From Suicide, to Acceptance through Faith, and then, to Defiant Revolt: Existential Absurdism in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

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From Suicide, to Acceptance through Faith, and then, to Defiant Revolt: Existential Absurdism in Albert Camus' The Stranger

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This thesis examines the three stages of resolving the Absurd in existential Absurdism highlighted by Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus in an attempt to find meaning in life. I argue that the narrator Meursault in Albert Camus' The Stranger ventures through these three stages: suicide, acceptance through faith, and defiant revolt. In order to better understand the process and motive behind Meursault's actions and human condition, and to gain a deeper understanding of Absurdism, I apply Freudian psychoanalysis in order to demonstrate Meursault's life in relation to the Absurd.

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Chapter I: Introduction

In his existential absurdist work, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus attempts to understand the natural human desire to find “meaning” in life.\(^1\) However, Camus ultimately concludes that no such meaning exists. He confronts utter “meaningless,” at least in relation to the individual, and this disturbance of the expectation of meaning is what he labels “the Absurd.”\(^2\) To Camus, the encounter with the Absurd can occur at any moment; this is revealed in the philosophical text *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where Camus states: “At any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face” (10-11). What Camus suggests by this is there does not necessarily have to be a catalyst for the Absurd’s manifestation.

I shall argue in the following pages that Camus uses the protagonist Meursault in his novel, *The Stranger* (1942), in an attempt to dissect, confront, and resolve the Absurd through three states that reverberate in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: suicide, acceptance through belief, and defiant revolt.\(^3\) I show how Meursault travels through these three stages in the novel and through it attempts to make meaning of his life. I am not arguing that Meursault, himself, believes that his life lacks meaning when faced with the Absurd, but rather that his confrontation with the Absurd *demonstrates* the human inability to find

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\(^1\) Camus defines “meaning” as a provisional and unstable social construction that may be found in active participation in life itself (Okoro 175). It may be important to note that Camus is speaking of achieved meaning. To Camus, there is no inherent meaning (ascribed meaning) but it may be possible to create meaning (achieved).

\(^2\) When I use the word meaningless I am using Camus’ definition, that is, meaningfulness in the sense of the world and universe. Though open to scientific understanding, it is not intelligible in the way humans express and desire (Okoro 173).

\(^3\) Camus defines “defiant revolt” as the rebellion against absurdity. This means rebelling against one’s own mortality and the universe’s meaninglessness and incoherence. For more on this, see *The Rebel*, 22.
and make sense of his individual relations to the Absurd. What I mean by this is that Camus argues that people react and deal differently when faced with the Absurd, but only through defiant revolt can one begin to live one’s life authentically. Meursault is thus championed by Camus as a vessel to demonstrate this conception (of existential Absurdism) throughout *The Stranger*. This is revealed in the novel when Meursault battles the Arab, rejects God and the court system, and accepts his execution with defiant revolt. I will discuss each of these in turn in the rest of my thesis.

**The Two Texts**

Even though the *Myth of Sisyphus* is written as a philosophical text, the process of demonstrating Absurdism in it and the novel *The Stranger* are very similar. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus states his intention of explicating the three methods of revolt and the stages involved in each case. By taking *The Myth of Sisyphus* and applying the concepts of the Absurd to Meursault in *The Stranger*, I believe we can uncover Camus’ intentions in the novel and help elucidate his thoughts on the Absurd.

But if the *Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* are both essentially about the philosophy of the Absurd and demonstrate an Absurd life, then why did Camus need to write two separate texts? I argue that there is a tension between the two works. With a philosophical treatise such as *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it can be at times difficult to follow Camus’ thought and comprehend his theory of Absurdism, especially at a visceral level. However, with a novel such as *The Stranger*, the reader becomes stylistically engaged, and achieves a deeply felt experience of what it means to confront the Absurd. Camus writes the novel so that the reader becomes both attached to and distanced from Meursault. He is muddling and convoluted, but he is also honest and expressive. I
maintain that in order to adequately understand Camus’ conception of the Absurd we need both the novel and the treatise. This is an issue I wish to explore in my thesis and contribute to existing scholarship.

