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MEURSAULT'S REPRESSION: MAMAN AND MURDER

William T. Conroy, Jr.

Despite innumerable works on *The Stranger*, the personality of Camus' protagonist, Meursault, has never been fully explored.¹ I would like to examine this character and, in particular, his relationship with "Mother."

Although critics have claimed that Meursault is devoid of emotions,² several incidents in the novel belie this contention. Meursault shows himself sensitive to the night air, the smell of flowers, and the beauty of the countryside.³ He registers pleasure in drying his hands with a dry towel (p. 44). On a personal level, when Salamano loses his dog, Meursault listens sympathetically to his story and attempts to console him (p. 66). In addition, Meursault shares a genuine comradeship with Emmanuel. Not only does Meursault help Emmanuel aboard the truck (p. 45), but he explains to his bewildered friend the intrigue of a film the two of them have gone to see (p. 54). Moreover, these expressions of feeling are uncalculating and disinterested—in marked contrast to those of other characters. Raymond, for instance, expresses friendship for Meursault, but only because he needs someone to compose a letter to his former girlfriend (p. 48). He invites Meursault to go to the beach, but the invitation which "*il aurait pu transmettre. . . le soir*" [he could have passed on. . . that evening] (p. 61) is really a pretext for him to telephone Meursault at his office; he wants Meursault to give him warning of the Arabs. As for Salamano, he hardly takes notice of Meursault's presence when they meet by chance on the stairs (pp. 46-47); it is only when he wants Meursault's consolation that he talks "*avec volubilité*" (p. 58) and shows himself at all friendly and civil (pp. 59-60, p. 65).

While Meursault is capable of genuine feelings, the undeniable fact is that he does not express many. It is precisely this relatively noncommunicative aspect of Meursault that is so puzzling. Does the protagonist tell us anything that might explain why he does not want to talk to the soldier en route to Marengo (p. 22), why he does not want to answer C eleste's questions (p. 39), why he cannot bring himself to see any sense in love (p. 55, p. 62)? In recounting his story, Meursault does reveal that "*quand j' tais  tudiant, j'avais beaucoup d'ambition de ce genre. Mais quand j'ai d  abandonner mes  tudes, j'ai tr s vite compris que tout cela  tait sans importance r elle*" [when I was a student, I had plenty of ambition of that kind. But when I had to drop my studies, I realized very soon all that was without real importance] (p. 62). Since this is virtually the only incident of his past life that he

recalls, it is surely of crucial significance for him. But just what Meursault means by this statement is not clear, for the words “*tout cela*” [all that] are decidedly vague. As in the very first paragraph of the novel (“*Cela ne veut rien dire*” [That doesn’t mean anything], p. 21), Meursault shows himself to be a master of the indefinite. Possibly, “*tout cela*” refers to “*ambition*,” which is what his boss has just accused him of lacking. “*Tout cela*” could also refer to “*mes études*” [my studies]. But since Meursault uses the combination “*tout cela*” and not simply “*cela*,” the pronouns may well have wide application referring not only to “*ambition*” and “*mes études*” but to everything in and about life. The trauma of having to leave school taught Meursault once and for all that he could put no trust in life, that he could count on nothing, and that ambition, studying hard, and everything else in life had no real importance.

The trauma has had far-reaching effects. For fear of incurring other disappointments, Meursault now refuses to place much importance on a job, love, or friendship. Just as he has moved his furniture into one room of his apartment and is living within those confines (p. 39), he has, in like manner, withdrawn psychologically within himself and has bottled up his emotions: anger about life’s disappointments, feeling toward others. He views people detachedly and from afar, just as he does on Sunday when he views his neighbors from a balcony (pp. 40-43). Meursault is indifferent and closed, then, not because he is inhumane and insensitive, but because he has an emotional problem which he “solves” by repressing his feelings. His outer shell of indifference is the mask of a repressed individual.⁴ Locked beneath the surface are feelings, especially those for his mother.

