Self and Other

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MEURSAULT'S ESTRANGEMENT

Camus' *The Stranger* begins with the right word, "Mother," in precisely the correct context, loss, with exactly the right tone, a mixture of uncertainty and emotional flatness: "Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY. FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday" (Camus 1942). From the perspective of attachment theory it would seem that the ontological anxiety attributable to Meursault in this novel might derive from this loss of his primary support figure—except that Meursault is a grown man, no longer dependent on his mother. Besides, they have had little emotional contact for a long time. "For years," he remarks, "she'd never had a word to say to me." When the Judge asks during the trial if the separation from his mother when he sent her to the Home for Aged Persons had caused him any distress, he responds, "Neither Mother nor I expected much of one another—or, for that matter of anyone else." With this statement Meursault gives evidence against himself concerning the heart of his problem, which is a problem of the heart. Meursault, the quintessential stranger, has little emotional contact with anyone at all. This novel, originally entitled *L'Indifférent*, tells us what it means to live without caring in an uncaring universe.

Granting this postulate by no means solves in any detail the many puzzles posed by *The Stranger*. While transparent in some ways, the novel remains opaque in many others. Why does Meursault kill the Arab, for instance? The initial narrative description of the event provides no direct answer to the question. In the courtroom Meursault declares he had no intention of killing the Arab. Pressed for his motives, Meursault responds...
this way: “I tried to explain that it was because of the sun, but I spoke too quickly and ran my words into each other. I was only too conscious that it sounded nonsensical, and, in fact, people were tittering.” Is Meursault insane? The people in the courtroom respond as though he were. Should his action be looked upon, philosophically, as a highly contingent one performed by an existential hero in what is after all an absurd world? Or should the explanation, “because of the sun,” be taken more literally in the context of the repeated narrative references to the blinding glare of the sun operating in conjunction with Meursault’s headache and his woozy condition after the big meal and the wine and the ensuing commotion on the beach? In other words, should we take Meursault seriously, elsewhere in the novel, when he tries to justify his assumption that death wishes towards loved persons are more or less “normal” by explaining to his lawyer that “my physical condition at any given moment often influenced my feelings”? He refers, in this instance, to tiredness and other forms of physical discomfort he experiences on the day of his mother’s funeral. Meursault sees his feelings as a function of his physiological state. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that in crucial situations his sensations simply supplant emotions that ought to be there—but are not.

Another puzzle has to do with the connection between Meursault’s feeling—or lack of feeling—concerning his mother’s demise and his lack of feeling when he kills the Arab. As narrative events, they appear to be independent of each other. As textual events, there must necessarily be a meaningful relationship, as the parallel of the physiological malaise on each occasion implies, and as textual wholeness requires. One of the relatively transparent ironies of the novel is that both officials and members of the public insist on trying Meursault not so much for killing an Arab as for not showing grief at his mother’s death. Camus doubles the irony by requiring his readers to intuit that, however wrong the public may be on legal grounds, there is some kind of a connection nevertheless.

Any attempt to understand this connection between Meursault’s public and private crimes calls for a fairly deliberate examination of the implications of his interpersonal relationships, direct and indirect, past and present, with the personages of the novel, including his mother, his long-dead father, his boss, Marie, Céleste, Raymond, Salamano, Pérez, the examining magistrate, the priest, and even figures so peripheral as the young journalist and the “little robot woman.” Such an exploration leads to the inference that what Meursault describes at the end of his story as
"the benign indifference of the universe" may be seen as a world view originating in an object-relational matrix.