**Literature Review and Purpose**

A large amount of criticism was devoted to Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus* in the twentieth century but it has begun to decrease in the twenty first century due to a seeming lack of interest in existentialism in the post-modern era. Absurdism, most likely due to its association with existentialism and nihilism, is often referred to as a negative ideology. This is particularly evident in Jonathan Westphal and Christopher Cherry. They critique the beliefs of Thomas Nagel, existentialists, and Albert Camus and reject the idea that human life is bound to be absurd (199). These authors emphasize artistic and cultural refinement and give an example of a life devoted to music, particularly Mozart’s Twenty-Third Piano Concerto, and argue that it cannot be “ultimately pointless” (200). They believe that due to art, science, and religion, meaning happens. They emphasize that religion and science introduce focused meaning into life. The authors ultimately conclude that Camus is “scorning” life; but they reply that it makes much more sense to “ignore the problem” and perspective of absurdity by “occupying ourselves with interesting work” and to recognize the Absurd as “colourful rubbish” (203).

The problem I have with this article is that Westphal’s and Cherry’s sanguine reliance on art, religion, and science to provide meaning in life ignores the fact, that for Camus, these activities, if thoughtfully pursued without a strong awareness to the Absurd,

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4 For criticism done in this area see Adams, Broadhead, Wilson, and Westphal and Cherry.
amount to “philosophical suicide.” These “illusions” can distract and deter from both awareness of the Absurd and defiant revolt, and Camus argues vigorously against such “evasions.” Camus chooses defiant revolt, while thereby living in constant awareness of the Absurd, rather than art, religion, and science, so as to live a life freely. As Westphal and Cherry suggest, Camus is not categorically scornful of life, but he is against mass civilization and globalization, because these tendencies dehumanize and limit people’s freedoms.

**Importance of Absurdism (Now and Then)**

In re-examining Absurdism in the twenty first century, its importance can be understood in relation to the rise of mass civilization and globalization. With the twenty first century containing societies swamped with totalitarianism, neocolonialism, and industrialization, and with increasing new technologies that coerce and lead to death, the result is a relentless dehumanizing of the poor, in particular, and of humanity in general. Kingsley Okoro states in his article “Camus’ Absurdism: A Re-Examination” that “within the historical background of Camus’ philosophical writings, anxiety over the fate of western culture was already intense and escalating to apocalyptic levels with sudden emergence of fascism, [and] totalitarianism”(174). From the twenty first century perspective, both the *Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* concentrate on expressing absurdity and how to live in a world filled with it. If we look at Meursault and Sisyphus through a contemporary lens, they are the workers in the assembly line or in the mundane office, forced to repeat mind-numbing repetitive tasks their entire life. But their

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3 Camus defines philosophical suicide as “a convenient way of indicating [a] movement by which a thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation” (*Sisyphus* 41). I will expand on philosophical suicide in the following pages.
awareness and defiant refusal to accept the Absurd in life can lead to a tragic kind of liberation. To be sure, this liberation through defiance may constitute a danger to the order of modern society, because it rejects the complacent conformity of the automated majority. To Camus, mass culture-level reforms and large-scale social and economic enterprises undermine individual freedom (Okoro 174). Absurdism should not be interpreted in a negative manner, or equated with nihilism, but rather seen as a positive response to contemporary life. To live in constant defiant revolt of the absurd in everyday life would thus embrace a realistic way of pursuing freedom while dealing with modern economic and social institutions.

