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### On the Pursuit of Happiness

Camus creates a uniquely absurdist view through much of his book, *The Stranger* translated by Matthew Ward, and in doing so, creates a focus on how societal customs function. Through the book, many examples can be found of how Meursault's understanding of enjoyment comes in direct conflict with society's understanding of enjoyment, and eventually culminates in Meursault's ultimate demise. Through Meursault's development, the patterns of happiness as discovered by minor characters, and the final revelations by Meursault, Camus explains the many different methods of which the reader can obtain happiness, and makes it clear that any way is acceptable.

Meursault begins the novel with the preconceived notion that the only way to receive joy is by subjugating oneself to the constraints of society, but feels pressure in such ways. He is frequently worried about the opinions of others, such as his boss or even complete strangers, who merely share a room in order to mourn his dead mother. Even then, he has this "feeling that they were there to judge me," and gets caught up with the emotions of those around him. (10) Camus' rather disgusting portrayal of these older folk help validate the notion that the opinions of these people do not, and should not, matter towards Meursault, as seen through the abrupt sentence structure and harsh imagery that he uses. However, Meursault is not a flat character at any rate within this novel, and eventually transcends this stage of dependence on others to be more attracted and attuned to his own enjoyment, regardless of what others believed. Through the

shooting scene, it is clear that he is no longer in pursuit of what others believe to be happiness, as evidenced by the fact that he “knew that [he] had shattered the harmony of the day”, but still continues to pursue his own goals (59). This is a clear departure from his previous state of mind, where he was extremely focused on the reactions of others; now, he is looking for his own pleasure. Camus reinforces that this line of thinking is more correct, using rhetoric based in the description of the environment. By crafting a central focus on how the environment compelled Meursault to perform such a deed, Camus also creates a sense of justification within the reader for the murder, and thus for this selfish pursuit of happiness.

Many of the individual characters seem to reemphasize the worldview where everyone should accept the status quo, and attempt to make sense of their world from the typical human manner. As seen through Marie, Camus introduces conflicting ideas of the preconception of love in her marriage proposal, as even though Meursault blatantly tells her that he does not love her, she still takes his arm “with a smile and said she wanted to marry [Meursault].” (42) She is still eager to get married because society dictates that that would be the correct thing to do, thereby representing a slightly extreme case of bowing down to the pressures of society. Camus creates this slight feeling of disgust the reader has towards Marie’s actions by placing the entire event in Meursault’s very limited perspective, and by limiting the usage of direct words from Marie, instead relying on what Meursault states. Both of these techniques create an unfavorable position for those who would rather depend on society to provide pleasure, rather than discovering it themselves. However, it still leaves the option of accepting the fate of society open to the reader, which can choose to take it. Even though there is disapproval in the action, Camus does acknowledge that such acceptance can still bring happiness to some.

Salamano, on the other hand, does attempt to create his own reality with the daily walking of his precious dog, and seems to revel in his own actions. Although society criticizes his harsh and uncouth manners, he rejects its criticism for his own comfort, ignoring their pity and views and only responding when needed. Even with all of this pent up, negative emotion, Camus makes him almost seem admirable in the way that Meursault, strangely, seems to respect his actions, defending him partly from Celeste's remarks and attempting to understand his actions. After the loss of the dog, there is an even larger explosion of feelings, as revealed in the flowing explanation of the connections between himself and the dog. In this exposition, Camus breaks from the short, rapid style of writing and embraces a longer, gentler style, where the emotive and true love that Salamano is revealed to have emerges off of the page.

Through his time in the prison, Meursault begins to have revelations about his purpose and the meaning of his patterns, but finds comfort that even "if [he] had to live in the trunk of a dead tree ... little by little I would have gotten used to it" (77). In this action, Camus shows ability for anybody to adapt into whatever state that he/she is now in, therefore dispelling the thought that humans are the ones determining their life. They were merely subject to the power of their environment around them and any belief otherwise would be entirely foolish. Instead of an anthropomorphic view, where humanity could control everything and guarantee happiness to oneself, Camus presents this view that happiness can only be found in accepting the predetermine environment around them. While this message sounds oddly contradictory towards the previously discussed methods of creating one's own liberties, a key portion of this argument also rests on the human enjoying the repetition of life. Therefore, anything that seems to cave in towards the pressures of society are actually self-inflicted, and are perfectly just under Camus' mindset.

Prior to the events of World War II, Camus had noticed that many people tended to follow societal patterns and choose to not think for themselves. Instead of creating happiness, they were merely following society. However, Camus does not criticize the act of following others, but instead, argues that every person should be able to enjoy life in any way they wish, whether it be in enjoying the patterns and rituality of life, or in creating one's own existence. Through Meursault's development as a character, evolving to understand his personal definition of happiness, as well as the defining moments in Salamano's and Marie's lives, culminating in these conflicting views, Camus forces the reader to understand that any pursuit of happiness was acceptable. There was no need to define one method as correct, as all methods depended invariably on the person seeking for it.

Through the analysis of Meursault's action, the reader may begin to reflect on the unimportance of following the same pattern that society has set out for them. Given the horrific breaking from the old culture with the invasion of France as well as all the other horrendous things that happened in World War II, it is likely that many families were struggling to get through the ordeal. Before Camus was able to provide the reader with an alternative method of escape, absurdism, he must first persuade them that it is okay to escape. Through redefining reality into personal, not societal forces, Camus allows for the reader to interpret life however as they wish, and therefore be free to openly pursue a radical and profound lifestyle.

Word Count: 1213

Works Cited

Camus, Albert, and Matthew Ward. *The Stranger*. New York, NY: Vintage International, 1988. Print.