# Albert Camus's *The Stranger*

# Albert Camus's *The Stranger*: Critical Essays

Edited by

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This collection of essays is dedicated to professors emeriti Dick Richards and Judy Miles. Their courses in the history of philosophy, Existentialism, and various independent studies enabled me to germinate, cultivate, and harvest my love for Albert Camus's literature and philosophy.

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# PREFACE

These essays before you are written by some of the world's leading authorities on the works and philosophy of Albert Camus. As you can tell, they focus on Camus's first published novel, *The Stranger*, and make a significant contribution to Camus studies in the English-speaking world. I would like to take this opportunity to thank each of the contributors for their patience and willingness to see this book to fruition, knowing that their contributions would help make it a successful influence in academic circles.

In addition to the contributors, several people deserve to be singled-out for their support during this process: Carol Koulikourdi at CSP, who had faith in the book to agree to its publication; my four anonymous reviews editors at the *Journal of Camus Studies*, whose understanding in a project of this magnitude helped when I needed someone to lean on. Helen and Simon Lea provided inexplicable amounts of morale support at times when I felt wavering in the endeavor; and a heartfelt thanks goes to my student assistant, Samantha Fairfield. Without Samantha's formatting expertise, the project would have been lost. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, my parents-in-law, my wife Jennifer, and my children Katherine and Michael who cannot fathom the amount of love and respect I hold for them, especially when there are tears at the airport.

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# "J'AI COMPRIS QUE J'ÉTAIS COUPABLE" ("I UNDERSTOOD THAT I WAS GUILTY"): A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO SEXISM, RACISM, AND COLONIALISM IN ALBERT CAMUS'S *L'ÉTRANGER/THE STRANGER*

GEORGE HEFFERNAN

## Abstract

Meursault, the protagonist in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, denies that the established religion is true, affirms that the unexamined life is worth living, and asserts that life is absurd. Apparently unjustly condemned for murder, he seems to die a happy death after having lived a meaningless life, and, in doing so, to emerge as an existentialist hero worthy of respect. Yet Meursault also displays misogynistic attitudes toward women, perpetrates prejudicial acts against native people, and commits a callous crime against an indigenous person. Thus he appears to be guilty of sexism, racism, and colonialism. Hence there is a paradox here, since Meursault is an atheist, existentialist, and nihilist hero for some readers, but a sexist, racist, and colonialist villain for others. There is another problem here as well, since Camus with Meursault seems to suggest not only that atheism, existentialism, and nihilism are philosophically defensible, but also that sexism, racism, and colonialism are morally acceptable. I challenge this interpretation by proposing that there is a sustainable reading of *The Stranger* according to which, far from condoning Meursault's sexism, racism, and colonialism, Camus inspires the readers to rise to a level of understanding higher than that of Meursault, from which his bigotry can be critically regarded, judiciously examined, and forcefully rejected. Thus I suggest that there is a tenable explication of *The Stranger* according to which Camus is not endorsing but exposing Meursault's prejudices. Yet, in proposing that it is possible to understand Meursault better than he does himself and others, I am not speculating that understanding *The Stranger* depends on understanding Camus better than he did himself. I do concede,

however, that my reading represents an attempt to understand Meursault differently from how Camus did. I approach this task by focusing on the novel's defining hermeneutical moments of understanding and misunderstanding.

## Introduction: Precolonial and postcolonial understandings of Camus's *The Stranger*

Broadly speaking, one may distinguish three distinct phases in the *Wirkungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte* of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*.[1] The first, from around 1942 to around 1960, was dominated by Sartre's seminal explication of the text (1943) and its rigorous philosophical focus on classic existentialist themes.[2] The second, from around 1960 to around 2000, has been inspired by the emerging field of postcolonial studies, for example, by the work of Memmi (1957),[3] and driven by the postcolonial response to the Algerian War (1954–62) and other global developments on the part of the international intellectual community, as well as by the critical preoccupation with Camus's alleged colonialism on the part of postcolonial interpreters, for example, Nora (1961),[4] O'Brien (1970),[5] and Said (1993).[6] The third, from around 2000 to the present, seems to be motivated by a genuine interest in arriving at a balanced judgment on the

[1] The French text of *L'Étranger* may be found in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade edition of Camus's works, vol. I: *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles*, ed. Roger Quilliot (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1962), pp. 1127–1212. I refer to the text in parts (1 or 2), chapters (6 in 1 and 5 in 2), and paragraphs (from 1 to 27), which is a much more precise way of citing and quoting it than by mere pages. Readers should note that the usual English translations may contain a few paragraph shifts vis-à-vis the French original. A good English translation of *L'Étranger* is: *The Stranger*, tr. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage, 1989). It is worth noting that a new four-volume edition of the complete works of Camus has recently been published in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade: *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Raymond Gay-Crosier (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2006–2008).

[2] Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Explication de *L'Étranger*" (1943), in: *Situations I* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1947), pp. 92–112.

[3] Cf. Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé, précédé par portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957).

[4] Cf. Pierre Nora, *Les Français d'Algérie* (Paris: René Julliard, 1961).