Theoretical Lens

I find the relationship between existentialism and psychoanalysis to be paramount as they both tend to focus on the human condition. Because of this, I will apply a psychoanalytic lens (Freudianism) to my interpretation of The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus. The reason I utilize a psychoanalytic approach in my thesis is that both Freud and Camus focus on the human condition in terms of anxiety, isolation, meaninglessness, morality, and freedom (Yalom 9). If we take anxiety as an example, its importance in the realm of existentialism makes existentialism a popular topic in modern psychotherapy. Existential therapists often offer existentialist philosophy as an explanation for anxiety. This is because anxiety is a manifestation of an individual's complete freedom to decide, and complete responsibility for the outcome of such decisions. Psychotherapists using an existentialist approach believe that a patient can harness his or her anxiety and use it constructively. Instead of suppressing the anxiety, patients are advised to use it as a

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6 For a more detailed explanation of existential psychotherapy and its practice, please see Irvin Yalom’s Existential Psychotherapy.
catalyst for change. By embracing anxiety as inevitable, a person can, in Camus’s words, develop it to achieve his or her full potential in life. In the *Myth of Sisyphus* Camus states that living one’s life fully equates to having the most experiences possible as the absurd teaches that all experiences are equally unimportant (63). Therefore, anxiety could create hindrance to this as it may limit the quantity of experiences, which would consequently limit one’s freedom.

If we can shift the psychoanalytic approach over to *The Stranger*, then if this method of embracing anxiety is related to Meursault, then it becomes clear why Meursault decides to live in defiant revolt of the Absurd and consequently reach his full potential. Because of this commonality between existentialism and psychoanalysis, I feel it is critical to examine Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, including the ideas of the unconscious, repression and freedom, as these can help elucidate Meursault’s own human condition and how it demonstrates his life in relation the Absurd.

**The Absurd**

It is here necessary to provide a brief description of Absurdism in the realm of existentialism. To Camus, a human being is born into an alien world and is ever afterward constantly in conflict with it. Through his very existence, man becomes faced with the Absurd. The Absurd refers to the struggle between the human tendency to seek inherent meaning in life and the human inability to find such meaning (*Sisyphus* 20-21). The Absurd does not mean “logically impossible” in this context, but rather, “humanly impossible.” It is important to note that the Absurd is not within the universe, nor within human beings; but rather, the Absurd arises from the inherent incompatibility between human needs and the universe’s inexorable, fundamentally inhumane nature (*Sisyphus* 6).
To Camus, this conflict essentially demands a divorce: “It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation” (Sixphus 30). Through this divorce, existential Absurdism thus believes that the efforts of human beings to find meaning in life will fail, and hence are absurd, because no such meaning exists, at least in relation to the individual. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham explain Camus’ words a bit more succinctly in their definition of existential philosophy: “[A] human being [is] an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe; [hence the Absurdist is led] to conceive the human world as possessing no inherent, truth, or meaning [. . .] as an existence which is both anguished and absurd” (A Glossary of Literary Terms 1).

It is important to state that Camus does not represent Absurdity as a negative philosophy, or as silly or ridiculous like the commonsense definitions of the word. However, what he means is that Absurdity refers to the true state of human revolt and existence. To Camus, living in defiant revolt of the Absurd declares that life does not contain universal meaning. Herbert Lottman rephrases Camus’ Absurdism succinctly: “God? No Thanks . . . I am on my own” (112).

As mentioned above, Camus defines Absurdism as a divorce of two ideas. He defines the human condition as Absurd. What Camus means by this is that man’s desire for purpose or meaning in life stands in stark juxtaposition with the silent and cold universe. To Camus, specific human experiences that evoke the absurdity of everyday life. Once one experiences absurdity, one consequently becomes the “Absurd Man.” Camus in the Myth of Sisyphus defines the Absurd Man as a person without appeal and limits:
‘My field,’ said Goethe, ‘is time.’ That is indeed the absurd speech. What in fact is the Absurd Man? He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime. [emphasis original] (66)

Camus continues, stating that the Absurd Man understands that a greater life cannot mean another life. Like everything else, the Absurd ends with death. But, according to Camus, there can be no Absurd outside this world either (31). This means that Absurdism expresses a disharmony in human existence. In effect, the Absurd is the product of a collision or confrontation between the human desire for meaning and purpose while the universe remains silent and unanswerable to one’s questioning of it. According to Camus, “The Absurd is not in the man nor in the world but in their presence together” (14).