Consideration of two psychoanalytic interpretations of the novel provides a convenient route for beginning this exploration. The more recent one of Patrick McCarthy adopts a partly biographical orientation: "A simple psychoanalytic reading would lead one to conclude that Camus was torn between an incestuous love for his mother and a hostility towards her coldness" (1988, p. 2). In McCarthy’s Freudian perspective, love for one’s mother must necessarily be sexual and oedipal, and he later emphasizes that it is an “incestuous bond” that unites mother and son in *The Stranger* (32). What is not so clear is whether McCarthy intends his readers to take the phrase “hostility towards her coldness” in a sexual sense as well, as an orthodox Freudian might. McCarthy begins the psychological portion of his interpretation by calling attention to biographical aspects of fictionalized passages in Camus’ first volume of essays, *L’Envers et l’Endroit*. He says that one essay depicts the mother as emotionally cold: “She never caressed her son because she wouldn’t know how to.” McCarthy adds, “The denial of affection haunts the narrator who tells a disturbing anecdote about a mother cat eating her kitten. Conversely, the essay depicts an assault on the mother by an intruder, after which the narrator-son spends the night next to her on her bed” (1). Although McCarthy does not elaborate on this episode, which might be read in part simply as an effort of the boy to comfort his mother, what McCarthy implies by it is the boy’s identification with the attacker and his lust. If one chooses to deemphasize the oedipal cast of McCarthy’s overall interpretation, and if one politely ignores the inconsequential way he toys with stock sexual symbolism (the Arab’s knife and the revolver as phallic instruments), one is left with this interpretation: “Hidden away in *The Stranger* lies a psychoanalytic novel where the mother, although dead, continues to strike at her son who strikes back” (41).

A psychologically more sophisticated reading of the novel, but one that makes no use of biography, was originally published in 1947 by an American psychoanalyst, Nathan Leites. This paper pays more attention to personality factors, especially the elements of guilt and defense. Instead of a mother who “continues to strike at her son who strikes back,” Leites gives us an unconsciously angry hero who atones for his unconscious guilt concerning his mother's funeral by arranging for his own (263)! Reading the character of Meursault as though he were a real person, but
not as an extension of Camus, Leites locates this unconscious anger and
guilt not only in the time frame of the narrative present but more espe-
cially in the protagonist's early life. After noting the hero's remark that he
had never set eyes on his father; that his mother did not speak to him for
years; that they didn't expect much from each other; and that the protag-
onist mentions his sense of the futility of life after being forced to give up
his studies, Leites makes this comment: "The child and the adolescent are
thus shown as reacting with withdrawal of conscious affect in intraper-
sonal relations (that is, the relations between various components of the
self) and in interpersonal relations. He is thus reacting to the guilty rage
induced by the severe deprivations which were imposed by an absent
father, an indifferent mother, and a withholding wider environment"
(248). What is particularly interesting about the methodology of this
relatively early piece of psychoanalytic literary criticism, and what marks
its primary difference from McCarthy's sexually oriented interpretation, is
that it construes the novel almost entirely in terms of a person-oriented as
distinct from a drive-oriented theory of object relations, though a few
minor traces of the jargon of libido theory do persist.

There are three aspects of the novel that Leites' paper accounts for
particularly well. First, he makes it clear and plausible that Meursault's
attack on the Arab represents a displacement of unconscious rage originally
directed at his parents. Second, the attack represents an unconsciously
self-punitive act because it invites reprisal by society. Third, Leites' elabo-
ration of his analysis of Meursault's personality lays great emphasis on
affectlessness as a defense. Specifically, according to Leites, "Affectlessness
is here not only a defense against the various fantasied dangers of [emo-
tional] involvement but also an instrument of aggression against (and
contempt for) those persons who expect a fuller response from the hero"
(254). Leites points to Meursault's detachment, to the way he generalizes
his feelings (replying, "Yes, like everybody else" when asked if he loved
his mother), to the way he avoids moral judgments of himself and others,
and to the way Meursault's perception of emotion in others is blurred by
his lack of empathy.

If one were to cast about for clinical analogues of Meursault's person-
ality, two likely nominees would be the closely related types described as
the "as-if" personality by Deutsch (1942) and as the "false-self" personality
by Winnicott (1960).