Although Meursault confesses at one point that “*j’aimais bien maman*” [I was quite fond of Mother], he cuts off the feeling by adding: “*mais cela ne voulait rien dire*” [but that didn’t mean anything] (p. 85). A similar pattern of spontaneous feeling and repression/avoidance is present throughout the first part of the novel. Meursault goes to the funeral (there is never a question of not going), and his impulse after arriving at the home is to visit Mother (p. 22). Yet, if possible, he avoids the thought of Mother and her death. One wonders if his dozing in the bus, which Meursault attributes to “*cette hâte, cette course . . . ajouté aux cahots, à l’odeur d’essence, à la réverbération de la route et du ciel*” [that hurrying, that running . . . added to the jolts, the smell of gasoline, and the glare off the road and from the sky] (p. 22), is not an attempt to avoid thinking of what he must face, what awaits him in the corpse of his mother. His periodic dozing at the wake may also constitute a similar “sleep of avoidance.” Somewhat analogously, Meursault forgets what happened at the funeral and assigns the cause to the fact that “*tout s’est passé ensuite avec tant de précipitation, de certitude et de naturel*” [everything then happened with such haste, precision, and matter-of-factness] (p. 35). Perhaps the lapse is more a result of Meursault’s mental inattention or suppression.

Furthermore, as Meursault enters the stark room in which his mother's coffin holds center position, his eyes avoid looking straight ahead and focusing on the bier. They look around and then up: "*Je suis entré. C'était une salle très claire, blanchie à la chaux et recouverte d'une verrière*" [I entered. It was a very bright room, with whitewashed walls and a skylight] (p. 24) His eyes descend and fall on the "*bière recouverte de son couvercle*" [The coffin with the lid on] (p. 24). His glance remains only momentarily on the object, then concentrates on one aspect: "*On voyait seulement des vis brillantes, à peine enfoncées, se détacher sur les planches peintes au brou de noix*" [One only saw the shiny screws, scarcely driven in, sticking out above the wood, which was stained dark walnut] (p.24). What appears as avoidance of the coffin continues throughout the long night of vigil. Meursault's eyes do not focus once upon the bier; the word "*bière*" is curiously absent from page 25 to page 31, at which point the director recalls it to Meursault's mind. In the meantime, during the vigil, Meursault looks at the nurse, the wasps, the light, and the aged patients. Later, when he is ushered out to the hearse, it seems too difficult for Meursault to focus on the conveyance of death. In comparing it to a pen-case (p. 32), it is as if he metamorphoses it into something bearable.

This method of avoidance explains Meursault's attitude toward two patients at the home. During the vigil, Meursault is annoyed by his mother's friend who "*pleurait à petits cris, régulièrement*" [cried in little sobs at regular intervals] (p. 28). It seems to Meursault that "*elle ne s'arrêterait jamais,*" [she would never stop] (p. 28), and he confesses that "*j'aurais voulu ne plus l'entendre*" [I would have wanted not to hear her anymore] (p. 28). Meursault's reactions seem a bit strong; after all, some crying is to be expected at a wake. His annoyance is comprehensible, however, if one considers that the crying woman may represent for Meursault a yielding to emotions that he is trying to avoid and an alternative self that he wants to shun. Analogously, during the day of the funeral, Meursault is intrigued by Thomas Pérez, his mother's boyfriend. During the long march to the church, Meursault notices that Pérez limps (p. 33), then turns around at least twice to catch a glimpse of the old man who has fallen behind (pp. 34-35). Although Meursault recalls little of the day's proceedings, he does remember "*le visage de Pérez quand, pour la dernière fois, il nous a rejoints près du village . . . [et] l'évanouissement de Pérez . . .*" [Pérez's face, when he caught up with us for the last time near the village . . . (and) Pérez's fainting . . .] (pp. 35-36). The curiosity that Meursault has about the old man is no doubt due to the latter's ability to express emotions that Meursault cannot; Pérez, too, represents the alternative self to which Meursault will not yield.