Therefore, to Camus, as he articulates in The Myth of Sisyphus, “man” is a creature desperately seeking hope and meaning in a hopeless and meaningless world (17). The Absurd does not reside in either an individual or the world itself, but rather, it is an inseparable part of the human condition. To further elucidate, Camus states: “The Absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28). To sum up, what Camus means by this “divorce” is that the Absurd presents itself in an existential opposition: it arises from human demands for understanding and clarity while the universe offers nothing of the kind.
Camus believes that when one who is faced with the Absurd one encounters and reacts in three possible ways: suicide, acceptance through belief and faith, or defiant revolt. Through these three methods, Camus eschews suicide, as well as, acceptance through belief and faith as a fraudulent method of combating the Absurd. To Camus, suicide is too direct and a simple solution to the Absurd. If one is to commit suicide then one is admitting that life is not worth living. Camus, however, finds this cowardly as he states in the *Myth of Sisyphus* the option of suicide is a “repudiation or renunciation of a true revolt” (21).

According to Camus, the second method of dealing with the Absurd is to adopt a belief and, in this belief, faith as a solution to the Absurd, such as, through religion or metaphysics. Much like suicide, belief and faith is a method of escapism by trying to find solace through a leap beyond the Absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes faith and belief in God as a means of hiding: “The leap in all its forms, rushing into the divine or the eternal . . . all these screens hide the Absurd” (91). The “leap” that Camus is alluding to is that of the 19th century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard also reflected on the Absurd, but, unlike Camus, advocated that with a leap of faith and true belief in God, one could (possibly) counter the meaninglessness of life. Kierkegaard defines the leap of faith as:

> Where one understands that there is more than the rational life (aesthetic or ethical) to take a leap of faith; one must act with the virtue of the absurd. . . . This is not the dogmatic faith that we have come to know, Silentio⁷, would call that an ‘infinite resignation’ and false, cheap faith,

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⁷ The reference to Silentio is that of Johannes de Silentio, an early pseudonym of Kierkegaard.
this faith has no expectation but flexible power propelled by the absurd.

(qtd. in Nagel 72)

Additionally, Camus deems the idea of faith as being “philosophical suicide” (*Sisyphus* 41). This means, to Camus, that faith in a divine being is essentially a method of escapism as there is neither “logical certainty” nor “experimental probability” that could justify the existence of God (*Sisyphus* 40). In this connection it is worth noting, however, that Camus does not undertake to prove the nonexistence of God, but rather simply contends that since it is impossible for human beings to know whether or not a divine being exists, this is a fraudulent method of evading the Absurd. To Camus, to annihilate reason by philosophical suicide is as fatal and self-destructive as physical suicide.

Kierkegaard’s attempt to try to find some sort of transcendence in the Absurd itself is unacceptable for Camus. To Camus, Kierkegaard is avoiding the logic posed to him by the Absurd, and, as such, commits philosophical suicide. I want to make it clear that there are other methods of philosophical suicide besides faith. As stated earlier, Camus defines philosophical suicide as “a convenient way of indicating [a] movement by which a thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation” (*The Myth* 41). What Camus means by this is that placing faith in anything (metaphysics, philosophy, science, art) attempts to pose rationality in an irrational world. For example, science can account for a naturally occurring phenomena and how it occurs, but it cannot account for the world as one would experience it. Because of this, Camus rejects faith in not only God, but also other recourses.

The third method of combating the Absurd in Camus’ view is defiant revolt by embracing the Absurd and continuing to live with it while maintaining awareness.
Defiant revolt is the final stage of combating the Absurd illustrated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solidarity effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance” (55). To Camus, since the Absurd is unavoidable, the only reasonable response is living one’s life to the fullest while revolting against it.

