

"MAMAM" IN CAMUS' *THE STRANGER*

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In discussing other elements in Camus' *The Stranger*, critics have frequently commented on the relevance of Meursault's mother and her funeral. Although their observations suggest the importance of the topic, they provide only a partial view. The subject warrants fuller study, because Meursault's recollections of his mother form a subtle structural pattern which not only illuminates the meaning but speaks for the artistic achievement of the novel. To examine the technique, however, I must first say something about Camus' use of time and point of view.

The story is predominantly a reflection of the past, told, as John Cruickshank has observed, with the advantage only "*le passé indéfini*" provides, the advantage of describing a past action while still retaining "its original sense of presentness."¹ The occasional use of the present tense does not indicate lapses in narrative technique so much as it intensifies the immediacy of the action. The story is as much a re-experience of the past as a retelling, but at the same time the emphasis the narrator gives to certain events suggests that he must view them from a distant perspective in time. In short, in rehearsing his past Meursault attempts to order and comprehend it; and by beginning with the event, he implicitly identifies his mother's funeral as the primary cause of his present circumstance. His predicament in prison colors the narrative and coerces him to select, consciously or unconsciously, given incidents and details from his recent past. "Meursault, reconstructing his experience, may not realize its significance," Marilyn Gaddis Rose has argued, "but he does realize what is significant in it."² In telling his story Meursault, by means of parallel character description, setting, and actions, recreates given elements of his mother's funeral which focus the meaning of his final identification with her.

Superficially, Meursault appears untouched by the funeral. It is Marie or his employer or Raymond or Salamano who refers to his mother's death. Meursault himself feels certain that the business is over. On the day following the funeral he is able to observe the people passing beneath his balcony with the same attention to detail that marks his acutely drawn picture of the burial. He is utterly passive, apparently oblivious to the funeral; and he concludes, "It occurred to me that somehow I'd got through another Sunday, that Mother now was buried, and tomorrow I'd be going back to work as usual. Really, nothing in my life had changed" (p. 30).³ Sundays bother Meursault, not his mother's death. He does not even recognize Raymond's expression of sympathy:

I must have looked tired, for Raymond said to me, "You mustn't let things get you down." At first I didn't catch his meaning. Then he explained that he had heard of my mother's death; anyhow, he said, that was something bound to happen one day or another. (pp. 41-42)

His actions in the second chapter have led Ignace Feuerlicht to say, "the burial of Meursault's 'maman' seems itself buried, and doubly so, in a succession of events and a triumph over death and joy over grief."⁴ But the fact is, his belief that "nothing in my life had changed" is a supreme irony, for subconsciously he is never free of his mother or her funeral.

The first part of the narrative, for example, contains two key re-enactments of the funeral episode. First, Salamano and his dog recreate the actions of the old people at the Home and illuminate by means of contrast the nature of Meursault's relationship with his mother. Second, Meursault describes the murder of the Arab with striking similarities to the funeral scene and thus creates a subtle irony.

Salamano, like the old people at the Home, is the approximate age of Meursault's mother. For some eight years he has owned a dog whom he apparently detests and yet depends upon for some sense of being. He and the dog, like Pérez and Meursault's mother, form a relationship which temporarily keeps Salamano from the imminent fact of death, for he suffers from the affliction of age. What Salamano says of his dog applies as well to him: "But his real affliction was old age, and there's no curing that" (p. 58).

The old man and his dog activate Meursault's memory of the funeral. At the end of chapter three, for example, Meursault describes his apartment in terms of a mock wake in which Salamano participates:

The whole building was as quiet as the grave, a dank, dark smell rising from the well hole of the stairs. I could hear nothing but the blood throbbing in my ears, and for a while I stood still, listening to it. Then the dog began to moan in old Salamano's room, and through the sleep-bound house the little plaintive sound rose slowly, like a flower growing out of the silence and the darkness. (p. 42)

The black stairwell recalls the grave, and Meursault responds to it as he had responded to his mother's death, with total objectivity. His physical senses react to the smell, the darkness, the cold. The moaning of Salamano's dog penetrates the silence just as the weeping of a woman at the wake had interfered with Meursault's detachment there—"I wanted her to stop crying, but dared not speak to her" (p. 11).