Deutsch employs the label "as-if" to convey how the behavior of this
type "forces on the observer the inescapable impression that the individu-
al’s whole relationship to life has something about it which is lacking in genuineness and yet outwardly runs along as if it were complete" and "normal" (302). Although interpersonal relations appear on the surface to be normal, the analyst discerns that such individuals are "devoid of any trace of warmth" (303). Deutsch makes a distinction between "the coldness of repressed individuals" and the falsified relations of the borderline schizophrenic, whom she sees not as guarding against forbidden impulses but as avoiding, in her terms, "a real loss of object cathexis" (304). In this type of person, according to Deutsch, aggressive tendencies are usually masked by passivity and mild amiability (305); at the same time she notes that the as-if personality is fundamentally devoid of any superego formation—to the point of being capable of serious misdeeds. To rephrase this formulation, one might say that no parental introjects of a moral kind have been internalized to constitute a control system. Thus Meursault, unable to feel remorse for his crime, wishes he had a chance to explain to the prosecutor, "in a quite friendly, almost affectionate way, that I have never been able really to regret anything in all my life." As for etiology, in the principal illustrative case Deutsch discusses, the analysand was cared for in childhood almost entirely by a series of comparative "strangers" and experienced neither tenderness nor punishment directly from her parents. "Throughout her whole childhood there was no one person who loved her and who could have served as a significant love object for her" (306). Of all the factors mentioned by Deutsch, there is one in particular that seems to be crucial to the makeup of the as-if personality, which is the tendency to be responsive to the wishes of others in a superficial way. Deutsch speaks of "a completely passive attitude to the environment with a highly plastic readiness to pick up signals from the outer world and to mold oneself and one's behavior accordingly" (304). These people are "suggestible" and exhibit "a passive readiness to be influenced" (305).

Meursault gets on well with people on the surface of everyday life. He gets on with his fellow workers, with his boss, with his neighbors. Many of his acquaintances, like Céleste, regard him as a friend. To Raymond's way of thinking, he is a "pal." Though laconic, Meursault is a pleasant, unargumentative, agreeable person. Yet it is precisely Meursault's compliance that betrays his fellowship with the as-if, false-self personality types. This compliance takes both trivial and extreme forms. When the keeper offers to unscrew the lid of the coffin, Meursault tells him "not to trouble" in an inappropriately accommodating way. Though technically in mourning, he goes along with Marie's desire to see a Fernandel film. Emmanuel
suggests they run so as to catch a ride on the back of a truck, and Meursault obliges. Raymond asks him to concoct a letter to his Arab mistress for him (as a prelude to taking revenge), and Meursault goes along with this malicious plan. When Raymond asks “if I’d like us to be pals,” Meursault replies that he has “no objection.” Later, after he has written the letter, Raymond says, “So now we’re pals, ain’t we?” and Meursault tells us, “I didn’t care one way or the other, but as he seemed so set on it, I nodded and said, ‘Yes.'” Subsequently Meursault agrees to lie to the police on Raymond’s behalf by saying that he knew the girl had been unfaithful to Raymond. A more extreme instance of compliance occurs when Meursault’s boss asks him to take a new post in Paris: “I told him I was quite prepared to go; but really I didn’t care much one way or the other,” though we learn later that Meursault had lived in Paris and did not like it there. Hot, bored, and tired of being subjected to the examining magistrate’s presumptions, Meursault tells us: “As I usually do when I want to get rid of someone whose conversation bores me, I pretended to agree.” After the trial, when one of the lawyers says about Meursault’s lawyer’s performance, “Fine, wasn’t it?” we are told, “I agreed, but insincerely.” The instance of compliance most likely to arrest the reader’s attention occurs when Marie asks Meursault if he will marry her. “I said I didn’t mind; if she was keen on it, we’d get married.” The peculiarity of his compliance gets underscored when Marie asks whether he would have responded in a similar way if another girl he liked had asked him to marry her. He assures her he would have.

Winnicott locates the origin of the inappropriate compliance of the False Self in the dynamics of early object relations. In essence, Winnicott characterizes the “good-enough” mother as responding (often enough) to spontaneous gestures, gestures Winnicott sees as deriving from the infant’s illusion of omnipotence, in a way that gives birth to increments of a psychological True Self. In contrast, “the mother who is not good enough is not able to implement the infant’s omnipotence, and so she repeatedly fails to meet the infant gesture; instead she substitutes her own gesture, which is to be given sense by the compliance of the infant. This compliance . . . is the earliest stage of the False Self” (1960, 145). Having been repeatedly “seduced” into a compliant mode of intersubjectivity, the false-self person becomes overly accepting of environmental cues and demands, and “builds up a false set of relationships” (146). It is interesting to note in regard to Winnicott’s claim that “only the True Self can be
creative” (148) that Meursault shows no signs of being a productive, creative person—unlike his creator, Camus.

