

# A Study Guide: *The Stranger* by Albert Camus

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## ***Learning Aims:***

Through studying this novel you will:

1. experience one of the most original novels of the Twentieth Century and understand why it had such an impact upon its audience;
2. explore the relationship between a novel and the author's philosophy.

## ***Pre-Reading:***

This novel requires some pretty specialized vocabulary. Research the highlighted words. You will need a very good dictionary (or two). Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What is the traditional meaning of **absurd**? What is the most absurd thing you have ever experienced? How is Camus' concept of the absurd different from the traditional meaning of the word? (Okay-- so that last question is difficult. Find a book on Camus and/or look on the Internet for further research.)
2. What is the traditional meaning of **existence**? What do you value? (and not value) about your own existence? What beliefs about existence does the philosophy called **existentialism** hold? (Okay-- another tough one, but I'm not expecting you to read a book on philosophy; just get the basic idea.)
3. What is the difference between a person or an action that is **immoral** and one that is **amoral**? Give an example of each.
4. What is the traditional meaning of **alienation**? Has there ever been a time when you have felt alienated from everyone (or nearly everyone) around you? Explain.

## ***How to Use this Study Guide:***

The questions are not designed to test you but help you to locate and understand information in the text. They do not normally have simple answers, nor is there always one answer. Consider a range of interpretations - preferably by discussing the questions with others. Disagreement is encouraged.

After each assigned reading, you will be arranged in groups of 3, 4, or 5. You will select as many questions from the Study Guide as there are members of the group. You may need to assign more than one question per person in order to answer all of the questions. Be sure to read the chapter synopsis.

Each individual is responsible for drafting out a written answer to one (or more) question(s), and each answer should be a substantial paragraph (6-10 sentences). Each group as a whole is the responsible for discussing, editing, and suggesting improvement to each answer, which is revised by the original writer and brought back to the group for final proofreading followed by revision.

Points for this activity will be based on the quality of *all* of the answers. If you are absent the day groups work on the study guide, you are responsible for answering all of the questions. Turned in the following class period.

*Read through and annotate the introduction on the following page.*

### Introduction:

We are now ready to look in detail at Camus' most detailed portrait of a man alienated from the values of the society in which he must live. Sprintzen describes the reader's first impressions of Meursault like this:

Is not this Meursault a stranger to our normal feelings and expectations? We sense a distance. Not that he seeks to scandalize or offend. Far from it. He is rather quiet unassuming, almost shy. He wants neither to offend nor to be hated. Expressing an air of naïveté, he often experiences an undercurrent of uneasiness as to what is expected of him. Occasionally he is moved to apologize without quite knowing what he is guilty of (23).

There is no satisfactory English rendering of the French title *L'Étranger*. The first English translation had the title *The Outsider*, but this was soon dropped in favor of the more literal *The Stranger*. However, as Akeroyd points out this lacks the force of the French that has more the sense of "The Foreigner" that much more accurately captures the protagonist's relationship to the French-Algerian society of which he is, perforce, a member, "He is a foreigner in a world which doesn't understand him and in which he frequently has experiences which make him feel a misfit" (30). Meursault has responded to the sense that he lives in a universe that he cannot understand by adopting a philosophy of indifference; where they are in active (but self-destructive) revolt against an absurd life, Meursault is not. He senses the meaninglessness of life but does not live in the consciousness of that truth. Faced with an existence he does not understand, and surrounded by people who live their lives as though they do understand it, he simply does not think about it. Thus, Meursault lives a life reduced to experiencing existence as a succession of events from which he aims only to extract the maximum sensual gratification. Luppé explains:

The central theme of the novel is the meaninglessness of Meursault's existence. His life has no purpose and no impulsion.; it proceeds blindly and automatically. It consists of movements, a sequence of half-thoughts and crude sensations ... Meursault is not an ordinary man, for he is without prejudices and without lies; nor is he a rebel for he has not discovered truly living values. He is the brute in man: the human creature stripped naked, in all his misery; Meursault is truth disclosed (43-4, 45 emphasis added).