Later Salamano's dog disappears and the old man finds himself at the nadir of his existence. The loss of the dog to Salamano, like the loss of

Meursault’s mother to her “fiancé” Pérez, seems unbearable. And when Meursault describes the effect on the old man, he again reflects on the events of the funeral. Through the wall, he hears Salamano “wheezing” like the old men at the wake. He adds, “For some reason, I don’t know what, I began thinking of mother” (p. 50). Typically, Meursault ignores the implications of his thought. “But I had to get up early the next day, so . . . I did without supper, and went straight to bed” (p. 50). By observing Meursault’s response to Salamano and his situation, however, the reader can better understand his relationship with his mother.

When the dog disappears, Salamano offers his hand to Meursault “for the first time since I’d known him” (p. 59), just as the old people at the Home shook hands with him after the wake, “as though this night together, in which we hadn’t exchanged a word, had created a kind of intimacy between us” (p. 13). Furthermore, Salamano’s feeling toward his dog contrasts with Meursault’s apparent lack of feeling toward his mother. Salamano recalls that Meursault’s mother had been very fond of the dog, and he assumes that Meursault must be suffering over the loss of his mother as he anguishes over the loss of his dog. Meursault, for his part, feels so embarrassed that he finds it necessary to explain that it was financially necessary to place his mother in the Home. He adds, almost as an aside, a more essential reason, “for years she’d never had a word to say to me, and I could see she was moping, with no one to talk to” (p. 58).

Meursault is *not* old like his mother. He cannot identify with her because, like the old people at the Home, she exists in a world “with death so near.” Death is imminent to her, and for Meursault to give himself to her would be like Salamano’s rubbing ointment on his dog every night to cure his skin mange when “his real problem was old age, and there’s no curing that.” Nonetheless, Meursault does respect his mother; and even though she cries the first few weeks in the Home, she apparently accepts his judgment. Later, at his trial, Meursault explains, “neither Mother nor I expected much of one another—or, for that matter, of anybody else; so both of us had got used to the new conditions easily enough” (pp. 109-110). Meursault’s relationship with his mother differs profoundly from Salamano’s relationship with his dog in that Meursault is not bound to her by the common fact of age. To understand this is to understand his detachment at the funeral. Later, when he finds himself in the same position in which his mother lived out her last days, in the shadow of death, he finds her a source of strength. The act of discovery, however, is as much the narrator’s as it is the reader’s; and as the story continues Meursault moves toward fuller and fuller recognition, as he constantly refers to his mother and her funeral.

In relating the murder of the Arab, Meursault re-enacts many details of the funeral. Ironically, the day of the murder begins with Marie's observation that "I looked like a mourner at a funeral" (p. 59; "*un tete d'enterrement*"). The heat at the beach has the same effect as the sun at the funeral. It clouds the mind and makes Meursault "feel half asleep" (later he tells the magistrate that he was only half-awake the day of the funeral). After the first encounter with the Arabs, when Raymond is slashed, Meursault attempts to flee in the same way he wanted to avoid the wake and funeral:

The small black hump of rock came into view far down the beach. It was rimmed by a dazzling sheen of light and feathery spray, but I was thinking of the cold, clear stream behind it, and longing to hear again the tinkle of running water. Anything to be rid of the glare, the sight of women in tears, the strain and effort . . . (p. 73)⁵

When Meursault encounters the Arab alone sometime later, his vision is again affected by the heat. He recalls that the Arab's raised knife sent a shaft of light upward . . . The keen blade of light flashing up from the knife" (p. 75; the French reads, the Arab "*dansait devant mes yeux dans l'air enflammé*"). In the same way, he was struck by the weird impressions made by the sun's reflecting off the casket at the funeral. Pérez, like the Arab, was a specter in the heat haze. Meursault concludes: "It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother's funeral, and I had the same disagreeable sensations—especially in my forehead, where all the veins seemed to be bursting through the skin" (p. 75).

