

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Stranger by Albert Camus

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Albert Camus was born on November 7, 1913, in French colonial Algeria. In 1914, his father was killed in World War I, at the Battle of the Marne. Albert, his mother, and his brother shared a two-bedroom apartment with the family's maternal grandmother and a paralyzed uncle. Despite his family's extreme poverty, Camus attended the University of Algiers, supporting his education by working a series of odd jobs. However, one of several severe attacks of tuberculosis forced him to drop out of school. The poverty and illness Camus experienced as a youth greatly influenced his writing. After dropping out of the university, Camus eventually entered the world of political journalism. While working for an anti-colonialist newspaper, he wrote extensively about poverty in Algeria. From 1935 to 1938, Camus ran the Théâtre de l'Équipe, an organization that attempted to attract working-class audiences to performances of great dramatic works. During World War II, Camus went to Paris and became a leading writer for the anti-German resistance movement. He was also the editor of *Combat*, an important underground newspaper.

While in wartime Paris, Camus developed his philosophy of the absurd. A major component of this philosophy was Camus's assertion that life has no rational or redeeming meaning. The experience of World War II led many other intellectuals to similar conclusions. Faced with the horrors of Hitler's Nazi regime and the unprecedented slaughter of the War, many could no longer accept that human existence had any purpose or discernible meaning. Existence seemed simply, to use Camus's term, absurd. In 1942, the same year that *The Stranger* was published, Camus also published *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his famous philosophical essay on the absurd. These two works helped establish Camus's reputation as an important and brilliant literary figure.

Over the course of his career he produced numerous novels, plays, and essays that further developed his philosophy. Among his most notable novels are *The Plague*, published in 1947, and *The Fall*, published in 1956. Along with *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel* stands as his best-known philosophical essay. In recognition of his contribution to French and world literature, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. Tragically, he died in an automobile accident just three years later.

In the midst of the widespread intellectual and moral bewilderment that followed World War II, Camus's was a voice advocating the values of justice and human dignity. Though his career was cut short, he remains one of the most influential authors of the twentieth century, regarded both for the quality of his fiction and for the depth and insightfulness of his philosophy.

BOOK SUMMARY

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The Stranger, Camus's first novel, is both a brilliantly crafted story and an illustration of Camus's absurdist world view. Published in 1942, the novel tells the story of an emotionally detached, amoral young man named Meursault. He does not cry at his mother's funeral, does not believe in God, and kills a man he barely knows without any discernible motive. For his crime, Meursault is deemed a threat to society and sentenced to death. When he comes to accept the "gentle indifference of the world," he finds peace with himself and with the society that persecutes him. Camus's absurdist

philosophy implies that moral orders have no rational or natural basis. Yet Camus did not approach the world with moral indifference, and he believed that life's lack of a "higher" meaning should not necessarily lead one to despair. On the contrary, Camus was a persistent humanist. He is noted for his faith in man's dignity in the face of what he saw as a cold, indifferent universe.

The Stranger is often referred to as an "existential" novel, but this description is not necessarily accurate. The term "existentialism" is a broad and far-reaching classification that means many different things to many different people, and is often misapplied or overapplied. As it is most commonly used, existentialism refers to the idea that there is no "higher" meaning to the universe or to man's existence, and no rational order to the events of the world. According to this common definition of existentialism, human life is not invested with a redemptive or affirming purpose—there is nothing beyond man's physical existence. Some ideas in *The Stranger* clearly resemble this working definition of existentialism, but the broader philosophy of existentialism includes aspects far beyond this definition that are not present in *The Stranger*. Moreover, Camus himself rejected the application of the "existential" label to *The Stranger*. Although Camus's philosophical ideas resonate strongly within the text, it is important to keep in mind that *The Stranger* is a novel, not a philosophical essay. When reading the novel, character development, plot, and prose style demand just as much attention as the specifics of the absurd.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. How do we know the world of *The Stranger* is irrational? How do different characters react to this irrationality?
2. How do Meursault's and Marie's views of their relationship differ?
3. Compare Meursault to Raymond Sintes. How are the two neighbors different? How are they similar?
4. Trace the development of Meursault's philosophy. How does he come to open himself to "the gentle indifference of the world"? What spurs his revelation? How do earlier events in the novel prepare us to expect it?
5. We see characters in the book solely through Meursault's eyes, but Meursault typically tells us very little. Using the information that Meursault provides, analyze a character such as Marie and Raymond. What level of insight does Meursault provide into these characters' personalities?
6. Compare and contrast the relationship between Salamano and his dog with the relationship between Meursault and his mother. What are the similarities? Which is more loving?
7. Discuss the style of *The Stranger*. How does Meursault's language correspond to the subjects he describes? Does it evolve or change as the novel goes on? Does the stripped-down prose of the novel's first half limit its expressive power?

8. Is Meursault really a threat to his society? Does he deserve the death penalty? Is he more or less dangerous than a criminal who commits a crime with clear motive?
9. In his jail cell, Meursault finds an old newspaper article about a Czechoslovakian man who is murdered by his mother and sister. How does this article relate to Meursault's own trial for murder? How does this article expand the themes in *The Stranger*? How does it support Camus's philosophy of the absurd?
10. Analyze the passages describing Meursault's walk down the beach before he kills the Arab. How does Camus build tension in the passage? How is it different from the passages preceding it? Meursault says at his trial that he killed the Arab because of the sun. Is this explanation at all valid?

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