Camus believes that life can be lived better if it has no meaning (*Sisyphus* 28). What Camus means by this is when one stands in defiant revolt against the Absurd one can essentially achieve meaning: “Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his moral consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his life time” (*Sisyphus* 66). However, it is more than just revolting against the Absurd in an attempt to make meaning of one’s life; it is also continuing to live in it despite the absurdity that life offers. By revolting against the Absurd, one could essentially maintain self-awareness. Through awareness of the Absurd, one could extend this to the whole of their experiences. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus regards freedom as “that which a human heart can experience and live” (60). This means that without religious or moral restraints, one could essentially live his or her life and become content living it despite the irrationality of the Absurd.

In the *Myth of Sisyphus* Camus makes reference to Sisyphus, a mythological ruler from the kingdom of Ephyra. Sisyphus was condemned to the underworld for cheating death and he was eternally labored to push a rock up a hill. When the boulder reached the top, Sisyphus would watch it roll back down from the peak. From then on, he was forced to roll the rock back up the hill again and again, for all of eternity.
To Camus, Sisyphus is the Absurd hero. He is fully aware of the existential helplessness of his plight and actions, yet he continues to labor on knowing that even though he pushes the rock to the top of the hill, it is going to fall back down. Sisyphus’ labor thus becomes a metaphor for human life, living day by day doing the same actions over and over without expecting these to necessarily yield results. But the difference is that Sisyphus lives in defiant revolt, despite knowing that his life is absurd. In doing so, he becomes an icon of spirit and revolt for Camus, he becomes aware, and of the human condition. To continue to labor each day, despite the despairing inevitability that life leads to nothing, is to face the Absurd with a spirit of revolt.

*The Myth of Sisyphus* explicates Camus’ notions of the Absurd and of defiant revolt without, a continual refusal of social norms, and a conscious dissatisfaction. Therefore, Camus elucidates in the *Myth of Sisyphus* how to experience the Absurd and how to live and resolve it. The Absurd man is aware of his temporarily limited freedom, just like Sisyphus, and is aware of the revolt while living out the span of his life (*Sisyphus* 25). I will now elucidate the three methods of dealing with the Absurd and how they reflect Camus’ theory in the *Myth of Sisyphus* and, as well as, how Meursault, in *The Stranger*, attempts to find meaning through them.
Chapter II: Suicide

In the Translator’s Note of the 1989 edition of Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*, Matthew Ward notes an observation that Camus recorded in one of his notebooks: “the curious feeling the son has for his mother constitutes all his sensibility [emphasis original]” (vii). Additionally, Sartre, in his “Explication de *L’Etranger*” notes of Meursault’s usage of the word “Maman” (qtd. in Ward vii) over the, as Ward states, “more removed, adult ‘Mother’” (vii). The significance of the relationship between a child and his mother evokes a Freudian psychoanalytic reading, that is, through Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex, where Freud states: “To his choice of his mother as a love-object everything becomes attached which, under the name of the ‘Oedipus complex’, has attained so much importance in the psycho-analytical explanation of the neuroses [...]” (*Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* 409). On a cursory reading, the relationship between Meursault and Maman seems distant and filled with indifference; yet, I suggest, there is a much deeper connection between the two. Through this analysis, some light can be shed on the ambiguous murder scene at the beach.

Moreover, the connection between Meursault and his mother can also explain the connection between Meursault and the Arab. By examining the murder scene at the beach and the convoluted interconnections among Meursault, Maman, and the Arab, we can begin to establish boundaries between suicide, homicide, and its relationship with the Absurd.

Suicide was a major philosophical issue for Camus. When faced with the absurdity of human life, Camus suggests that a sensitive and aware individual reacts with one of three solutions that he declares as being a revolt. The first stage he addresses is
that of suicide which is explained in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In that work Camus explores suicide profoundly, stating that: “At that last crossroad where thought hesitates […] they then abdicated what was most precious to them, their life. Others, princes of the mind, abdicated likewise, but they initiated suicide of their thoughts in the purest revolt. The real effort is to stay there” (9-10). For some, suicide can be seen as liberation from the Absurd, as it offers the quickest way out of the absurdity of life.