The killing itself recalls events at the funeral. The murder seems unavoidable. Meursault is passive; he exists in a dream world (he said of the old people at the wake that "it was hard to believe they really existed," p. 10) in which he is subject to external forces. He can no more control his actions at the beach than he could at the funeral. As critics have noted, "the trigger gave way"; it was not pulled. But this time his "innocent" detachment is impossible. At the funeral the nurse presents him with an explanation: "What she said was: 'If you go too slowly there's risk of a heatstroke. But, if you go too fast, you perspire, and the cold air in the church gives you a chill.' I saw her point; either way one was in for it" (p. 21). When he awaits trial in prison in the second part of the novel, Meursault returns to this remark and understands it ("And something I'd been told came back; a remark made by the nurse at Mother's funeral. No, there was no way out . . .," p. 101). But first he has to appreciate the situation which his mother endured when she first went to the Home. Prison teaches him this.

Meursault faces in his cell what his mother faced at the Home—"I realized that this cell was my last home, a dead end, so to speak" (p.

89)—and when he recognizes his circumstances he identifies with his mother. Just as his mother cried for a few weeks when she first went to the Home, Meursault passes through a stage when he still possesses "the thoughts of a free man." When he comes to accept his situation, he remembers it had always been "one of Mother's pet ideas—she was always voicing it—that in the long run one gets used to anything" (p. 96).

The trial which follows his adjustment to prison life is a spurious ritual with many similarities to the funeral rites.⁶ The predominant black color at the funeral reappears in the robes of two of the judges. At the wake Meursault had "an absurd impression" that the old people "had come to sit in judgment of me" (p. 11); now at the trial he actually is judged for his actions at the funeral. One young journalist gazes intently at him, just as one of the men at the wake had "stared hard" at him. When the warden of the Home tells of Meursault's indifference at the funeral, Meursault realizes that the people at the trial detest him. He is gradually coerced into action; and when Céleste, his friend the restaurant owner, tries vainly to save him, he remembers that "for the first time in my life I wanted to kiss a man" (p. 116). He cannot escape the fact of the trial as he thought he could ignore the funeral.

When the defense attorney offers his summary, Meursault criticizes him for making no references to the funeral. Ironically, even as he listens he half-dozes as he did at the funeral: "I found that my mind had gone blurred; everything was dissolving into a grayish, watery haze" (p. 132). He had one vision of himself at the end of the funeral. "I pictured myself going straight to bed and sleeping twelve hours at a stretch" (p. 22). And now, as counsel rambles on, he concludes, "The futility of what was happening here seemed to take me by the throat, I felt like vomiting, and I had only one idea: to get it over, to go back to my cell, and sleep . . . and sleep" (p. 132). Finally, after the verdict is given, he notices that the faces of those present have been transformed into near sympathy. Once Meursault succumbs to the social rite, he is accepted by the community, just as he was offered the hands of the old inmates when he completed the obligation of the wake and just as he had received Salamano's hand when the old man thought that Meursault shared a common loss with him.

The trial, then, is an extension of the funeral, another rite in which Meursault participates by default (the defense lawyer usurps Meursault's identity completely and even refers to himself as Meursault in the summation). Like the funeral, the trial requires Meursault to sacrifice his identity for the social order of things. But, ironically, the sentence gains a measure of freedom for him which the memory of his mother sustains

and focuses. His mother was “freed” to take on a “fiancé” when she accepted the Home; and, in a sense, when Meursault is finally condemned to his cell, he acquires a measure of freedom too.

As the condemned man remembers his mother’s words, he finds her a source of strength, a co-partner of sorts. He remembers his mother’s story of how his father once attended an execution and vomited on the way home. The incident is charged with significance for Meursault. He realizes suddenly that nothing is more important than an execution, for death is the one great matter of life. And in watching an execution one can experience the grotesque “*joie*” of the ultimate, the most exultant, experience of life and yet be able to go home and vomit afterwards. He rebels against his own sentence to the guillotine because the guillotine permits no possibility of beating “*l’organisation*,” no dignity.

