

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Stranger

by Albert Camus

written by Steve Weed

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The Stranger

Pre-Reading

1. *The Stranger*, written by Albert Camus, an Algerian, was first published in 1942, when Algeria was still a colony of France; World War II was still being fought with great intensity, with France being one of the central battlegrounds. During the war, Camus spent time in Paris, which was under occupation by Nazi Germany. He wrote articles for *Combat*, one of the strongest French Resistance newspapers. While in France and writing news stories, Camus saw much horror and bloodshed, destruction of homes, animals, and people.

Having this background about the time period in which *The Stranger* was written, list three themes you think the novel might contain, and then for each potential theme write a brief explanation as to why you think this concept will be in the book. Remember, it does not matter if you are correct or not; these are only your assumptions about some of the themes you think you'll see in the story.

2. Albert Camus was born in Algeria in North Africa in 1913, and his parents were French Nationals. His father died in World War I when Camus was just a baby, and he grew up poor. His mother's family was Spanish, and she was half deaf. Camus had to work his way through school, during which time he contracted tuberculosis. As the French-speaking, Algerian-born son of non-Arabs, Camus was called a *pied-noir*, which translates as blackfoot.

The Stranger is set in Algiers around the late 1930s or early 1940s. Camus would have been in his late twenties, and the *Pieds-Noirs* were a highly visible and even dominant part of life in Algiers, the Algerian capital of this French colony.

Do the author's story and the book's title cause you to want to read the book? Why or why not? Answer this question in a few sentences.

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3. In his novels, plays, and essays, Albert Camus wrote about a theory he referred to as “the absurd.” One of the central ideas behind his philosophy is that people find meaning in their lives by accepting that the self and one’s actions are all we can count on. He believed people cannot and should not live to impose their sense of reality onto everybody else. According to Camus, life is difficult and may not prove to have much meaning, but we can find happiness, nonetheless. Happiness, to him, is to accept the senseless nature of life and to continue to work and find the moments of joy amidst this senselessness. In essence, Camus believed we find happiness and meaning when we do not search for them, but live passionately for the sake of living itself.

Camus’s ideas can be complex and difficult to follow. Based on what is stated in the previous paragraph about “the absurd,” imagine you are writing a letter to Albert Camus. Write a letter that conveys to the author why you agree or disagree with the idea. If the concept is one that is hard for you to understand, write a letter to Camus in which you explain why you believe his thinking is too complex, and what life means to you.

4. The author has a reputation for valuing forthrightness, bravery, and fair play. He did not support any state, political philosophy, or religion, which caused people to perceive him as being against the status quo. Camus saw things differently: he believed he was just being inherently honest and direct in his dealings with the world.

Decades after his death, some might consider the beliefs Camus upheld to be unrealistic, naïve, or even foolish. Remember an incident in your own life when you faced an obstacle or an opponent. What happened? How did you feel about your decision to act the way you did? Were you successful or not? Write a journal entry about that event and recollect how it felt to make that choice about what you did.

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5. *The Stranger* was originally written in French. Two well-known English translations are by Stuart Gilbert and Matthew Ward. While both of these translations are in the same language, the two men choose to handle certain words in different ways; for instance, Gilbert uses the word, “mother,” whereas Ward uses the word “Maman.” This example is why some critics believe that a translation can convey the story of a book as it appears in its original language, but translation makes it more difficult to capture the full essence it.

Go online and find some French to English translation sites. Here are a few:

- www.translation.langenberg.com
- www.babelfish.yahoo.com
- www.worldlingo.com/en/products_services/worldlingo_translator.html
- www.freetranslation.com

Type in the following French phrases and write down how the different sites translate them into English:

- Pour être ou ne pas être, là est la question.
- La vie, la liberté et la poursuite du bonheur.
- Il a été le meilleur des cas, elle a été la pire des époques.
- Nous n'avons rien à craindre, mais la crainte elle-même.
- Ils ont tous vécu heureux pour toujours.
- Au commencement, Dieu créa le ciel et la terre.
- Mary avait un petit agneau, sa toison était blanche comme neige.

The resulting phrases should be quotations that you immediately recognize. Can you draw any conclusions about the sites, about translations in general, or about languages from this experiment?

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Part 1

Chapter 1

6. It is important to pay close attention to the first paragraph of a novel, because it has clues to themes and symbols of the book, sets the story into motion, and often introduces central characters. *The Stranger* opens with this paragraph, “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.”

Based on what is said in this paragraph, and how it is written—with short, quick sentences—write a list of at least three emotions you believe the narrator reveals about himself. For each emotion you list, write a brief explanation as to why you believe the narrator feels this way.

7. The reader doesn’t learn much about Madame Meursault except through the reactions of others to her death. Her emotional attachments to her son and the other people she lived with at the home are not revealed within the text.

Imagine that Meursault visited his mother just prior to her passing. Even though the information is limited, there are enough hints about each character for you to create a dialogue between the two. Starting with the prompt below, write what a final exchange might be like between mother and son. Base your conversation only on information gathered from Chapter 1.

Maman: I’m surprised you’re here. You’ve seldom visited since putting me in this place.

Meursault:

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8. Madame Meursault is about sixty when she dies. In the U.S. culture and this century, sixty is not considered elderly, yet Meursault thinks of Maman as an old lady. His mother's engagement to Thomas Pérez makes the director of the home smile, because he considers it a "rather childish sentiment." The attitude at the nursing home toward the older adults like Madame Meursault appears to be one of condescension.

Imagine you live at the same nursing home as Madame Meursault and that you have been appointed by the other residents to write a letter to the director of the facility, explaining to him that everyone there wishes to be treated with more respect. Write this letter. Remember, you are pretending to be a person who is older, so include details in the letter that you feel are important to that age group.

9. Chapter 1 revolves almost entirely around the funeral of Madame Meursault. She had lived for the past couple of years in the equivalent of a nursing home. Meursault takes a bus to the home, where he meets with the staff. The staff is polite, but emotionally distant from the situation. During calling hours, Meursault encounters, but does not really interact with the other guests, who are friends of Madame Meursault. Some grieve loudly, and most eventually fall asleep. At the funeral itself, the day is hot and Thomas Perez, a close male friend of the deceased, cries openly. During the procession, Meursault continues his small talk with the staff, talking in particular about the heat. He then takes the bus home.

Write a few paragraphs about Meursault's experience during his mother's funeral. In these paragraphs, include your thoughts about this question: Does this funeral experience in its entirety, from when Meursault arrives to when he departs, seem standard to you? Why or why not?

10. The sun and heat are mentioned frequently. In particular, on the day of the funeral, Meursault mentions it several times. He states, "The sky was already filled with light. The sun was beginning to bear down on the earth and it was getting hotter by the minute. I don't know why we waited so long before getting under way. I was hot in my dark clothes." Later in the same paragraph, Meursault concludes, "But today, with the sun bearing down, making the whole landscape shimmer with heat, it was inhuman and oppressive."