[5] Cf. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus: Of Europe and Africa* (New York: Viking Press, 1970).

[6] Cf. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993), the chapter entitled "Camus and the French Imperial Experience".

literary legacy of Camus, and is exemplified in the works of Judt (1998)[7] and Walzer (2002).[8] This last phase, which has recently gained strong new impulses from the latest, most nuanced contribution to Camus studies, the crucial work of Carroll (2007),[9] would then be badly misunderstood if it were taken for merely a reactionary apologetic against the anti-colonialist stream of Camus research. For Carroll's effort, for example, is a sincere and serious attempt to resolve the conflicts generated by the previous phase.

In an earlier study, I suggested that there is a tenable explication of *The Stranger* according to which Camus is not defending but cross-examining Meursault's absurdist worldview.[10] The question of Camus's connection to existentialism is, of course, vexed.[11] I think that I have shown, however, that the philosophical strength of *The Stranger* is not that it exhorts the readers to embrace Meursault's celebration of the alleged absurdity of life, but rather that it challenges them to dig to a deeper level of reflection than that of which Meursault is capable. For hermeneutical investigations demonstrate that existentialism entails neither atheism nor nihilism. Bracketing author's intent, a hermeneutically cultivated reader gathers that

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[7] Cf. Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[8] Cf. Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), the chapter entitled "Albert Camus' Algerian War".

[9] Cf. David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[10] See my recent article "'Mais personne ne paraissait comprendre' ('But no one seemed to understand'): Atheism, Nihilism, and Hermeneutics in Albert Camus' *L'Étranger/The Stranger*", *Analecta Husserliana*, vol. 109 (2011), pp. 133–152. There is a certain inevitable amount of overlapping between some formulations in that article and others in this one. Yet all formulations have been revised and adapted to the present purposes. I therefore urge the readers to consult the earlier paper as well, which retains its unique position as my original hermeneutical investigation of Camus's *The Stranger*. In any case, the topical focus of the earlier paper was on atheism, nihilism, and existentialism in the novel, whereas the operative themes of the present paper are sexism, racism, and colonialism.

[11] Although Camus is commonly thought of as an existentialist, he is critical of Kierkegaard and other existentialists, arguing, for example, that their notion of a "leap of faith" misses the point of the ineluctability of the absurd. Cf. the section on "Philosophical Suicide" in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. The French text may be found in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade edition of Camus's works, vol. 2: *Essais*, ed. Roger Quilliot and Louis Faucon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1965), pp. 119–35. A good English translation of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* may be found in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, tr. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1955).

Camus is reducing Meursault's absurdist worldview to the absurd and inviting the readers to explore what might come next.

In the present paper, I propose once again to apply hermeneutics to Camus's *The Stranger*, this time to move beyond the binary postcolonial opposition between colonialist and anti-colonialist readings that threatens to obstruct a constructive interpretation of the novel. For, on the "Camus-as-colonialist" side, one has (1) Nora's psychological interpretation of the novel as a stark revelation of the repressed attitudes of the *pieds noirs* in general and of the *petits colons* in particular toward the indigenous people of Algeria, (2) O'Brien's employment of essentially the same evidence to indict Camus as a colonialist writer who supports the mythology of and rationale for colonialism, namely, the superiority of the colonizers over the colonized, and (3) Said's depiction of Camus's work as a resolute apology for French colonialism in Algeria. On the "Camus-as-anti-colonialist" side, one has (4) Judt's argument that Camus's political position did not constitute an apology for colonialism, (5) Walzer's judgment that Camus was a courageous dissenter who in an untimely fashion opposed both sides in the Algerian War, and (6) Carroll's plea for a restoration of the Algerian in Camus and thus for a rehabilitation of "Camus the Algerian". As simply posed as possible, the question is whether there is not an acceptable means between the one extreme of "Camus-as-colonialist" and the other extreme of "Camus-as-anti-colonialist".

For reasons that will gradually become evident, my own philosophical and postcolonial sympathies lie mainly and mostly on the side of those readers who understand Camus not as a colonialist but as an anti-colonialist author. A self-imposed restriction on my study is that, for reasons of brevity, I concentrate almost exclusively on *The Stranger*. I also do so because, as I have shown in my earlier study, the hermeneutical distinction between understanding and lack of understanding is the key to understanding the novel. Another limitation is that, although I focus on sexism, racism, and colonialism in the novel, I put colonialism and racism in the foreground and set sexism in the background. This should not pose an insuperable methodological obstacle, since these three themes are distinct but inseparable in the work. Finally, my explication of the text of *The Stranger* is perhaps best understood as a commentary on Camus's telling observation in his posthumously published autobiographical novel *The First Man*:[12] "What they did not like in him was the Algerian" ("Ce qu'ils n'aimaient pas en lui, c'était l'Algérien"). Bearing in mind that a character is never identical to the creator, that intent and effect can be two

[12] Cf. Camus, *Le premier homme* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994), p. 318. Cf. also *The First Man*, tr. David Hapgood (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 317.

different things, and that genuine understanding does not presuppose any retrieval of original intent, the question is: To what extent is it possible and plausible to read *The Stranger* as Camus's essay not in commending sexism, racism, and colonialism as "legitimate prejudices" (*préjugés légitimes*), but in condemning them as *illegitimate prejudices* (*préjugés illégitimes*), precisely by attributing them to the acutely unsympathetic figure of Meursault?

