

# Deterioration, Dissonance, and Disillusionment

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Through Meursault's social alienation and the dissonance between his physical self and his emotions, Camus illustrates how in order to have a true understanding of life and cope with life's irrationality, one must separate themselves from society. When Meursault is thrown into prison, Camus uses parallelism and a detached tone to demonstrate how isolation affects Meursault's mental state. Through the motif of heat, Camus symbolizes the dissonance between Meursault's physical and emotional selves, thus illustrating the effects of isolating and suppressing one's emotions. Meursault's emotional and social isolation provides him with an objective perspective of reality, which strongly contrasts to the attempts of minor characters' at creating meaning. In conclusion, Camus portrays how in a world of irrationality, the only way to cope and understand life is to separate yourself, either emotionally or physically, from society in order to have a clear and unmanipulated perception of reality. Thus, separation provides both a true understanding of life, and freedom to live one's life as they choose.

In *The Stranger*, written by Albert Camus and translated by Matthew Ward, Camus explores the motifs of social and physical alienation, and through that, explores how isolation impacts one's perspective of life. Meursault's experience in the prison towards the end of the novel is one demonstration of Camus' portrayal of alienation in the novel. Interestingly, due to his alienation, Meursault more easily copes with the pointlessness and the randomness of the world around him, unlike the other minor characters, such as the magistrate, who try to perceive a false reality. Thus, through Meursault's social alienation and the dissonance between his physical self and his emotions, Camus illustrates how in order to have a true understanding of life and cope with life's irrationality, one must separate themselves from society.

When Meursault is thrown into prison, Camus uses parallelism and a detached tone to demonstrate how isolation affects Meursault's mental state. At first, "[Meursault] sort of [waits] for something to happen" (Camus 72). After killing the Arab, he receives little punishment, and almost gets treated kindly, as Meursault gets the impression of being "one of the family" (Camus 71). Meursault is waiting for a physical acknowledgement of the consequences of his actions. Meursault's need for physical acknowledgement is demonstrated when he goes on a liaison with Marie, and experiences physical verification from "Marie's heart beating softly" under his head (Camus 20). The lack of physical verification is emphasized by how Camus has Meursault paraphrase his own words instead of directly narrating what he said. Instead of "I killed an Arab," Meursault states "I said I'd killed an Arab", making it seem like he is separated from reality (Camus 72). This is demonstrated by Meursault's isolation from society; not only does Meursault not belong in any cultural groups, as "most of [the prisoners are] Arabs," he is physically isolated and "put in a cell by [himself]" (Camus 72). Meursault's isolation from any physical contact and disconnect from his own physicality draws him down into unconsciousness, as only after "many long" days in the prison does he become aware that "[the voice] that had been ringing in [his ears]" was his own (Camus 81). Thus, Camus illustrates how some level of human interaction is necessary for maintaining an attachment to reality, as demonstrated by Meursault's increasing detachment as he

spends more time alone in the prison. Furthermore, Meursault begins to settle into the routine of the prison. Camus describes this when Meursault is going to see Marie, that Meursault “[goes] down a long corridor, down some stairs and, finally, another corridor” (Camus 73). Camus’ use of parallelism—“down” and “corridor”—emphasizes the repetitiveness of prison. Meursault simply sees “the main problem [of prison as] killing time”, and that prison “[takes] away freedom” (Camus 78). When Meursault finds the story about the Czechoslovakian, he remarks that “[he] must have read [the] story a thousand times” (Camus 80). At this point, Camus is not emphasizing the fact that he read the story “a thousand times,” but that Meursault seems to be reading out of routine: the story just becomes another way for him to pass the time. Through Meursault’s attachment to routine, Camus emphasizes how in order to cope with the lack of emotional connections, Meursault relies on physical routine as a distraction.