In the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus states: “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether or not life is or is not worth living amounts to the fundamental question of philosophy” (1). Camus believes that many people commit suicide because life is not deemed worth living to them. The problem that Camus has with suicide is that it involves a futile abnegation of existence. By contrast, Camus has no problem with the idea of people getting killed because they entertain “ideas” or “illusions” that “give them a reason for living,” (and thus a reason as well for dying) (4). Camus argues that all other questions of philosophy dealing with truth, morality, ethics, knowledge, and such are secondary to this one: “I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions” (2). To Camus, by answering the question of suicide, one can begin to answer the fundamental question of philosophy (1).

To Camus, suicide can be interpreted as a method of escape where opting for death avoids the consequences of life. Deeming life as not worth living or too difficult to live implies that suicide is a greater alternative: killing yourself outweighs the pain of suffering through living. Camus describes this as an act of confession: “In a sense, and as
in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or you do not understand it” (5).

With this idea of confession, we can make a transition to *The Stranger*. Through Meursault’s narration, he is confessing to the reader what he experiences. Throughout the novel Meursault confesses that life is too much for him and he does not understand. But Meursault never does commit suicide. Nor is there one mention of suicide in *The Stranger*. Characters do not talk about suicide nor do any commit the act. However, there is discussion of death and impending death in Camus’ novel. The novel begins with the passing away of Meursault’s mother, an event which scarcely seems to evoke any response on his part. Half-way through the narrative, Meursault capriciously kills a man seemingly with no compelling motive. At the end of the novel, Meursault is executed for his crime, but the execution seems as pointless as the murder that preceded it. Through these instances, the novel is structured and resolved with issues concerning the theme of death. This cannot be accidental. As stated, the novel begins with the death of Meursault’s mother, structured in an ambiguous fashion: “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday” (3).

One of the reasons why Meursault is unable to express his feelings about the death of his mother is that society doesn’t allow him to do so honestly. It is as if he were being blamed for the death of his mother and for treating her death as if it were just an inconvenience to the life he lives. This is revealed when Meursault explains to his boss that he need two days off of work to go to her funeral and he’s implicitly reprimanded:
“There was no way he was going to refuse me with an excuse like that. But he wasn’t too happy about it. I even said, ‘It’s not my fault.’ He didn’t say anything. Then I thought I shouldn’t have said that. After all, I didn’t have anything to apologize for. He’s the one who should have offered his condolences” (3). Meursault is being dehumanized here as he believes that his life and purpose is in the office where he works. When this is disrupted, it becomes an inconvenience to both Meursault and the boss as it bends the complacent conformity to the normalized reaction of the automated majority. This is further articulated when Meursault states that: “After the funeral, though, the case will be closed, and everything will have a more official feel to it” (3). Meursault is comparing the death of his mother to a case of the courts. It is as if he were on trial for the death of his mother, and only when the case is closed will he be allowed to return to work with the automated majority.

When Meursault is done speaking with his boss he heads immediately to the old people’s home in Marengo to commence the funeral. However, the entire funeral scene is very rushed and this casts a negative light on Meursault. Meursault is seen as an outsider when he visits the old people’s home, much like an “alien” or a “stranger” stepping into a foreign land. When Meursault firsts meets the director he feels criticized by him when he states: “I’ve read your mother’s file. You weren’t able to provide for her properly. She needed someone to look after her. You earn only a modest salary. And the truth of the matter is, she was happier here. . . . You’re young, and it must have been hard for her with you” (5). The director, without letting Meursault offer his interpretation, distances himself from Meursault as he believes he is an outsider to the rest of the residents. The
director later states that they had to bury Maman quickly because of the hot plains, but gives no further explanation (7).

This idea of Meursault being painted as an alien or stranger continues when he meets all of Maman’s friends at the old people’s home. Meursault views them as strangers as he states that they all look very similar and that he “couldn’t see their eyes, just a faint glimmer in a nest of wrinkles” (10). This feeling is reciprocated as Meursault states “I had the ridiculous feeling that they were there to judge me” (10). This idea of being an outsider continues when one of the old women starts crying and won’t stop. Meursault is surprised because he doesn’t know who she is and soon becomes annoyed by her incessant sobbing (10). But what is interesting is when the caretaker approaches Meursault and explains to him that the woman crying was very close to his mother. (11). This further reveals how much of a stranger Meursault was to his mother, as he possesses no knowledge of his mother’s friends or even of the life she was living.