## Hermeneutics I: Understanding Meursault without any colonial consciousness

The plot of *The Stranger* is plain: The mother of Meursault, an office clerk from Algiers, has died, and he attends her wake and funeral in what seems to some observers to be a state of emotional insensitivity and intellectual indifference. The next day, Meursault goes to the beach and bumps into Marie, a former coworker, with whom he begins what is for him nothing more than a casual affair. The next week, Meursault helps Raymond, a neighbor who is rumored to be a pimp, by writing a letter to entice Raymond's allegedly unfaithful mistress, an Arab, into a situation in which Raymond will abuse her. A few days later, Raymond beats the woman, the police detain him, and Meursault testifies for him. A few days after that, Marie asks Meursault to marry her, but he responds with what she perceives as insensitivity and indifference. The next weekend, when Meursault, Marie, and Raymond go to the beach to visit Masson and his wife, friends of Raymond, the abused woman's brother and another Arab man follow them, and Meursault eventually kills her brother, "the Arab", by shooting him five times. Arrested, Meursault encounters an examining magistrate who urges him to acknowledge Christ's sacrifice and to beg God's forgiveness for his crime, as well as a defense lawyer who is more interested in his attitudes at his mother's funeral than in his actions at his crime. In prison, Meursault regrets the loss of his sexual freedom and reflects inchoately on crime and punishment. At the trial, the prosecutor argues, paradoxically but persuasively, that the defendant is guilty of premeditated murder, for burying his mother with crime in his heart, and even of killing his mother. The defense lawyer is hapless, the jury finds Meursault guilty, and the judge sentences him to death by guillotining. In his cell, Meursault is visited by the chaplain, but he ends up shouting at him that "nothing matters", "life is absurd", and "everyone is privileged and condemned", after which he calms down and opens up to what he refers to as "the gentle indifference of the world".[13]

[13] Cf. 2.5.26.

Meursault's odd way of life is both simple and complex. Before his crime, he leads a life of immediacy,[14] insensitivity,[15] and "indifference".[16] By his own admission, he has "a taciturn and withdrawn character"[17] and "a nature such that [his] physical needs often get in the way of [his] feelings".[18] This is especially evident at the funeral of his mother and at his killing of the Arab.[19] In fact, his insensitivity at his mother's death turns out to have fateful consequences following his callous killing of the Arab.[20] It is as if Camus designed Meursault as an anti-Socrates, for whom "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being":[21] "… my purpose … was to describe a man with no apparent awareness of his existence".[22] After his crime, Meursault displays a low level of interest,[23] but not a high level of reflection.[24] He attempts to be "reasonable",[25] concludes that "life is absurd",[26] and tries to be happy about it.[27] Since *The Stranger* is without doubt one of the most successful philosophical novels of the twentieth century, it may also be the case that seldom has such a poster-boy for the unexamined life inspired so many people to examine their own lives. For present purposes, Meursault's singular lack of consciousness, which encompasses both a neglect of reflection on himself and an absence of awareness of others, is best exemplified by the utter absence of any self-critical sense of sexism or racism or colonialism on his part.

In the following analyses, I approach *The Stranger* within a hermeneutical horizon, rendering the interpretation hermeneutical by

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[14] Cf. 1.2.1–11.
[15] Cf. 2.1.4, 2.4.2, 2.4.5 ("insensibilité").
[16] Meursault's mantra is: "cela ne signifiait rien". Cf. 1.1.1–2, 1.1.13, 1.1.17, 1.2.2, 1.2.11, 1.4.3, 1.4.5, 1.5.3–4, 1.6.20, 2.3.3, 2.5.10, 2.5.23, 2.5.25–26.
[17] Meursault is "un caractère taciturne et renfermé". Cf. 1.1.4, 1.4.3, 1.5.4, 2.1.4, 2.1.8, 2.3.14, 2.3.16–17.
[18] Cf. 2.1.4: "… j'avais une nature telle que mes besoins physiques dérangeaient souvent mes sentiments."
[19] Cf. 1.1.26, 1.6.25.
[20] Cf. 2.1.4–5, 2.3.11, 2.3.14–17, 2.3.20, 2.4.2, 2.4.5, 2.4.7, 2.5.25.
[21] Cf. Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 38a.
[22] Cf. Camus, *Essais*, p. 1426 ("Interview", *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, Nov. 15, 1945): "… mon propos … était de décrire un homme sans conscience apparente." For an English translation of the remark cf. Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody and tr. Ellen Kennedy (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969), p. 348.
[23] Cf. 2.1.1–13, 2.3.2, 2.3.4, 2.4.1, 2.5.1, 2.5.3, 2.5.6, 2.5.10, 2.5.13–14.
[24] Cf. 2.2.17. Cf. also 1.2.5.
[25] Cf. 2.5.4, 2.5.8.
[26] Cf. 2.5.25.
[27] Cf. 2.5.7, 2.5.26.