There is no need to accept Winnicott’s highly dichotomized schema of the True and False Self as a precise model of human development in order to appreciate the relevance of his idea for understanding a figure like Meursault. Neither is there any need to assume that Meursault, as an individual, corresponds exactly to the as-if or false-self personality types. No individual ever conforms exactly to type, at least not in real life, and certainly not in the case of a complex figure like Meursault. Meursault is nothing if not authentic in certain ways. For instance, he is authentic in the sense that the reader always experiences him as consistently himself—consistently functioning according to a hypothetical identity—and he is so honest a person in some respects that by the honesty of his responses to questions he contributes to his own prospective execution. In fact, Camus once referred to Meursault—years after the novel’s publication—as “a man who refuses to lie” (Lottman 1979, 393).

Winnicott leads us into early object relations; this is where we must go if we are to understand the psychological correlates of Meursault’s ontological position in an absurd universe. Melanie Klein remarks that the schizoid patient “feels estranged and far away, and this feeling corresponds to the analyst’s impression that considerable parts of the patient’s personality and of his emotions are not available” (1970, 313; italics added). Such a remark helps us to see a correspondence in the real world to Meursault’s estrangement in Camus’s fictive one, the primary difference being that awareness of Meursault’s estrangement abides with the reader, not with Meursault himself. Meursault appears to possess little, if any, consciousness of being strange, or isolated, or radically different from others. After all, he loves his mother “just like everyone else.”

Regarded from the confines of attachment theory, Meursault’s relationships with other people appear to fall into a permutation of what is referred to as “avoidant behavior,” which in Meursault’s case does not mean the avoidance of superficial relationships with acquaintances, or even sexual relationships, but rather the avoidance of emotional closeness. According to Parkes, “Two types of behavior indicative of insecure attachment in infancy are avoidance behavior and clinging” (1982, 296). The former inclines the child to become abnormally self-reliant: “Having learned that he must not make bids for attention if he is going to be tolerated at all, the young child inhibits attachment behavior.” Certain consequences
follow: “As with all forms of avoidance, once the child has learned to avoid the dangerous or punishing situations that result if he exhibits attachment, he has no way of finding out whether or not the danger has passed. Hence his avoidant behavior will tend to persist” (296). Parkes says concerning the predictable consequences in adult life, “The compulsively self-reliant person becomes increasingly isolated from others, who naturally interpret his lack of overt affection as a sign of indifference” (p. 297; italics added). What Parkes does not mention here, but what seems relevant in terms of what the reader of the novel is told about Meursault’s mother, is that the child’s avoidant behavior may be modeled on the behavior of the parenting figures as distinct from simply being a general response to a range of inappropriate parenting. In other words, Meursault’s avoidant behavior serves the defensive purpose of avoiding the perceived danger of emotional closeness, and at the same time it replicates the familiar mode of intersubjectivity constituting an aberrant form of attachment behavior.

For those familiar with the details of Camus’s early life, there is ample reason to infer that the circumstances of Meursault’s infancy and childhood parallel those of Camus in crucial respects, although to say so is by no means to set up anything like a one-to-one correspondence between novelist and protagonist, which would be a naive reduction. The resemblance of the mothers of Meursault and Camus is close but not exact. McCarthy’s version, quoted earlier, is somewhat distorted by ellipsis. In his account of the fictionalized autobiographical sketch in L’Envers et l’Endroit, McCarthy says that Camus “depicts her as cold” (McCarthy’s paraphrase) and then he quotes these words: “... she never caressed her son because she wouldn’t know how to” (1988, 1). The account in Lottman’s biography—a more accurate and comprehensive one than McCarthy’s—brings out the text’s distinction between grandmother and mother: “... living with a grandmother without kindness and a good and kind mother who knew neither how to love nor to caress and so was indifferent ...” (Lottman, 1979, 20; italics added). In the fictionalized sketch, the son “pities his mother, is that to love her? She had never caressed him because she would not know how. So he stares at her for long minutes. Feeling a stranger, he becomes conscious of her unhappiness” (Lottman, 29; italics added). As is well known, Camus’s mother was half-deaf, illiterate, and generally exhausted by her work as a charwoman, labor that supported her two children and her own mother after the death of her husband in October 1914, when Albert Camus was less
than one year old. Camus's mother seldom spoke, presumably because of her deafness. She also deferred to her strong-willed mother, to whom she left the rearing of her sons and control of the household. The grandmother, a proud, bitter woman, was a harsh disciplinarian who literally cracked a whip in the household, striking the children with a *nerf de boeuf* (ligament of a bull's neck; Lottman, 21).