Through the motif of heat, Camus symbolizes the dissonance between Meursault’s physical and emotional selves, thus illustrating the effects of isolating and suppressing one’s emotions. In prison, Meursault notes that his summers blended together, “[a]nd [knows] that as soon as the weather [turns] hot that something new [is] in store for him” (Camus 82). Heat is a pervasive symbol in the novel, and, in this instance, it functions as a symbol for Meursault’s lack of emotional understanding. Camus also uses this symbol leading up to the scene when Meursault shoots the Arab and the “heat [is] pressing down on [him]” (Camus 57). Camus uses heat to symbolize the disconnect between Meursault’s emotional and physical being. Meursault seems cold and objective even as “[he fires] four more times at the motionless body” of the Arab, which stands in stark contrast to the heat that he experiences (Camus 59). Thus, Camus illustrates the dissonance between Meursault’s emotional and physical self-understanding. Although he is aware of himself physically, Meursault seems to be emotionally absent from the scene. For example, when describing the moment he shoots the Arab, Meursault states, “The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt” (Camus 59). Again, Camus emphasizes Meursault’s focus on his physical environment rather than his motives or emotions, as he strangely focuses on the “smooth underside” of the gun

he's holding. This becomes especially apparent during the scene where Meursault shoots the Arab, as Meursault "[strains] every nerve in order to overcome the sun" (Camus 57). The heat from the sun represents how Meursault focuses on the physical being, rather than the emotional. With this, Camus foreshadows the emotional disconnect of Meursault's trial. Throughout the trial, Meursault notices "how hot it [is]" in the courtroom, all while the prosecutor exclaims that Meursault "[does not] have a soul nothing human" (Camus 101). Again, Meursault chooses to focus on the physical being instead of his emotions. Thus, Camus emphasizes that because Meursault does not want to face his emotions, he resorts to focusing on physical feelings. The sun and the heat that appear throughout the novel are symbolic of the emotion that Meursault is suppressing and hiding, even from himself.

Meursault's emotional and social isolation provides him with an objective perspective of reality, which strongly contrasts to the attempts of minor characters' at creating meaning. Thus, Camus demonstrates how although Meursault's emotional and social isolation are a detriment to his mental state, they interestingly provide Meursault with a clearer understanding of the futility of creating meaning out of life. As Meursault nears his execution, he comes to the realization that "there [is] no way [to escape death]" (Camus 81). Camus contrasts Meursault's realization with the perspectives of minor characters to emphasize the clarity of Meursault's perspective of reality. For example, the chaplain states, "sometimes we think we're sure in when in fact we're not" (Camus 116). Camus illustrates Meursault's certainty through the irony of the chaplain's own convictions. The irony of the chaplain's statement stems from the fact that he relies on religion to create meaning in things he does not understand. The chaplain remarks that "[e]very man [he] has known in [Meursault's] position has turned to Him," which makes Meursault's rejection of religion confusing (Camus 116). Camus emphasizes Meursault's clarity of perspective through Meursault's statement: "what did God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter when we're all elected by the same fate?" (Camus 121). Separated from society, Meursault is able to recognize the illusion of choice of fate. Meursault understands that the only fate for humans is

death, that “[he] had lived [his] life one way and [he] could just as well have lived it another [but] nothing [matters]” (Camus 121). Meursault’s isolation from society is illustrated by the fact that “at one time, way back, [he] had searched for a face in [the walls]... [but] [n]ow it was all over” (Camus 119). Thus, Camus emphasizes the fact that while Meursault’s isolation from society and objectiveness make him blind to his emotions, it gives him a clearer perspective.

In conclusion, Camus portrays how in a world of irrationality, the only way to cope and understand life is to separate yourself, either emotionally or physically, from society in order to have a clear and unmanipulated perception of reality. In the last few pages of the novel, Meursault mentions his mother, and how she “played at beginning again” (Camus 122). Instead of fighting against her mortality and trying to make sense of life, Meursault’s mother decides to live her life as she pleases, without trying to create a false reality for herself. In essence, she separates herself from society by refusing to live her last days on anyone else’s terms. Thus, not only does Camus illustrate that alienation and separation gives people a clearer view of life and reality, he illustrates that it can also create happiness in one’s life, as they realize that the only person who has any control over their own life is themselves. Thus, separation provides both a true understanding of life, and freedom to live one’s life as they choose.

### Works Cited

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. New York: Vintage International, 1989.  
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