Although he feels himself to be an alien in a society whose values, rituals and habits mean nothing to him, he is not in revolt against the absurd; he willingly accepts powerlessness. He enjoys the physical pleasures of a young and presumably quite attractive *pié-noir*, and feels no resentment at having to spend nine hours a day working. That is to say, Meursault lives a natural life and appears fated to die a natural death. How this man comes to consciousness, how he comes to confront the absurd, is the central drama of the novel.

## PART ONE

### Chapter 1

Meursault, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is not Camus and neither is he Camus' spokesman. He narrates his story just before his execution for murder at a point where he understands its full significance, but his aim in the narrative is (with very few exceptions) to convey accurately his feelings at the time things happened.

Meursault is an office worker not a philosopher; as he later tells his lawyer, he has "pretty much lost the habit of analyzing [himself]" (65). As much as he would like others to believe that he is, Meursault is not "the same as anyone" (67). He regards emotions as meaningless abstractions – fictions invented by people to make themselves feel better by giving their lives the appearance of meaning. Thus, his inability to feel emotion is not a result of a psychological illness.

Deeply aware that he has a different worldview from everyone else, Meursault spends most of his time trying to 'read' other people in order to know what is expected of him. However, he frequently misreads social situations causing him to feel embarrassed, inadequate and even guilty. He experiences life as a succession of unconnected sensual experiences, some pleasant and some unpleasant. As a result, he lives in the moment, almost completely unconcerned about either the past or the future.

1. Re-read paragraph one of the novel. It establishes Meursault as the narrator/protagonist. Comment on Meursault's reaction to the news of the death of his mother, and specifically on:

- a) his use of the informal, colloquial term "Maman" (very roughly 'mom' or 'mummy' rather than 'mother' which would be 'ma mère');
- b) the aspects of her death that do concern him;
- c) anything that you find lacking in his response;
- d) possible meanings (including those that the narrator may not intend) of his statement, "That doesn't mean anything" (3). To what exactly does "That" refer? (You should find three or four possible interpretations.);
- e) the writer's use of short sentences to reflect the narrator's state of mind.

2. Meursault concentrates throughout the chapter on practical details. These seem to interest him whereas social relationships appear to bore or even to antagonize him. Give examples of some of the practical details that capture his interest.

3. Meursault is often surprised or irritated by displays of emotion in others. Give examples. What do these have in common? How does this commonality explain his feelings? How does Meursault seek to block out emotion?

4. Comment on the description of Pérez falling behind the coffin and finally fainting at the cemetery. Does Camus intend this to be comic? Does it have a symbolic interpretation?

5. In this chapter, Meursault repeatedly feels guilty or embarrassed. Give examples. What do these have in common? How does this commonality help the reader to understand his feelings?

6. Comment on the following dialogue between the nurse and Meursault, "She said, 'If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill inside the church.' She was right. There was no way out" (17). This appears to be a comment on the heat of the day, but Meursault's conclusion suggests a more symbolic interpretation. Against what does Meursault feel there is "no way out"? (Note: He may or may not be conscious that his words carry this deeper meaning. What do you think?)

7. The chapter ends with Meursault listing a number of "images from that day that have stuck in my mind" (17-18). What do these have in common? What is the sole image that generates an emotional response in Meursault?

8. How do you react to Meursault's apparent lack of emotion about his mother's death? Is his seeming indifference a sign of honesty or lack of humanity or both?

## Chapter 2

Meursault finds refuge from thought in practical details and logistics, which explains both why he is happy in his work and why he is such an efficient and productive employee. He feels most comfortable when he does not have to take decisions. Meursault's experience of being alive is limited to physical gratification and a daily routine of activities. He likes routine and hates having free-time.

In Marie, he appears to have found a companion who also lives exclusively for the gratification of her senses. They seem ideally suited because Meursault is no more capable of romantic love than he is capable of filial love. He is a stranger to the neighborhood in which he lives, observing but taking no part in the various social groups.

1. As the chapter opens, Meursault suddenly thinks that he understands why his boss was annoyed that he asked for two days off work. Comment on his use of the following expressions:

- a) "why my boss had seemed annoyed" (19);
- b) "naturally, my boss thought" (19);
- c) "that still doesn't keep me from understanding my boss's point of view" (19).