That McCarthy's account blurs the personality of the mother by collapsing mother and grandmother into one figure is not only not surprising but almost pardonable in view of the fact that this merging is exactly what seems to happen in the novel itself, that is, Meursault's mother represents a composite of Camus' conscious memory of his mother and grandmother and his unconscious internalization of the introjects of these figures. One of the many substantial differences between novelist and protagonist is that Camus' mother did not die until after he did. And according to the account in *L'Envers et l'Endroit*, it is at the funeral of the grandmother, not the mother, that the grandson experiences difficulty mourning: "Only on the day of the funeral, because of the general explosion of tears, did he cry, *but with the fear of not being sincere...*" (Lottman, 23; italics added).

Two widely recognized correspondences between Camus's life and Meursault's involve the theme of filicide and the story of the father's encounter with the spectacle of death by the guillotine. Briefly, the newspaper clipping about the story of the mother who "completely failed to recognize" her son and (with the help of his sister) murdered him out of greed becomes an obsession: "I must have read that story thousands of times." Camus himself not only clipped this story of real events out of the newspaper to use in *The Stranger*; he later based an entire play on it: *Le Malentendu*. Whatever else Melanie Klein might have found in this mixture of truth and "phantasy," she would at least have regarded the story as a projection of the rage and guilt of the greedy infant of the paranoid-schizoid position. In this hypothetical situation, the infant directs his rage at the bad-breast (withholding) mother, which precipitates a fantasied attack on her that is then projected onto the mother-figure so that it eventually takes the paranoid form of a fatal hostility directed from without at the guilty infant self. Thus Meursault's subsequent encounter with the story of a mother who fails to recognize her son presumably excites his unconscious memory of infantile death wishes directed at his mother.

The other well known correspondence lies in the fact that the story of the father Meursault says he "never set eyes on," the anecdote about
seeing a murderer executed, replicates exactly the only story about his father Camus remembers having been told in his childhood. The essential correspondence is at least twofold: the obvious narrative parallel itself, and, more profoundly, the inferable unconscious infantile rage about never having a father, that is, a psychological as distinct from a biological father. In addition, the crime-and-punishment narrative as embedded in the novel may be regarded as incorporating punishment for death wishes directed at the absent father if Meursault, metonymically linked in the novel with the case of the parricide to be tried after he is, can be said to identify with the guillotined murderer. The theme of displaced patricide occurs without any buffering in "The Renegade": "One really ought to kill one's father, but after all there's no danger that he'll hurl himself into missionary work since he's now long dead. . . . so there's nothing left but to kill the missionary" (Camus, 1958, 36). A related difference between protagonist and novelist, in this connection, is that Meursault repeatedly comes into conflict—generally mild conflict except in the case of the priest who wants Meursault to address him as "father"—with authority figures in part 2 of the novel, such as the judge and the examining magistrate, whereas in real life Camus enjoyed a number of close friendships with supportive older men like Jean Grenier and Pascal Pia. The difference between Meursault and Camus in this regard paradoxically confirms the implied presence of the theme of the need for paternal love.

Still another correspondence, also widely recognized, between Meursault and Camus lies in the situation of being condemned to death, a theme of great significance for Camus because of the recurrent threat of death from tuberculosis. That Meursault's sentence to be guillotined constitutes a transmutation of Camus's situation can scarcely be questioned.

It has been said that Hamlet was the man Shakespeare might have been if he had not written a play called Hamlet. Meursault might be said to be the man Camus might have been if he had not written The Stranger. However meaningful that comparison may be, a kind of dynamic difference, or tension, may be found to exist between novelist and protagonist within the spectrum of their similarities. In terms of attachment theory, Camus was a man—whatever his air of reserve—capable of making all kinds of friends, of being devoted to members of his family, of being committed to causes, and in general a man profoundly engaged by social and political issues. He was a man who could distill the concept of love to its very essence, which he does in an early sketch called "Les Voix du quartier pauvre" in a passage based on his mother's affair with a married
man: “Catherine’s lover brought her flowers, oranges, and liqueurs which he won at carnivals. It was an adulterous relationship, but his wife was a drunkard. He was not handsome, but he was good. ‘She cared about him who cared about her. Is love anything else?’” (in Lottman, 22).