After the funeral, the pattern of emotion/avoidance continues. The Sunday following the burial, Meursault mentions that his apartment "*était*

commode quand maman était là,” [was comfortable when Mother was there] (p. 39), but quickly changes the subject. At the end of that lonely day, spent watching the neighborhood activities from his balcony, Meursault thinks that “*c’était toujours un dimanche de tiré, que maman était maintenant enterrée, que j’allais reprendre mon travail et que, somme toute, il n’y avait rien de changé*” [it was one Sunday gone, anyway, that Mother was now buried, that I was going to go back to work and that, in the final analysis, nothing had changed] (p. 43). Narration, however, comes to a halt; these words conclude Chapter 2. Furthermore, after Meursault learns that Salamano has lost his dog, he hears a noise from his neighbor’s apartment. “*Et au bizarre bruit qui a traversé la cloison,*” Meursault says, “*j’ai compris qu’il pleurait. Je ne sais pas pourquoi j’ai pensé à maman. Mais il fallait que je me lève tôt le lendemain. Je n’avais pas faim et je me suis couché sans dîner*” [Through the wall there came a strange noise, (and) I guessed that he was crying. I don’t know why I thought of Mother. But I had to get up early the next day. I wasn’t hungry and I went to bed without eating] (p. 60). Meursault does not know why he thinks of his mother. Perhaps he senses, on a subconscious level, a resemblance between Salamano and himself, for both men have given the impression of disdaining companions they, in truth, have feeling for. Unlike Salamano, however, Meursault refuses to think of his former companion and yield to emotion. Significantly, Meursault decides to go to bed right away.

Meursault’s feelings for his mother finally surface on the beach with the shooting of the Arab. It is clear that the bullet that kills the Arab goes off by itself.⁵ During his walk on the beach, Meursault tightens his muscles and strains every nerve in order to resist the effect of the burning sun (p. 78). Later, Meursault’s reflex action is identical (p. 80), only now he is holding a gun, his finger muscles tighten about it, and, because of “*le glaive éclatant jailli du couteau [de l’Arabe] toujours en face de moi*” [the dazzling blade flashing up from the (Arab’s) knife still in front of me] (p. 80), the gun happens to be aimed at the Arab. Consequently, as Meursault’s muscles tighten up to ward off the sun, the trigger gives way (p. 80) and the Arab, in the line of fire, falls dead. The explanation for the first shot does not, however, account for the four subsequent shots Meursault fires. We must look further.

Near the climax of Part One, dramatically announced by the “*cymbales*” [cymbals] (p. 80), which contrast with the earlier “*trois notes*” [three notes] of the Arab (p. 76), Meursault provides a clue. He tells us that “*c’était le même soleil que le jour où j’avais enterré maman et, comme alors, le front surtout me faisait mal et toutes les veines battaient ensemble sous la peau*” [it was the same sun as the day I had buried Mother and, like then, I had a great pain especially in the forehead where all the veins were beating together under the skin] (p. 79). Indeed, on both days, the brightness of the sun was “*insoutenable*” [unbearable] (p. 34, p. 73), and, as a result of the