Find further examples in this chapter of Meursault apparently coming to an understanding of the feelings of other people.

2. Comment on the way in which Meursault describes his attraction for Marie, "I'd had a thing for her at the time" (19). How did he react to the end of their relationship?

3. What leads Meursault to comment of Marie, "she seemed very surprised" (Note that word "seemed" again!) and, "She gave a little start" (20)? Comment on Meursault's statement that his mother died, "Yesterday" (20). How does he respond when he notes Marie's reaction?

4. How does Meursault's description of his interactions with Marie on the beach and in the cinema indicate the importance he places on the physical aspects of existence?

5. Do you find Meursault's behavior on the day after his mother's funeral inappropriate? Why (or why not)?

6. What seems to you significant about the way in which Meursault describes the people whom he observes from his balcony? How is Meursault different from the "distinguished" man with his wife and children, the waiter doing his job, and the young soccer players (23)?

7. Comment on the sentence, "Then I thought maybe I ought to have some dinner" (24). What does it show about Meursault?

8. Based on your reading of this chapter, why do you think that Meursault does not like Sundays?

## Chapter 3

Convinced that there are no transcendent values, Meursault lives in a valueless world. Faced with the cruel mathematics of human mortality, length of life is clearly of no importance: it doesn't matter when you die; it matters that you will die. Because of death, nothing in life can be of any lasting significance, and one choice is as good as another because there is no valid moral basis on which to evaluate them.

Strong-willed people live their lives in defiance of these two truths - or say rather, by ignoring them. Meursault, who lacks self-will, is vulnerable to such people because he is easily influenced. In terms of how he lives his life, this chapter probably shows the worst aspects of Meursault.

1. Meursault admits that he does not understand why his boss "seemed to be relieved" (25). What is it that he is failing to understand about his boss's reaction? What else about his boss does Meursault record without appearing to understand it? How does Meursault in a similar way fail to understand and respond appropriately to Céleste a little later in the chapter?

2. Meursault reports that his boss said that the wet towel is "really a minor detail" (25). Why is it not minor to Meursault?

3. What does the incident in which Meursault and Emmanuel jump up on the truck tell us about Meursault? Look particularly at the language that is used to describe the incident.
4. Both Céleste and Raymond take a moral position on Salamano beating his dog. What is it? How does Meursault react?
5. Contrast the way in which “the neighborhood” regards Raymond with Meursault’s attitude towards him. How do you explain the difference?
6. Why does Meursault agree to be Raymond’s “pal”?
7. Raymond describes several acts of violence that he has committed. How does Camus bring home to the reader the seriousness of these through Raymond’s own account? What is Meursault’s reaction to hearing about them?
8. Why does Meursault agree to assist in Raymond’s scheme to get revenge on his mistress? Comment on the use of adjectives in the following description, “he took out a sheet of paper, a yellow envelope, a small red pen box, and a square bottle with purple ink in it” (32 emphasis added).
9. At the end of the chapter, Meursault thinks, “[Raymond said] that it was one of those things that was bound to happen sooner or later. I thought so too” (33). What similarities, and what differences, do you find between the views of life and death held by Meursault and by Raymond?

### **Chapter 4**

Meursault’s relationship with Marie appears to combine the maximum of sensual gratification with the minimum of emotional commitment which makes him happy and leads Meursault to feel that he is living in harmony with the physical world. However, although he is currently unaware of it, Marie’s love for Meursault threatens to change completely the nature of their relationship. Similarly, becoming a “pal” to Raymond Sintès carries obligations the nature of which Meursault entirely fails to understand. Thus, Meursault’s relationships with Marie and Sintès threaten to destroy the independence from society which is the basis of his life as a stranger.

Salamano’s relationship with his dog is a habit (a routine) which makes it easier for the old man to avoid thinking about the reality of death.