Camus possessed a complexity of personality that makes Meursault appear almost one-dimensional by comparison. As McCarthy remarks, “Camus was a man of many parts: the swaggering Belcourt street-kid, the aristocratic dandy, Fouchet’s cold-blooded rival [for Simone Hie, Camus’s first wife], and De Freminville’s miserable friend” (1982, 44), not to mention the many roles he played later in life, such as being an editor of Combat. “I am linked to the world by everything I do, to men with all the gratitude I feel,” Camus writes in his Notebooks (1963, 17–18). Another passage in the Notebooks dramatizes Camus’s sense of his own variousness: “To know yourself you must act—and this does not mean that you can then say who you are. ‘The Cult of the Self’—don’t make me laugh. Which self and which personality? When I look at my life and at the secret color which it has, I feel as if tears were trembling in my heart. I am just as much the lips that I have kissed as the nights spent in the ‘House before the World,’ just as much the child brought up in poverty as this frenzied ambition and thirst for life which sometimes carry me away. Many people who know me sometimes don’t even recognize me” (1963, 63–64). In contrast to Camus’s polychromatic variousness, Meursault seems monochromatic.

Meursault’s weapon against the residual effect of the emotional poverty of his early life is indifference. To put back into play the passage quoted earlier, Camus lived with “a good and kind mother who knew neither how to love nor to caress and so was indifferent.” By a process of identification, indifference becomes the essential ingredient of the interactional style of the son. In the novel whose working title was L’Indifférént, Meursault is indifferent to many things: to people, to goals (he is some sort of a clerk, with no career ambitions), to causes, and even to survival. The forms of his indifference include isolation, emotionlessness, impassivity, uninvolvement, silence, terseness, and passive compliance, the latter functioning as a mode of disengagement where engagement might be threatening to a precarious autonomy (as distinguished from the active cooperation of a mature person for whom interpersonal cooperation constitutes no psychic threat). Speaking of Camus’s relationship with his mother, McCarthy says that the bond between them “was a kind of illness. . . . Camus talked of ‘my profound indifference which is like a
natural infirmity.’ The long hours spent with his mother [after he contracted tuberculosis] were a death where Camus ceased to be a separate person and was merged with her. Yet her mute suffering also sharpened his desire to write. Since she could not speak he would speak for her. His writing would be tough and concise because it would contain her silence” (1982, 21). Meursault’s profound indifference may also be regarded as one form of the denial of a massive rage toward what Leites refers to as “the severe deprivations which were imposed by an absent father, an indifferent mother, and a withholding wider environment” (1947, 248).

Whatever Leites intends to convey by the phrase “wider environment,” it needs to be taken in this case not only as inclusive of society in general but more particularly as embracing the natural environment, including the climate—especially that of Algeria. On the whole, Camus himself experienced this physical environment as benign. In one of his early poems he represents the Mediterranean Sea as a “Blond blue cradle where certainties balance” (in Lottman, 69). Again and again Camus relates to the physical environment much as he relates to people, as these passages from his notebooks show: “Seek contacts. All contacts. If I want to write about men, should I stop talking about the countryside? If the sky or light attract me, shall I forget the eyes or voices of those I love?” (1963, 15); “A day of sunshine and clouds. The cold spangled with yellow. . . . The bay trembling with light like a moist lip” (16). Such evidence tends to confirm what everyone intuitively knows: that the natural environment possesses object-relational significance. Harold Searles articulates this claim at length in his pioneering work, The Nonhuman Environment (1960), arguing specifically that “man is not an alien in his nonhuman environment but in kinship with it” (5), and that the nonhuman environment, “far from being of little or no account to human personality development, constitutes one of the most basically important ingredients of human psychological existence” (5–6).

Although Meursault also relates to the physical environment in a positive way at times, what is much more significant in the novel is the way he experiences it as painful, discouraging, and disorienting. On the morning of his mother’s funeral the sky is “a blaze of light.” As Meursault gazes at the countryside he remarks, “Evenings in these parts must be a sort of mournful solace. Now, in the full glare of the morning sun, with everything shimmering in the heat haze, there was something inhuman, dis-
couraging, about this landscape." On the morning of the day he kills the Arab, Meursault feels "under the weather" and "the glare of the morning sun hit me in the eyes like a clenched fist." In Kleinian terms, he frequently experiences the environment as a persecutory object—psychologically a function of his own projection even though the sun itself is real enough. For Meursault, as for the protagonist of Camus's story "The Renegade," the sun in particular exhibits the power to confuse, so that Meursault speaks the truth in object-relational terms when he tries to explain that he killed the Arab "because of the sun."

