not unlike existentialism, but nihilism goes further: it rejects all positive values, and its followers believe in nothing. There are elements of both of these philosophies in *The Stranger*. Camus himself was said to believe that individuals are seeking beliefs or value systems, but the world offers them none, forcing human beings into an absurdist or meaningless life.

The Stranger has been a successful novel since its publication. Its appeal to readers throughout the world has been enduring, and it is now considered a literary classic.

All references come from the Vintage Books edition of *The Stranger*, copyright 1988.

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Biography of Albert Camus

Albert Camus was born of French parentage in Algeria in 1913. His father died when Camus was a year old. Because his deaf mother was poor, Camus was raised in a working-class section outside of the port city of Algiers. Many of his experiences growing up in this environment and along Algeria's beaches are mirrored in *The Stranger*. Before falling ill with tuberculosis, Camus attended the University of Algiers.

Camus wrote *The Stranger*, his first novel, in Paris where he had gone to work as a journalist. He fought with the French Resistance during WW II.

Following the success of *The Stranger*, Camus continued writing essays, novels, plays, and short stories. *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Plague* are two of his better known works.

Camus received the 1957 Nobel Prize in Literature. Three years later, in 1960, Camus died in an automobile accident in France.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. understand the following facts:
 - The setting for this novel is Algeria, a country located along the Mediterranean Sea in North Africa, in an unspecified time in the mid-twentieth century.
 - Algeria was under French rule until 1962.
 - Algiers is the capital of Algeria.
 - Arabic and French are the predominant languages.
 - The population of Algeria is religiously and ethnically mixed.
2. recognize that Meursault is the protagonist of the novel, that it is written in the first-person, and what the differences are between first and third-person point of view in a novel.
3. discuss some elements of Camus' philosophy of existentialism.
4. discuss Camus' writing style and how this style contributes to the consistently serious and somber tone of the novel.
5. distinguish between the different content of Parts One and Two, the first concentrating on Meursault's view of the world and the second showing how his immediate world views him.
6. define the terms "existentialism" and "nihilism" used to categorize The Stranger.
7. understand to what extent the novel is autobiographical.
8. summarize the main points of the plot of the novel sequentially.
9. define certain vocabulary words with reference to their context.
10. explain Meursault's views about love, relationships, and the world by citing examples from the novel.
11. discuss Meursault's interpersonal relationships with other characters in the novel.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Even though Madame Meursault is not alive in the novel, what impression does Camus give about her relationship with her son, Mr. Perez, and the other persons at the retirement home?
2. How do the many descriptions of the natural world add to or subtract from the tone of the novel and the character of Meursault?
3. Both Salamano and Raymond are violent toward those they profess to care about. Discuss the ways each is violent and what the possible reasons for this violence may be.
4. Camus writes about two other murders in *The Stranger* besides the one that Meursault commits. Describe them and discuss how Meursault views the one he reads about on the scrap of newspaper in his cell.
5. To outward appearances, Meursault does not seem to be a person who has set himself outside of society. Discuss some ways in which Meursault seems normal and in conformity with society and also ways in which he seems to be outside of society and a non-conformist.
6. Describe the behavior of the Arab man on the beach after Meursault arrives to confront him. Would you describe his reaction to Meursault as violent, pacifying, passive, or frightened or something else? Compare the behavior of the two men before the shooting. Are the two men more alike than different?
7. Write a one-page essay about Marie Cardona. This could include any of her characteristics such as, her physical appearance, the type of nature she has, her attitude toward life, her emotions before and after Meursault is arrested, and what qualities she shows throughout Meursault's imprisonment and trial.
8. Write a one page essay which discusses various ways in which Meursault demonstrates his rejection of the prevailing social rules in his world.
9. Explain at least two episodes in *The Stranger* which exemplify the philosophy of existentialism or nihilism. Cite portions from the book which substantiate your answer.
10. Existential philosophy holds that nothing really matters, not even death. Discuss the examples of death in *The Stranger* and how Meursault reacts to them. Would these reactions confirm or refute the opinion that Meursault is an existentialist character?

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Part One

Chapter 1

Vocabulary

- abscess** – an infection where pus collects
- acolyte** – an assistant to a priest
- atheist** – person who does not believe in God
- censer** – incense container used at religious ceremonies
- condolences** – expressions of sympathy
- destitute** – without any means of support
- hacking** – a harsh, dry cough
- kilometer** – a distance equal to 0.6 of a mile
- Legion of Honor** – a French medal for some meritorious service
- Moorish** – of the Muslim faith
- mortuary** – where dead bodies are kept
- pallor** – paleness
- vigil** – a purposeful watch

1. In what country is this novel set and which country governs it? Name one language spoken there. What two facts would give a clue to the setting and one of the languages?

2. What is a protagonist? Who might that be in this novel?

3. Is *The Stranger* written in first-person or the third-person narration?

Chapter 5

Vocabulary

meticulously – with great care
vague – unclear

1. What further involvement does Raymond ask of Meursault as this chapter opens?

2. Give examples of ways Meursault again shows indifference in the discussion with his boss about a transfer to Paris.

3. What surprising question does Marie ask Meursault? What is Meursault's answer?

4. Cite three examples where Meursault defends his lack of emotion.

5. Cite a statement by the examining magistrate and another by one of the judges which describe their feelings about Meursault.

6. Neither the magistrate nor the lawyer are given names by the author. What could be a reason why Camus chose not to give them names?