1. What expression does Meursault use twice to describe his attraction to Marie? What does it tell you about him?
2. “A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn’t mean anything but that I didn’t think so” (35). Is Meursault’s reaction to Marie’s question honest or insensitive? Perhaps you feel it is both?
3. Contrast the reactions of Meursault and Marie to the incident involving Raymond, the woman, and the policeman. How is Meursault’s reaction to the beaten woman similar to his reaction to Marie’s question?
4. Comment on the unconscious irony of Meursault’s conclusion, “I found him very friendly with me and I thought it was a nice moment” (38).
5. When Meursault hears Mr. Salamano crying, he comments, “For some reason I thought of Maman” (39). Explain what it is that he is failing to understand.
6. What is significant about Meursault’s eating and sleeping in this chapter?

### **Chapter 5**

Meursault is losing the autonomy and isolation which his life had before the death of his mother: his involvement with Sintès drags him into a family feud which has racial overtones; his boss’s offer of a promotion threatens to disrupt Meursault’s easy-going, physical Algerian lifestyle; and Marie’s proposal that they get married threatens to take away his independence.

The robot-woman and Salamano each epitomize unsatisfactory and inauthentic responses to the absurdity of human mortality. Salamano exerts upon Meursault the pressures of social expectations to which he is expected to conform.

1. Why do you think that Meursault has no desire to live in Paris? What does the boss find unsatisfactory about Meursault's reaction to his offer? (Comment on Meursault's expression, "He looked upset" [41].)
2. "Then she pointed out that marriage was a serious thing. I said, 'No'" (42). Explain why Marie and Meursault have such a different view of marriage. Why does Marie decide that she wants to marry Meursault despite this difference of opinion?
3. What is significant about Meursault's reaction to the "strange little woman" at Céleste's (43)? [Note that this character will reappear later to watch Meursault's trial and appear to judge him.]
4. Comment on the following aspects of Meursault's dialogue with Salamano: a) the way in which Salamano tries to impose some meaning on Meursault's life and actions; b) the theme of the inevitability of decay and death; c) Meursault's reaction on learning that some people had been critical of his decision to put his mother in a home.
5. Without his narrator being aware of it, Camus has set up a conflict that will have a catastrophic impact on Meursault's life. Trace the way in which this has been developed in the novel.

### Chapter 6

Understanding this chapter is central to understanding the novel as a whole, and a satisfactory reading must explain the significance of the sun in a consistent way. Meursault alternates between feeling that the sun is an antagonist and feeling that it is a benevolent force. Both perceptions are fundamental errors. Meursault feels happy when he is free to enjoy the sensual pleasures of the day, but unhappy when placed under pressure by other characters to conform to their expectations, thus he projects his feelings onto his environment – specifically he anthropomorphizes the sun. This is a fundamental mistake.

Meursault comes to understand that man is entirely free to choose his actions. Given man's mortality, he realizes that one choice is the same as another. He goes back to the spring to find a refuge from the "strains" of both the social and the physical worlds. He perceives the sun as an antagonist because he unconsciously sees it as an embodiment of the pressures which are making his life intolerable (his obligations to Raymond and to Marie). Having escaped the pressures of society, he encounters on the beach the most fundamental of these pressures in his growing awareness of his own mortality in contrast to the immortality of the physical world.

Meursault shoots the Arab as an act of defiance, of self-destructive revolt. The shooting is Meursault's conscious rejection of happiness; it is a form of suicide and as such it is an evasion of the absurd.

1. Comment on the simile "the day, already bright with sun, hit me like a slap in the face" (47). How does it foreshadow the dramatic events that will happen at the beach?
2. In what ways is Meursault's comment on Raymond's white hairy arms, "I found it a little repulsive" typical of him (47-8)? (Compare it with his complaint about towels in the washroom at work and contrast it with his failure to make any judgment about Raymond's immorality.)
3. How does Camus make the encounter with the Arabs by the tobacconist's shop ominous?
4. How does Meursault's description of his first visit to the beach and of swimming with Marie emphasize the way in which he enjoys the natural environment?
5. How does Meursault's description of the natural environment (particularly the sun and the sand) differ when he gives an account of walking on the beach after lunch? (Show how Camus' use of language becomes more ornate, featuring such rhetorical devices as personification and metaphor, and contrasting strongly with the spare, simple descriptions that Meursault usually offers.)
6. What is typical about Meursault's role in the first violent encounter with the two Arabs and his reaction to the women when the men have returned to the house?
7. Meursault makes a number of judgments in this chapter. Comment on the validity of the following: a) "It was then that I realized that you could either shoot or not shoot" (56); b) "But the heat was so intense that it was just as bad standing still ... To stay or go, it amounted to the same thing ... I turned back

toward the beach” (57); c) “As far as I was concerned, the whole thing was over, and I’d gone there without even thinking about it” (58).