What needs to be considered further, because of the pivotal consequence of Meursault's physiological condition when he shoots the Arab, is the relationship of the persecutory environment to his state of mind and the state of his body—this in reference to his own explanation, mentioned earlier, that his physical condition at any given moment often influences his feelings. Stern asserts that "the sharing of affective states is the most pervasive and clinically germane feature of intersubjective relatedness" (1985, 138). If one assumes, hypothetically, that the form and degree of what Stern calls "affect attunement" experienced by Meursault in infancy and early childhood stunted not only his emotions but other aspects of his psychological development as well, and if one takes it for granted that the earliest stage of good-enough parenting consists largely in regulating the homeostasis of bodily needs and functions, then one may further suppose that Meursault's "body self," or roughly what Stern calls "the emergent self," carries a disproportionate burden with regard to his sense of well-being and his ability to control his own behavior. When his limited coherence of selfhood breaks down under conditions producing bodily discomfort, Meursault's repertory of hierarchically higher defensive measures, such as indifference, prove insufficient to save him from lapsing into the turbulence of a dangerous, regressive state of mind. "I knew it was a fool thing to do," he says. "I wouldn't get out of the sun by moving on a yard or so. . . ." Then a shaft of reflected light lances upward from the Arab's knife:

I felt as if a long, thin blade transfixed my forehead. . . . Beneath a veil of brine and tears my eyes were blinded; I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and, less distinctly, of the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs.

Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from
the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. (1942, 75)

And then he pulls the trigger.

The diseased environment at Oran in The Plague exhibits persecutory elements multiplied a millionfold, but in contrast to Meursault, figures like Rieux, the physician, and Rambert, the journalist, are capable of love. What the surface of The Plague presents as contingent cannot in fact be accidental. What cannot be psychologically accidental is the fact that the persecutory forces of the plague arise during the absence of beloved women, though Rieux's separation from his wife is counterbalanced, in part, by the presence of his mother. Separation, as distinct from loss, becomes a major leitmotif in the novel, even though the novel's preoccupations with death would lead one to expect the reverse. One instance of this emphasis on separation can be found in the phrasing of M. Othon, the magistrate who has lost his son, when he insists that by voluntarily returning to duty within the confines of an isolation camp he will "feel less separated" from his little boy. By comparison, Meursault's physical isolation from Marie in prison breeds no yearning for her as a person.

In a way influenced by his own existentialist convictions, Sartre claims that "the absurdity of the human condition [in The Stranger] is its sole theme" (1947, 111). It was, in any case, the first to be published of a group of works, all written more or less contemporaneously, on the theme of the absurd: Caligula, The Myth of Sisyphus, and Le Malentendu (Lotman, 428). The word "absurd" occurs infrequently in the verbal texture of The Stranger, at least in Stuart Gilbert's translation, and only in what looks like a casual manner, as in the passage where Meursault thinks, "...the mere thought of being an onlooker who comes to see the show, and can go home and vomit afterward, flooded my mind with a wild, absurd exultation." Though scarcely the sole theme in The Stranger, the theme of the absurd is certainly a major one. More to the point, this theme needs to be understood in terms of Meursault's conviction of the absence of meaning in life, an absence of meaning unwittingly predicated on the absence of meaning, for him, in interpersonal relations. He believes love has no meaning: "When she laughed I wanted her again. A moment later she asked me if I loved her. I said that sort of question had no meaning, really; but I supposed I didn't." Camus, in contrast, remarks in his Notebooks on "the misery and greatness of the world: it offers no truths, but only objects of love." He adds, "Absurdity is king, but love saves us from it" (93).
Meursault may be said to understand but deny this truth, or, alternatively, Camus may be said to understand it while allowing Meursault to deny it. “It’s common knowledge that life isn’t worth living, anyhow,” claims Meursault in much the same vein that Caligula remarks, “Really, this world of ours, the scheme of things as they call it, is quite intolerable” (1965, 9). Later on, in the flood of thought and emotion released in connection with his tirade at the priest in his cell, Meursault himself touches on the way the meaningfulness of life inheres in, or grows out of, personal relationships (technically, both intrapersonal and interpersonal ones): “None of his certainties [such as the existence of God] was worth one strand of a woman’s hair.” Even after Meursault’s profoundly nihilistic claim that “Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why,” he reveals that he unconsciously grasps the way personal relationships constitute the ground of all meaning (Marris 1982) by the way he discusses the meaning of life in the context of such relationships: “What difference could they make to me, the deaths of others, or a mother’s love, or his God; or the way a man decides to live, the fate he thinks he chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to ‘choose’ not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers.” If all alike are condemned to die, “what difference could it make if, after being charged with murder, he were executed because he didn’t weep at his mother’s funeral, since it all came to the same thing in the end?”

