

## ***The Stranger* Normalized: Reading Camus in the Elder-Boom Digital Age**

Fifty years ago, a decade after the novel's publication and in the midst of my high-school adolescent rebellion phase, I read Albert Camus' *The Stranger* for a literature class. We learned that the book expressed the Existentialist philosophy, a popular post-World War II intellectual movement. Existentialism, we were told, held that ideologies were meaningless and that there was no inherent order or purpose to human life. The protagonist of *The Stranger*, Mersault, embodied these ideas through his emotionally detached behavior: not crying at this mother's funeral, and experiencing no remorse after becoming irritated on a very hot day and killing an innocent Arab at the beach. Mersault's dispassionate first person narration of these events theoretically provided a clear view of the anomie characteristic of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century European and American society.

Despite the book's canonical status – it was admired by people our parents had heard of and it would be on the final exam – pretty much everyone in the class loved it. After all, if dogmas carry no authority and life is essentially meaningless, why should anyone get upset about our staying out past curfew, using recreational drugs, or foregoing college to live in a hippie commune?

Well, most of us survived those years and went on to establish conventional, meaningful adult lives with jobs, mortgages, insurance policies, children, etc. I didn't think much about *The Stranger*, Albert Camus, or Existentialism until a few months ago when an English translation was published of the Algerian writer Kamel Daoud's best-seller *The Mersault Investigation*. Daoud's novel tells the story of *The Stranger* from the perspective of the murdered Arab's younger brother. Transported back to 1940's Oran, I found it an excellent book, full of insights about racism, inequality, Algerian culture, and North Africans' experience under French colonial rule. On the wise advice of several reviewers, I had re-read *The Stranger* before undertaking *The Mersault Investigation*. Becoming reacquainted with Camus' writing certainly made Daoud's vision clearer and his points sharper. Yet from the vantage point of 2015, Mersault's behavior seemed much more normal than Existential.

What has changed in fifty years? A lot, of course, but most pertinent would be our understanding of two things: eldercare and autism.

Mersault is a middle-aged single man living alone in a small apartment and working at a bureaucratic clerical job. When his elderly mother can no longer live alone, she moves in with him. That arrangement lasts for a while, until Mersault becomes fed up with her presence and she becomes lonely isolated in the apartment all day. Without any evident financial burden to her or to himself he places her in what seems to be an assisted living facility where she makes friends and joins activities. She is not ill or demented or needy in any way. The relationship between mother and son appears unaffectionate and pragmatic. When she dies, he goes immediately to the home and spends all night sitting with her friends, keeping a vigil over her

remains as custom dictates. In the morning he follows the hearse through the blistering heat to the cemetery. He smokes cigarettes when he is allowed to, and he does not cry.

For this series of actions and inactions, Mersault is judged to be a monster. To me, he seemed well within the bounds of reasonable, respectable filial piety.

I am a member of the Baby Boom demographic cohort. My generation has seen our parents live longer than any senior citizens in history: according to United Nations population studies, between 1950 and 2000 the percentage of people over 60 in the developed world tripled, and the trend continues to grow. We Baby Boomers are also known as the Sandwich Generation, middle-aged folks whose family life often includes both eldercare and childcare responsibilities. As we have learned, looking after an elderly parent is stressful under the best of circumstances when everyone gets along well. When the parent in question was negligent and/or abusive, crying at the eventual funeral is certainly not a requirement for membership in the human race. At least Mersault did not behave like two sisters of my acquaintance, who sat stonily through their mother's funeral and then when almost everyone had departed began singing "Ding Dong, the Witch Is Dead."

Yet from the narrative it is quite clear that something is missing in Mersault. He mostly experiences sensations rather than feeling emotions or thinking about ideas. He doesn't really care how people react to him. Today he might be a tech billionaire.

For the past thirty years, I have worked on teams with software developers, engineers, and mathematicians, and my hunch is that Mersault would fit right in. Fortunately none of my colleagues have ever murdered anyone with their own hands, but then our work environments have been less dangerous than a colonial society about to erupt in a bloody and desperate civil war. Nowadays we often describe the various species of techies, introverts, OCDers, and sociopaths as being "on the spectrum" ranging from shyness to Asperger's syndrome to autism. I would leave it to the pros to make a specific diagnosis and locate his position, but perhaps Mersault's destiny would have been happier if he had been born into an era when he could have avoided human contact by interacting with his smartphone and earned a living as a computer game designer.

In the domain of constitutional law, sometimes situations arise involving new technology or new forms of social behavior which the original legislators could never have foreseen, and the law no longer seems useful or appropriate. Under those circumstances a process exists for challenging the old rules and amending them to reflect new realities. Literary criticism has no such process, but if it did, contemporary readers of *The Stranger* would have solid grounds for appealing the Existentialism decision.