8. Why does Meursault go to the beach the third time?
9. Why does Meursault fire the first shot at the Arab?
10. Why does he then fire four times into the man’s inert body?
11. Is his reaction to what he has done typical or untypical of him?

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## PART TWO

The meaning of the book lies precisely in the parallelism of the two parts. Conclusion: society needs people who weep at their mother’s funeral; or else one is never condemned for the crime one thinks. Moreover, I see ten other possible conclusions. (Notebooks 1942-1951, March 1942, 19)

### *Chapter 1*

In a number of ways, Part Two is a very different kind of novel from Part One. Despite the detailed depiction of ordinary life in Part One, it becomes clear immediately that in Part Two Camus is not writing a realistic novel of Colonial Algeria. One aspect of this is that the focus of the investigation quickly shifts away from the murder of the Arab to Meursault’s reaction to the death of his mother. He will be tried for the way he lived his life in Part One.

Meursault is also a rather different character being much more assertive and unapologetic about the way he lives his life than at any point in Part One. Camus manipulates the reader to see Meursault as the victim of an arbitrary and invalid process, and to do this the Arab has to disappear. In two interviews, the values and beliefs of humanism and Catholicism are subjected to Meursault’s criticism and found to be wanting.

Meursault is forced by the questions of both his defense counsel and the magistrate to reflect upon the way in which he has led his life.

1. Give examples of the way in which Meursault focuses on the practical details of his life in prison rather than on its emotional elements. How does this tendency lead him to make a number of responses that are inappropriate to his situation?
2. How does Meursault answer the charge that he “had ‘shown insensitivity’ the day of Maman’s funeral” (64)?
3. Meursault frequently claims that he is “like everyone else ... the same as anyone” (66, 67). How do the people to whom he is saying this react? How do you react? Is he right?
4. What reasons does Meursault give for failing to respond to being questioned about the pause between the first and second shots that he fired at the Arab?
5. On being asked by the magistrate if he is sorry for murdering the Arab man, Meursault replies “that more than sorry I felt kind of annoyed. I got the impression he didn’t understand” (70). Explain what Meursault means.
6. Explain how Meursault’s atheism and his indifference to his mother’s death challenge the magistrate’s belief in a rational world controlled by God - a belief that gives his life meaning. In what way does the magistrate adapt to this perceived challenge so that he is soon able to treat Meursault in a cordial way.

### *Chapter 2*

This chapter is written from the perspective of Meursault at the end of the chapter not that of the Meursault at the end of the novel. As a character, Meursault appears more sympathetic because of his child-like inability to understand the situation he is in.

The interview with Marie is a failure ironically in a room full of people who are communicating successfully.

One important effect of prison is to wean Meursault off his addiction to sensual gratification, but becoming reconciled to the reality of prison is not the positive development which Meursault as narrator presents it as being. Meursault is, almost despite himself, becoming more self-aware, but until he faces the reality of his imminent death he is still evading the human situation.

1. What is the difference between Meursault's experience of prison before and after his one visit from Marie?
2. What are the physical aspects of confinement that weigh most heavily on Meursault's mind? Explain his comment, "I shouldn't exaggerate ... it was easier for me than for others" (76).
3. What humor does Camus get out of Meursault's delayed understanding of why he is in prison? (See 78)
4. Meursault comments that the story of the Czech murdered by his own mother and sister was "perfectly natural" (80). What does he mean by this?
5. Where has he used this word before in the novel?
6. What was it that the Nurse said at Maman's funeral? Why does Meursault see this statement as relevant to his prison experience? What is he beginning to realize about the events that led up to the murder and the murder itself?