focusing on understanding and misunderstanding.[28] My guiding intuition is that Meursault's defining character flaw and intellectual deficiency is a *hermeneutical* weakness.[29] For, if he had spent more time trying to understand others and less time crying about not being understood by them, not to mention his not trying to understand himself,[30] then he would not have fallen into the fateful failure of communication and into the vicious pattern of subalternation that are depicted by the novel. The point is that the topics of sexism, racism, and colonialism in *The Stranger* can only then be fully understood when they are apprehended within a hermeneutical horizon. From the hermeneutical perspective, namely, it becomes evident that from the fact that the protagonist is utterly bereft of any consciousness of sexism, racism, and colonialism, it does not follow that the author is too. Nor does it imply that the author endorses such subalternating attitudes on the part of the characters or of the readers. To the contrary, it is not only possible but also plausible that, bracketing the distinction between intent and effect, Camus has created with Meursault an unreflective character whose sexist, racist, and colonialist attitudes are held up to the reflective readers, as if in a mirror,[31] to show the prejudices that

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[28] This is a novel approach. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Explication de *L'Étranger*" (1943), in: *Situations I* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1947), pp. 92–112; Roland Barthes, "*L'Étranger*, roman solaire", *Bulletin du Club du Meilleur Livre*, vol. 12 (1954), pp. 6–7; Germaine Brée, *Camus* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961); René Girard, "Camus' Stranger Retried", *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, vol. 79 (1964), pp. 519–33; Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus: Of Europe and Africa* (New York: Viking Press, 1970); Brian Fitch, *The Narcissistic Text: A Reading of Camus's Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); Patrick McCarthy, *Albert Camus: "The Stranger"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988/2005); English Showalter, *"The Stranger": Humanity and the Absurd* (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1989); Harold Bloom, *Albert Camus's "The Stranger"* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2001); Robert Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts: Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Edward Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 147–64 (Peter Dunwoodie, "From *Noces* to *L'Étranger*"); David Sherman, *Camus* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[29] My interpretation was originally inspired by Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 1997), pp. 137–164 (on Camus's *The Stranger*).

[30] Cf. 1.5.3., 2.1.4.

[31] Cf. 1.2.5, 1.2.11, 2.2.17. The recurring references to a mirror are hermeneutically significant.

are neither morally respectable nor socially acceptable. In fact, it is virtually inconceivable that an author could have created this character and attributed to him these reprehensible attitudes without being acutely aware of what he was doing and why. But it is not necessary to get into original intent, since ultimate effect is more telling.

## An Explication of the text: Understanding and misunderstanding in *The Stranger*

In one basic sense, at least, hermeneutics is not the art of interpretation that supplies a canon of rules which, applied correctly, result in the mechanical extraction of truth from texts; rather, it is a systematic philosophical reflection on what happens when understanding and misunderstanding take place.[32] Hence the methodical focus on understanding and misunderstanding in *The Stranger* is justified by the fact that the novel is replete with hermeneutically relevant references to "understanding" and "misunderstanding". Thus I seek to explicate the text in such a way as to clarify its defining hermeneutical moments of understanding and misunderstanding, in order to establish the relevance of these aspects to the topics of colonialism, racism, and sexism.[33]

Here is what Meursault does and does not understand *before* he commits his crime:

In his own peculiar manner, Meursault tries to *understand* his mother's death. At the old people's home at Marengo, the caretaker, a French man, says that he *understands* that Meursault does not want to see his dead mother, but the caretaker does not seem to *understand* Meursault.[34] Nor does Meursault seem to *understand* the nurse,[35] an Arab woman whose face is deformed by an abscess.[36] The director also asks Meursault to *understand* the funeral arrangements, especially the participation of his mother's dear old friend, Thomas Pérez.[37] Again Meursault does not seem

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[32] Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr {Siebeck], 1960), esp. the Preface to the Second Edition (1965).

[33] In this section the parts and paragraphs of the synopsis correspond to the parts and chapters of the novel. The first part contains six chapters and the second part contains five chapters.

[34] Cf. 1.1.9: "Je comprends."

[35] Cf. 1.1.8: "… il y avait une infirmière arabe …."

[36] Cf. 1.1.9: "… je ne comprenais pas …."