When he faces death Meursault embraces life the more.⁷ At the funeral he thought of how happy his mother must have been even in the face of death in the beautiful countryside at the Home. He recalls—“Mother used to say that however miserable one is, there’s always something to be thankful for. And each morning, when the sky brightened and light began to flood my cell, I agreed with her” (p. 142). The memory of his mother sustains Meursault; he finds, as she did, that the presence of death heightens the love of life. At the funeral he could feel little interest in his mother’s death, just as he can no longer feel for Marie because he shares no reality with her: “I couldn’t feel an interest in a dead girl” (p. 144). Ironically, he identifies with his mother now because he shares with her a confrontation with death. Marie, however, does not exist for him because “apart from our two bodies, separated now, there was no link between us, nothing to remind us of each other” (p. 144).

Meursault’s last encounter with “*l’organisation*” involves the priest. His mother, he earlier remarked, had never given a thought to religion; and he would not either, except that the priest, dressed in black like the mourners and the judges, demands it of him. When the priest requests that he kiss him and call him “*mon père*,” Meursault releases his long restrained anger. He realizes at last that he acted properly at the funeral (his mother would have understood): “I’d been right, I was still right, I was always right” (p. 151).

The priest would rob him of the exultation of death, and yet death paradoxically makes life meaningful. The only immortality Meursault desires is “A life in which I can remember this life on earth. That’s all I want of it!” (p. 150). In the face of death at the funeral, he unconsciously noticed every detail. Prison presents him with the possibility of his own

death, and he unconsciously holds onto every concrete object. Every object in the jail cell falls under his scrutiny, and he visualizes every piece of furniture in his apartment "and each article upon or in it, and then every detail of each article, and finally the detail of the details, so to speak . . ." (p. 98).

Having rejected the last temptation to deny his selfhood, Meursault is sure of himself and of the death to come. He responds to the world around him—the stars, the sounds from the countryside, the cool night air, the smells of earth and salt water, the summer night—as he imagines his mother must have rejoiced in the countryside near the Home. When a steamer's siren sounds at daybreak, he turns again to his mother:

Almost for the first time in many months I thought of my mother. And now, it seemed to me, I understood why at her life's end she had taken on a "fiancé"; why she'd played at making a fresh start. There, too, in that Home where lives were flickering out, the dusk came as a mournful solace. With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. No one, no one in the world had any right to weep for her. And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again. (pp. 153-154)

When Meursault experiences the paradoxical excitement of a life on the verge of death, he can envision his mother's last days. In one sense, he concludes as he began: he could not cry for her then and he cannot now. The difference is that he has discovered why—"Pour le moment, c'est un peu comme si maman n'était pas morte."

NOTES

- 1 "Camus' Technique in *L'Étranger*," *French Studies*, 10 (July 1956), 249.
- 2 "Meursault as Pharmakos: A Reading of *L'Étranger*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 10 (Autumn 1964), 258-259.
- 3 *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage, 1946). All references refer to this translation and text and will be cited parenthetically.
- 4 "Camus's *L'Étranger* Reconsidered." *PMLA*, 78 (December 1963), 614.
- 5 William M. Manly argues that "The phrase '*les pleurs de femme*' brings together Marie, the mourners at his mother's funeral, and the cries of Raymond's mistress—all of whom represent involvements he has avoided." "Journey to Consciousness: The Symbolic Pattern of Camus's *L'Étranger*," *PMLA*, 79 (June 1964), 324.
- 6 Carl A. Viggiani, in his inclusive essay on the novel, suggests that the trial "is an ironic recapitulation of everything that happens in Part I." "Camus' *L'Étranger*," *PMLA*, 71 (December 1956), 885.
- 7 Germaine Bree has written, "The death sentence . . . finally sets him on the path of epiphany that reaches back to the beginning of the novel, wrenches Meursault out of his passive state, and prepares him to counter the terror of death with the concentration of all the forces of life." *Albert Camus, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers*, Number 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 19.