### Chapter 3

Although the procedures of the trial are realistically presented (Camus spent some years as a court reporter), the way in which the focus is shifted to an examination of the way Meursault has lived his life in Part One is allegory not realism.

Camus' essential criticism of the trial is that the plausible interpretations which are imposed onto Meursault's conduct in Part One are palpably false.

By the end of this chapter, Meursault has understood that love, happiness and contentment can give life value; he has still not yet understood that man's freedom to choose how to live his life can actually be meaningful even if existence lacks transcendent values (e.g. God).

1. Before the trial starts, what evidence is there that Meursault totally underestimates the seriousness of his situation? Meursault's comments indicate that he feels himself to be a detached observer rather than a person on trial for his life. Which of his comments give you this impression?
2. Comment on the unconscious irony of Meursault's reaction to being asked his name, age, date of birth, etc., "I realized it was only natural, because it would be a very serious thing to try the wrong man" (87).
3. What rational explanation of Meursault's crime is offered by the prosecution and how does the testimony of the witnesses add support to it?
4. How does Meursault's perception of himself in relation to the trial change as the case proceeds, and it becomes increasingly clear that he will be found guilty? Comment particularly on his statements:
  - a) "I had this stupid urge to cry because I could feel how much all these people hated me" (90);
  - b) "I felt a stirring go through the room and for the first time I realized that I was guilty" (90);
  - c) "it was the first time in my life I ever wanted to kiss a man" (93).

[The following comment from Spark Notes is very helpful: "Meursault comes to understand that his failure to interpret or find meaning in his own life has left him vulnerable to others, who will impose such meaning for him. Until this point, Meursault has unthinkingly drifted from moment to moment, lacking the motivation or ability to examine his life as a narrative with a past, present, and future. Even during the early part of the trial he watches as if everything were happening to someone else. Only well into the trial does Meursault suddenly realize that the prosecutor has successfully manufactured an interpretation of Meursault's life, and that, in the jury's eyes, he likely appears guilty."]

5. What does Meursault's lawyer mean when he says of the trial, "everything is true and nothing is true!" (91).



6. Comment on Meursault's closing statement, "No, there was no way out, and no one can imagine what nights in prison are like" (81).

### Chapter 4

The legal system finds Meursault to be a "monster" (102), but this chapter subjects that system to withering satire. In their summations the prosecutor and the defender each construct a false identity for Meursault: he finds the prosecutor's argument "plausible" (99) and "right" (100), but the reader knows it to be untrue. Meursault himself feels entirely excluded from the trial, but given an opportunity to speak he can offer no explanation for the way he has lived his life. Meursault still does not grasp the real consequences of a guilty verdict.

Meursault develops a conscious and intense appreciation for the "lasting joys" of a life which he formerly took for granted and which he has now lost forever (104).

1. What does Meursault find interesting about hearing people talk about himself? Why does hearing them soon lead to a return of his feeling of disengagement from the court proceedings ("they seemed to be arguing the case as if it had nothing to do with me" [98])?
2. What does he find "plausible" and consistent in the prosecution's account of his actions?
3. How does the prosecution succeed in linking Meursault's case to the trial of a man for parricide (the killing of a father) that will follow it?
4. How does Meursault respond to his lawyer's use of first person narrative to present Meursault's motives to the jury?
5. At the start of the chapter, Meursault asks, "were the two speeches [those of the prosecution and the defense] so different after all?" (98). What do they have in common in relation to Meursault?
6. What is unusual, as compared with most defendants, about Meursault's reaction to his lawyer's explanation that there is very little chance of "overturning the verdict" (106)?
7. Show how, near the end of both Chapters 3 and 4, Meursault becomes aware of the life experiences that he has lost as a result of his actions. Comment on the irony of this realization.