[37] Cf. 1.1.21: "Vous comprenez …."

to *understand*, at least not fully.[38] Despite the general lack of *understanding*, Meursault thinks that he is able to *understand* his mother, especially against the sad landscape of the surrounding countryside.[39]

Returning to work, Meursault *understands* why his boss seemed annoyed when he requested two days off for his mother's funeral.[40] Meursault thinks that he should have gotten two days off, but he *understands* why his boss thinks otherwise.[41] On the day after his mother's funeral, Meursault and Marie enjoy an intimate encounter, but they do not seem to *understand* each other.[42] At the same time, Meursault can *understand* why people in his neighborhood say that a certain man is "distinguished".[43]

On a chance encounter, Meursault agrees to help his French neighbor, Raymond, who purports to be a warehouse guard but is rumored to be a pimp, punish his allegedly unfaithful Arab mistress by physically abusing her "juste au moment de finir".[44] Raymond begs Meursault to *understand* him,[45] Raymond gets Meursault to *understand* him,[46] and Meursault shows Raymond that he *understands* him.[47] Meursault writes a letter to the woman for Raymond, and Raymond expresses *understanding* for Meursault at the death of his mother.[48] Raymond assures Meursault that "men always *understand* one another", though Meursault seems to have his doubts.[49]

As the plan works, Meursault ignores the screams of the terrified Arab woman, whom Raymond is beating mercilessly, but registers the tears of his confused and incoherent French neighbor, Salamano, whose dog has

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[38] Cf. 1.1.23: "Je n'ai pas entendu … j'ai compris seulement …."
[39] Cf. 1.1.24: "… je comprenais maman."
[40] Cf. 1.2.1: "… j'ai compris pourquoi …."
[41] Cf. 1.2.1: "Bien entendu, cela ne m'empêche pas de comprendre tout de même mon patron."
[42] Cf. 1.2.2–1.2.4.
[43] Cf. 1.2.6: "… j'ai compris pourquoi dans le quartier on disait de lui qu'il était distingué."
[44] Cf. 1.3.11.
[45] Cf. 1.3.7: "Vous comprenez … c'est pas que je suis méchant, mais je suis vif."
[46] Cf. 1.3.9: "… vous comprenez …."
[47] Cf. 1.3.11: "… je comprenais qu'il veuille la punir …."
[48] Cf. 1.3.12: "D'abord, je n'ai pas compris. Il m'a expliqué alors qu'il avait appris la mort de maman …."
[49] Cf. 1.3.13: "… entre hommes on se comprenait toujours …."

gone missing.[50] He understands Salamano's loss of his pet in terms of the death of his own mother.[51]

Although his boss offers to further his career by sending him to Paris, Meursault, who is convinced that people never change their lives, cannot *understand* why he should try to change his own life.[52] When Marie asks Meursault whether he wants to marry her, he answers that he does not think that he loves her, but that he will marry her if she wants.[53] He then tells her of his boss's proposition and she says that she would love to see Paris, but he informs her that he once lived there and cannot *understand* why anyone would want to live in such a dirty place with countless pigeons, dark courtyards, and pale people.[54] Later, while walking through town, Meursault asks Marie whether she has noticed the beautiful women, and she says that she *understands* him.[55]

As Meursault, Marie, and Raymond take a trip to the beach house of a pair of Raymond's friends, they are observed by some Arab men, including the brother of the woman whom Raymond has beaten.[56] Marie does not *understand* what is happening.[57] Out of sight, the Arabs follow them, and at the beach Raymond is cut in a fight with the woman's brother and goes to a doctor.[58] At the house, Meursault is supposed to explain to the women what has happened, but he, who does not mind explaining movies to a fellow office worker who does not *understand* them,[59] does not want to explain the incident to the women, so he does not.[60] When Meursault returns to the beach alone and kills the Arab, there is then no mention of *understanding* or lack thereof.[61]

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[50] Cf. 1.4.3–1.4.8.
[51] Cf. 1.4.8: "… j'ai compris qu'il pleurait. Je ne sais pas pourquoi j'ai pensé à maman."
[52] Cf. 1.5.3: "… quand j'ai dû abandonner mes études, j'ai très vite compris que tout cela était sans importance réelle."
[53] Cf. 1.5.4.
[54] Cf. 1.5.4.
[55] Cf. 1.5.5: "Elle m'a dit que oui et qu'elle me comprenait."
[56] Cf. 1.6.3.
[57] Cf. 1.6.3: "Marie ne comprenait pas très bien et nous a demandé ce qu'il y avait."
[58] Cf. 1.6.4, 1.6.12–1.6.15.
[59] Cf. 1.4.1: "Je suis allé au cinéma … avec Emmanuel, qui ne comprend pas toujours ce qui se passe sur l'écran. Il faut alors lui donner des explications."
[60] Cf. 1.6.15: "… pour expliquer aux femmes ce qui était arrivé …. Moi, cela m'ennuyait de leur expliquer."
[61] Cf. 1.6.20–1.6.25.