sun's heat and his not wearing a hat, Meursault sensed the flow of perspiration (p. 34, p. 79). Moreover, on the beach, the sun caused his forehead to hurt and the blood to beat in the same way it did on the day of Mother's funeral when "*moi, je sentais le sang qui me battait aux tempes*" [I felt the blood beating in my temples] (p. 35). But these are not the only similarities. Meursault is drowsy both days. On the day of the funeral, he claims: "*Tout cela, le soleil . . . la fatigue d'une nuit d'insomnie, me troublait le regard et les idées*" [All that, the sun . . . the tiredness from a poor night's sleep, clouded my eyes and thoughts] (p. 35), whereas on the beach day, he tells us that "*j'avais la tête un peu lourde*" [my head was a little heavy] (p. 73) and "*j'étais à moitié endormi*" [I was half asleep] (p. 74). Meursault associates both experiences with the color red. From the first day, he remembers "*les géraniums rouges*" [the red geraniums] (p. 36) and "*la terre couleur de sang*" [blood-color earth] (p. 36); on the second day, Meursault not only claims that "*le sable surchauffé me semblait rouge maintenant*" [the overheated sand now seemed red to me] (p. 74) but also talks about "*la figure en sang*" [the face streaming with blood] (p. 75), "*son bras dégoûtant de sang*" [his arm dripping with blood] (p. 75), and "*le sang de sa blessure*" [the blood from his wound] (p. 75). Finally, during both the funeral proceedings and the visit to Masson's, Meursault is a witness to women's tears: "*Une des femmes s'est mise à pleurer*" [One of the women began to cry] (p. 28); "*Mme Masson pleurait*" [Mme Masson was crying] (p. 75).

Only one thing is missing to complete the similarity between the days, and once Meursault's hand tightens about the trigger, discharging the fatal bullet, that similarity is complete: Meursault again stands before death. The sun, the sweat, the pulsation, the fatigue, the coloring, the tears, and death are *déjà vu*; they resuscitate for Meursault the experience of his mother's funeral and the emotions he was then feeling. If his love for Mother and his anger at her death have been heretofore concealed and suppressed, in reliving that day, the build-up of emotion has become too great and it breaks forth. He fires again four times, releasing his hatred of death that has deprived him of his mother, trying to kill death.⁶ Indeed, in recounting the four shots, Meursault himself claims that he fired "*sur un corps inerte*" [into an inert body] (p. 80).

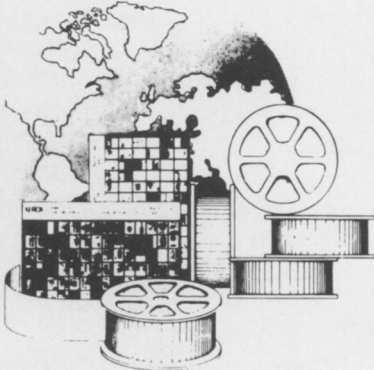
These four shots constitute a catharsis for the heretofore self-contained Meursault and a demonstration of his feelings for his mother. As such, they appear to be a delayed outpouring of affection and anger that Meursault could not manifest the day of the funeral, a delayed flow of tears, so to speak. Now, in the second half of the novel, Meursault will be found guilty of the Arab's death because he did not cry at his mother's funeral. The final touch of irony in *The Stranger* is that, contrary to what the jurists think, Meursault is condemned to death precisely because he did eventually "cry," or at least did the equivalent of crying, over his mother's death.

NOTES

- 1 For attempts at exploring this character, see Robert J. Champigny, *Sur un Héros païen* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959); Claude Treil, *L'Indifférence dans l'Oeuvre d'Albert Camus* (Montreal: Editions Cosmos, 1971).
- 2 Robert de Luppe, *Albert Camus* (Paris: Temps présent, 1951), pp. 46-47.
- 3 Albert Camus, *L'Etranger* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), pp. 27, 30. Henceforth, page references to this edition will be given in the text.
- 4 Meursault is not the only character whose exterior belies internal feelings. The elders at the wake give the impression that the dead Mme Meursault "*ne signifiait rien à leurs yeux*" [meant nothing at all to them] (p. 29) but are actually, as Meursault intimates, moved by her death (p. 29). Raymond's rough treatment of his former mistress seems to deny (but indeed affirms) feelings he has for her. Furthermore, Salamano's beating of his dog suggests a great animosity but conceals a need and affection.
- 5 Pierre-Georges Castex, *Albert Camus et l'Etranger* (Paris: José Corti, 1965), pp. 87-88.
- 6 Cf. Treil, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

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