### Chapter 5

Although they do not admit it, most people find the idea of a death in which "nothing remains" to be a "terrifying ordeal" causing "extreme despair ... more than a man can bear" (117). At the start of this chapter, Meursault also feels this terror of death - now that he has been sentenced to execution, he has no alternative but to face the ultimate reality. Meursault eventually sees that extending one's life-span does not change the fact of mortality since all men have "only a little time left" even if they are going to live for another twenty years, and we should not waste it on things which do not interest us (120).

Meursault realizes that he was right to believe that we are all free to live the life we choose, but that he has mistaken the nature of man's relationship with the world, and now feels that the pursuit of individual happiness gives life value. The world is not against us; it is indifferent. We are entirely free: we have the privilege of life. Understanding what he now understands, Meursault would not have shot the Arab.

1. At the start of this chapter, Meursault says, "All I care about right now is escaping the machinery of justice, seeing if there's any way out of the inevitable" (108). How has his attitude regressed since the end of the trial?
2. What does Meursault mean when he says that "there really was something ridiculously out of proportion between the verdict such certainty was based on and the imperturbable march of events from the moment the verdict was announced" (109)? (Note how differently Meursault speaks here as compared with his narrative style in Part One. He is here reflecting on causality.)
3. In what ways is hope a barrier that Meursault must overcome before he can come to terms with the reality of his own death?

4. By what difficult (but accurate) reasoning does Meursault persuade himself finally “to accept [the idea] of the rejection of my appeal” (114)?
5. How does the chaplain give meaning to his own life? How does Meursault react to the philosophy (or theology) that the chaplain urges him to accept?
6. Following his confrontation with the chaplain, Meursault experiences an epiphany, “I was sure about me, about everything ... sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting me ... I had been right, I was still right, I was always right” (120-1). He gets it! Understanding this epiphany is the key to understanding Camus’ message, his purpose in writing the book, and his absurdist philosophy. (Camus always rejected the label ‘existentialist,’ but critics have continued to apply it to his thinking.)
  - a) Meursault goes on to ask repeatedly the rhetorical question, “What did it matter ...?” (121) Explain why none of the things that he considers matters.
  - b) What does Meursault mean when he says, “Everyone was privileged. There were only privileged people” (121)? (Note: We are not just privileged because we have been born and so given a life. There is more to it than that.)
  - c) What does he mean when he refers to the chaplain as “this condemned man” (122)? Why is his use of this word ironic?
7. Look carefully at the final paragraph of the novel:
  - a) Now that Meursault has accepted that, “Nothing, nothing mattered” (121), how does he react to the physical beauties of the world he is about to leave?
  - b) How does he explain his mother’s taking a “fiancé” at the end of her life?
  - c) What does he mean when he says of his mother, “Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her” (122)?
  - d) What does he mean by the oxymoron “the gentle indifference of the world ... so like a brother, really” (122-3 emphasis added)?
  - e) Why does he want to die with “a large crowd of spectators ... [who will] greet me with cries of hate” (123)?
8. Spark Notes makes the comment that at the end of the novel Meursault comes to understand “the redemptive value of abandoning hope.” Comment on the meaning of this paradox.

### ***Afterword***

Camus himself came to feel that *The Stranger* placed too much emphasis on the individual and that a “different order of understanding and ethics was necessary, one that encompassed others rather than isolating the individual subject. Society, not the individual, was now the measure of meaning” (Zaretsky 58). Writing in 1955 to the critic Roland Barthes, Camus made a distinction between *The Stranger*, which he said represented “*révolte solitaire*,” and *The Plague* which he saw as a transition to the recognition of community (Lottman 543). Indeed, he would eventually write in his cahiers, “I see clearly that absurd thought ... ends in an impasse, and the problem is, Can one live in an impasse?” (quoted in Todd 167). This explains Camus’ own involvement as an engaged artist in the political and social questions of his day.

The final words belong to Albert Camus:

If we assume that nothing has any meaning, then we must conclude that the world is absurd. But does nothing have a meaning? I have never believed that we can remain at this point. Even as I was writing *The Myth of Sisyphus* I was thinking about the essay on revolt that I would write later on, in which I would attempt, after having described the different aspects of the feeling of the Absurd, to describe the different attitudes of man in revolt (“Encounter with Albert Camus” *Essays* 356).