Here is what Meursault does and does not understand *after* he commits his crime:

Meursault's lawyer attempts to get him to help him *understand* why he apparently showed insensitivity at his mother's funeral.[62] After he cannot explain himself to his lawyer, Meursault concludes that his lawyer has failed to *understand* him.[63] When the examining magistrate tells Meursault that he too wants him to help him *understand* him, Meursault cannot *understand* him and does not respond.[64] Yet the magistrate insists that Meursault help him *understand* his crime.[65] Still Meursault cannot *understand* why the magistrate cannot *understand* why he hesitated between firing the first shot and the other four.[66] Meursault feels that the magistrate does not *understand* him.[67]

In prison, the Arab prisoners and their visitors have an easier time *understanding* one another than the European prisoners and their visitors.[68] Meursault, who is tormented by his desire for a woman, gradually *understands* that a major part of the punishment for a serious crime is the loss of sexual freedom.[69] He also *understands* why he cannot smoke in prison.[70] Yet Meursault does not *understand* "prison time".[71] Thus he cannot then *understand* it when the guard tells him that he has been incarcerated for five months.[72]

In court, Meursault *understands* that he is on trial by a jury of the anonymous,[73] but he has a hard time *understanding* that he is the focus of all the attention.[74] He does not, of course, *understand* everything that is

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[62] Cf. 2.1.4: "Vous comprenez … cela me gêne un peu de vous demander cela. Mais c'est très important."
[63] Cf. 2.1.6: "Il ne me comprenait pas et il m'en voulait un peu."
[64] Cf. 2.1.8: "Je n'ai pas bien compris ce qu'il entendait par là et je n'ai rien répondu."
[65] Cf. 2.1.8: "Je suis sûr que vous allez m'aider à les comprendre."
[66] Cf. 2.1.10: "J'ai à peu près compris [que] … il ne le comprenait pas."
[67] Cf. 2.1.12: "J'ai eu l'impression qu'il ne me comprenait pas."
[68] Cf. 2.2.3: "Ceux-là ne criaient pas. Malgré le tumulte, ils parvenaient à s'entendre en parlant très bas."
[69] Cf. 2.2.11: "Oui, vous comprenez les choses, vous."
[70] Cf. 2.2.12: "Je ne comprenais pas pourquoi on me privait de cela qui ne faisait de mal à personne. Plus tard, j'ai compris que cela faisait partie aussi de la punition."
[71] Cf. 2.2.16: "Je n'avais pas compris à quel point les jours pouvaient être à la fois longs et courts."
[72] Cf. 2.2.17: "… je l'ai cru, mais je ne l'ai pas compris."
[73] Cf. 2.3.3: "Tous me regardaient: j'ai compris que c'étaient les jurés."
[74] Cf. 2.3.4: "Il m'a fallu un effort pour comprendre que j'étais la cause de toute cette agitation."

happening: the drawing of lots for the jury; the questions of the presiding judge to his lawyer, the prosecutor, and the jury; the reading of the indictment; and some more questions to his lawyer.[75] He does then *understand*, however, when the judge begins to talk about his mother again, and it irritates him.[76] The director of the home also does not *understand* the judge's question as to whether he can identify Meursault as the defendant.[77] After the director and the caretaker of the home have testified, Meursault *understands* for the first time that he is guilty.[78] Echoing the appeal to *understanding* of Pérez,[79] Salamano pleads with the court to *understand* Meursault.[80] Yet no one seems to *understand*.[81] When the prosecutor accuses him of burying his mother with a criminal heart, Meursault then finally *understands* the mortal danger in which he finds himself.[82]

Now Meursault has difficulty *understanding* the prosecutor's description of his crime as premeditated,[83] as well as his characterization of Marie as his "mistress".[84] Hearing himself judged "intelligent", Meursault cannot *understand* how an innocent man's virtue can become a guilty man's vice.[85] He also cannot *understand* why the prosecutor so relentlessly attacks him for not expressing remorse for his offense, because he not only did not feel much remorse for what he had done but he had also never been able truly to feel remorse for anything that he had ever done.[86] Pronounced guilty and sentenced to death by public guillotining "in the name of the French people", Meursault cannot *understand* how all this has "happened" to him.[87]

Imagining clemency but anticipating severity, Meursault *understands* why his father went to watch the execution of a murderer.[88] He also

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[75] Cf. 2.3.7: "… je n'ai pas très bien compris tout ce qui s'est passé ensuite …."
[76] Cf. 2.3.11: "J'ai compris qu'il allait encore parler de maman et j'ai senti en même temps combien cela m'ennuyait."
[77] Cf. 2.3.14: "Comme le directeur ne comprenait pas la question …."
[78] Cf. 2.3.15: "J'ai senti alors quelque chose qui soulevait toute la salle et, pour la première fois, j'ai compris que j'étais coupable."
[79] Cf. 2.3.16: "Vous comprenez …."
[80] Cf. 2.3.18: "Il faut comprendre … il faut comprendre."
[81] Cf. 2.3.18: "Mais personne ne paraissait comprendre."
[82] Cf. 2.3.20: "… j'ai compris que les choses n'allaient pas bien pour moi."
[83] Cf. 2.4.2: "… si j'ai bien compris …."
[84] Cf. 2.4.2: "J'ai mis du temps à le comprendre, à ce moment, parce qu'il disait …."
[85] Cf. 2.4.4: "Mais je ne comprenais pas bien comment …."
[86] Cf. 2.4.4: "… sans qu'en réalité je comprenne bien pourquoi."
[87] Cf. 2.4.11.
[88] Cf. 2.5.3: "Maintenant, je comprenais, c'était si naturel."