Two characters in the novel, Pérez, the mother’s aged boyfriend (“He and your mother had become almost inseparable.”) and old Salamano, Meursault’s neighbor, are foils showing what difference weeping does make. Pérez’s “eyes were streaming with tears. . . . But because of the wrinkles they couldn’t flow down. They spread out, crisscrossed, and formed a smooth gloss on the old, worn face.” And old Salamano weeps at the loss of his mangy cur, with whom he fought eight years of daily battle at the end of a leash, dragging and cursing and even beating him on their walks. When told he would have to pay a fee at the pound if the dog were found, Salamano responds, “Is it likely I’d give money for a mutt like that? No damned fear! They can kill him, for all I care.” But nevertheless he weeps. When Meursault suggests he get another dog, Salamano points out that “he’d become used to this one, and it wouldn’t be the same thing.” Readers of the novel cannot fail to notice the ironic contrast between the depth of Salamano’s attachment to his pet and the shallowness of Meursault’s emotions in the face of the loss of his mother.
Meursault passes up his last opportunity for a meaningful personal attachment, even if only a symbolic one, when he rejects the overtures of the priest in his cell. After Meursault refuses the solace of faith, the priest asks if he may kiss him. Meursault refuses. When the priest asks why Meursault never addresses him as “Father,” Meursault says, “I told him he wasn’t my father.” Shortly thereafter, provoked beyond endurance, Meursault breaks into an “ecstasy” of rage at the priest—the first state of true passion Meursault ever appears to have felt. This anger constitutes the only major exception to his sustained indifference and detachment, assuming that his impulse to kiss Céleste after his testimony (“I didn’t say anything . . . but for the first time in my life I wanted to kiss a man”) and his contacts with Marie constitute minor ones.

Some readers of The Stranger believe that Meursault experiences a fundamental change toward the end of the novel, an enlightenment. Brée writes, “Defiant and lucid, he will go to his death happy” (1959, 113), and McCarthy contends, “But the Meursault of the closing pages is innocent and he goes to the guillotine reconciled with the universe” (1982, 162). These readers miss, among other things, the irony of the closing lines. Meursault’s sense of estrangement, which mirrors an experience that no human being can have escaped totally, not only endures to the end of the novel but becomes accentuated by Camus’s savage, remorseless irony. Meursault feels as if his great rush of anger has washed him clean by emptying him of hope. Gazing up at the stars, he lays his heart open for the first time “to the benign indifference of the universe.” He says that “to feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly,” makes him realize that he has been “happy,” and that he is happy still. Camus’s austere conclusion follows: “For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.” Even if readers were to choose to regard this assertion, which Meursault alleges to be a new position, achieved for “the first time,” as a kind of rock-bottom foundation for existential becoming on his part, Meursault’s psychic position vis-à-vis the universe nevertheless remains a paranoid-schizoid one in that his conception of the essence of feeling “less lonely” in the world takes the form of being greeted with a crowd’s “howls of execration.”

As readers we can dissociate ourselves from our unconscious identification with Meursault at this terminal point where, as a scapegoat hero,
he is driven from the community of our collective guilt by those imagined howls of execration (before his actual sacrifice at the guillotine). Yet we sense he is laden with our collective guilt. After all, it is true, as Meursault remarks, that “all normal people . . . had more or less desired the death of those they loved, at some time or another,” even if only in infancy.