*understands* that Marie will then forget him when he is dead.[89] After having tried to explain to the chaplain that he is not desperate,[90] and without really *understanding* what the man has been saying,[91] Meursault *understands* that the chaplain is genuinely upset,[92] so he listens more closely to the man's pleas for him to seek consolation in God.[93] Yet Meursault still cannot *understand* why the chaplain cannot *understand* that life is not rational but absurd.[94] Finally, consoling himself, Meursault feels as if he *understands* why at the end of her life his mother had played at beginning again, and as if he too is willing to live it all again.[95]

Hermeneutically regarded, then, this novel of the absurd contains as much misunderstanding as understanding. Upon closer scrutiny, it also emerges that most of what happens circles around Meursault's sexist, racist, and colonialist acts and attitudes. Before his crime, Marie says that Meursault is "peculiar".[96] For his part, Meursault regards "the little robotic woman" in Céleste's restaurant as "peculiar".[97] After his crime, Meursault thinks that his lawyer is looking at him "in a peculiar fashion".[98] At the trial, Meursault has "the strange impression"[99] of being "a little like an intruder"[100] and "the odd impression" of being "watched by [himself]".[101] Adducing his peculiar behavior at his mother's funeral, the prosecutor portrays Meursault as "a stranger"[102] to society. All these things seem to Meursault to be "foreign to [his] case".[103] But Meursault does not appear to understand the law.[104] Even "the little robotic woman" who stared at him in

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[89] Cf. 2.5.10: "… comme je comprenais très bien que …."
[90] Cf. 2.5.14: "Je lui ai expliqué que je n'étais pas désespéré."
[91] Cf. 2.5.17: "Sans bien le suivre, j'ai entendu qu'il recommençait à m'interroger."
[92] Cf. 2.5.17: "J'ai compris qu'il était ému …."
[93] Cf. 2.5.17: "… et je l'ai mieux écouté."
[94] Cf. 2.5.25: "Comprenait-il, comprenait-il donc?" Cf. also ibid.: "Comprenait-il donc …"
[95] Cf. 2.5.26: "Il m'a semblé que je comprenais pourquoi à la fin d'une vie … elle avait joué à recommencer."
[96] Cf. 1.5.4: "… bizarre …".
[97] Cf. 1.5.6: "… bizarre …".
[98] Cf. 2.1.5: "… d'une façon bizarre …".
[99] Cf. 2.3.4: "… la bizarre impression …".
[100] Cf. 2.3.4: "… un peu comme un intrus …".
[101] Cf. 2.3.7: "… l'impression bizarre …".
[102] Cf. 2.3.15: "… un étranger …".
[103] Cf. 2.3.11: "… questions étrangères à mon affaire …".
[104] Cf. 2.1.1.

the restaurant is at the trial to stare at him again.[105] And the judge tells Meursault "in bizarre language"[106] that he will be guillotined. Now Meursault does not like questions that begin with "why".[107] Yet Camus's challenge to hermeneutically cultivated readers is to understand what Meursault cannot,[108] namely, why "the stranger" wrote the letter to the Arab woman and why he killed the Arab man in the first place.[109] After all, he would hardly have done either the one thing or the other if he had not harbored sexist, racist, and colonialist attitudes toward his victims, whom he did not know personally and therefore did not intend as individuals. Rather, he treated them as anonymous members of subaltern groups. In this hermeneutical sense, *The Stranger* constitutes an elegant and elaborate plea for an understanding of the misunderstandings in which illegitimate prejudices are rooted.

## Hermeneutics II: Understanding Meursault with a postcolonial consciousness

Within this hermeneutical horizon, it is time to return to the original question, namely, whether with respect to *The Stranger* there is not a mean between the two extremes, namely, "Camus-as-colonialist" and "Camus-as-anti-colonialist", outlined above. Again, according to the "Camus-as-colonialist" reading of *The Stranger*, Meursault is not an Algerian, a native of the country, but a Frenchman, one with no right to his place of birth. This reading is best exemplified by Said, for whom even Camus himself is not a native son but a foreign usurper whose claim on the country that he calls his own is philosophically, politically, and aesthetically illegitimate.[110] And again, according to the "Camus-as-anti-colonialist" reading of the novel, Meursault is not French but Arab, or, more exactly, he is at first French but then becomes Arab. This reading is best represented by Carroll, for whom Meursault becomes "a stranger" to the French and dies as the ultimate Other, that is, as an Arab and even as a Jew.[111] Yet, wherever

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[105] Cf. 2.3.8, 2.3.10, 2.3.13, 2.4.9.
[106] Cf. 2.4.11: "… dans une forme bizarre …".
[107] Cf. 1.1.9, 2.1.9–10, 2.3.11–12, 2.3.18.
[108] Meursault understands the insignificant things but not the significant ones. Thus he can explain to Emmanuel, the office dispatcher (1.3.2), what goes on in the movies (1.4.1), but not to the women what has happened on the beach (1.6.15).
[109] Cf. 1.6.22, 2.1.8, 2.4.6.
[110] Cf. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, esp. the chapter "Camus and the French Imperial Experience".
[111] Cf. Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian*, esp. the chapter "The Place of the Other".

there are two implausible extremes, it is advisable to seek a reasonable mean. Also, one of the best ways to weaken a strong case is to overstate it. Hence the question is whether it does not make more sense to understand Meursault as just that as which he appears to be, namely, a man who prefers to live in Algeria rather than in France, and who displays a depraved indifference toward the lives of Arabs as well as a lack of respect for the laws and institutions of the French. In this regard, it is worth noting the evident fact that Camus cleanly divides the novel into two parts, and that each one neatly determines the otherness of "the stranger" Meursault in a substantially different way.

The first part of the novel, on the one hand, emphasizes the differences between Meursault and the Arabs. For example, Meursault may be a *pied noir* and a *petit colon*, but he is not at home in the hot, buggy, and sunny landscape of Algeria,[112] and he is especially oppressed by the unbearable glare of the ubiquitous sun.[113] He is most comfortable among his own kind and class in his own neighborhood.[114] He is a racist, because at first he declines to write the letter that Raymond wants him to write to his allegedly unfaithful mistress, but, as soon as he discovers that the woman to whom he is supposed to write it is an Arab, he complies with Raymond's request without further ado.[115] A sexist man who believes that "men understand one another",[116] not only is Meursault complicit in luring the woman to Raymond's apartment, but he also ignores the loud screams of the terrified woman, whom Raymond is beating.[117] In an exception that proves the rule in this part, Meursault says that he does not like the police, the local symbols of French authority,[118] and he lies to them to cover for Raymond.[119] Meursault also has no desire to move to Paris, France, which he describes to Marie as "dark", "dirty", and populated by "pale" people.[120] An unreflective colonialist, Meursault stereotypically attributes "the dead stare" to "them", that is, to "the Arabs".[121] Feeling oppressed again by the

[112] Cf. 1.1.10, 1.1.19–20.
[113] Cf. 1.1.24–27.
[114] Cf. 1.2.1–11.
[115] Cf. 1.3.11–12.
[116] Cf. 1.3.13.
[117] Cf. 1.4.3–4.
[118] Cf. 1.4.4: "Elle [Marie] m'a demandé d'aller chercher un agent, mais je lui ai dit que je n'aimais pas les agents."
[119] Cf. 1.4.5, 1.6.3.
[120] Cf. 1.5.3–4.
[121] Cf. 1.6.3: "Ils nous regardaient en silence, mais à leur manière, ni plus ni moins que si nous étions des pierres ou des arbres morts." Cf. also 1.6.4: "Ils

unbearable glare of the ubiquitous sun,[122] Meursault kills "the Arab" on the beach, even though he himself was armed with a revolver, the other man had only a knife, and there was a safe distance between them.[123] Thus this part emphasizes *the strangeness* of "the stranger" to the Arabs by putting more distance between Meursault and them than between him and the French.

The second part of the novel, on the other hand, stresses the differences between Meursault and the French. For example, to the examining magistrate Meursault denies the existence of God and rejects the sacrifice of Christ, thus spurning the religion of French society and provoking the label "Monsieur Antichrist" for himself.[124] In prison, Meursault must come to terms with the fact that the population in his vicinity has changed from a majority of French to a majority of Arabs, and he seems to get along with them under the circumstances.[125] In court, Meursault recognizes that he is the center of attention, not because of the nature of his crime, but because of the curiosity of otherwise bored newspaper readers in Paris, for the French press is covering his trial in the slow season for news.[126] The prosecutor is less interested in Meursault's actions at the criminal death of his Arab victim than in his behavior at the natural death of his French mother,[127] and he argues that Meursault is not only "a stranger" but also "a monster, a man without morals".[128] Meursault insists that he did not intend to kill the Arab but that "the sun made him do it", which incurs the ridicule of the French court.[129] The prosecutor does not summon a single Arab witness to testify against Meursault, and thus, solely on the basis of French testimony, the presumably all-French jury finds him guilty of premeditated murder, after which the judge sentences him to be decapitated in a public place "in the name of the French people".[130] Meursault is sensitive to the fact that he has been condemned to death "by men who change their underwear", that is, by Frenchmen of a certain class.[131] Having eschewed the French religion and embraced an indifferent universe, Meursault's last

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étaient toujours à la même place et ils regardaient avec la même indifférence l'endroit que nous venions de quitter."

[122] Cf. 1.6.11, 1.6.13, 1.6.17–25.

[123] Cf. 1.6.25.

[124] Cf. 2.1.10–13.

[125] Cf. 2.2.1–17.

[126] Cf. 2.3.4.

[127] Cf. 2.3.12, 2.3.14–20.

[128] Cf. 2.3.15, 2.3.19, 2.4.5: "… un étranger … un monstre moral …".

[129] Cf. 2.3.12, 2.4.6.

[130] Cf. 2.4.11: "… au nom du peuple français …".

[131] Cf. 2.5.2: "… par des hommes qui changent de linge …".