The idea of being a stranger or outsider evokes the relationship between suicide and the Absurd. This relationship arises in the confrontation between the human desire for meaning, purpose, and explanation versus the meaninglessness of a universe that cannot provide such. To Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a man is essentially an “alien” or a “stranger” in the universe and man suffers a “divorce” between himself and life (6). Suicide, then, would seem to be a solution to the Absurd.

But although suicide can be interpreted as a solution to the Absurd, Camus eschews it. Camus views suicide as an escape as it avoids the Absurd rather than dealing with it. For some, suicide can be seen as liberation from the Absurd, as it offers the quickest way out of the absurdity of life. However, Camus rejects suicide, stating “that
the real effort is to stay there” (Sisyphus 8). Additionally, Camus bolsters his reasoning, later stating in The Myth of Sisyphus that is it more absurd to seek oblivion as a way of countering what is already the most absurd (54). By this he means that, if life is what is most absurd, then killing oneself would be even more absurd. Camus instead maintains that one should continue living, despite the Absurd, even though one exists in a world without purpose. To expand on this topic, Camus’ alternative to suicide is to “die unreconciled and not of one’s free will” (55). By revolting against suicide, one thus rebels against mortality and its limits. Revolting against suicide would thus acting in defiant revolt of the absurd.

It is interesting, in this connection, to refer to some psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud. Somewhat surprisingly, the latter shares similar beliefs with Camus. Freud believes that both homicide and suicide are very similar in nature: both involve an aggressive response toward a seemingly alien world. According to Freud, when the superego is established and considerable amounts of aggression are fixated in the ego, they may operate self-destructively. This can become dangerous to the self as it can prevent and hinder cultural development. Freud believes that the condition of living in a civilized society can channel and expand these feelings. To Freud, holding back aggression and not expressing it can be unhealthy, which can then lead to illness and other psychological concerns (Litman 336).

To Freud, homicide would be viewed as an aggressive reaction to the external stimuli that have caused the emotional upheaval, while suicide would take it one step farther, manifesting an impulse to kill another turned inward on the self. Additionally, according to Freud, people that commit suicide often have their aggression first turned
inward into depression—a situation which can then lead to suicide if the trauma is not resolved or resurfaced in a healthy environment ("Harper and Voigt, Homicide Followed by Suicide" 298).

Freud claims in Beyond the Pleasure Principle that suicide has two roots: the "Thanatos" instinct or "death wish," and sexual frustration or repression. He maintains that the urge to kill oneself is primarily connected with the death wish and the desire to eliminate the tensions created by living. However, sometimes the "life instinct" stymies the death drive from suicide and releases that self-destructive impulse outward (homicide). Suicide can also result from the inability to commit murder, and thus the frustration combined with the repressed desire can be turned inward on the self.

Dee Harper and Lydia Voigt in their article "Homicide Followed by Suicide: An Integrated Theoretical Perspective," reference Freud's views on homicide and suicide. Like Freud, they believe that homicide and suicide have the same underlying cause (frustration), which may be catalyzed by social or economic deprivation (298). They additionally state that if one commits homicide on a "primary source of nurturance" then one may subsequently commit suicide because of the loss of that same nurturance (298). Through this, the individual may suffer such a threat to the self-esteem that the only way to demonstrate the anticipated hatred of society would be to kill oneself (299).

If Meursault feels that he is partly responsible for killing his mother, then Harper’s and Voigt’s view on homicide becomes more apropos. As we can see throughout the early novel, Meursault is frustrated and his frustration finally exposes itself, explodes, in an unhealthy manner at the beach before he murders the Arab. Since, as I have suggested, Meursault unconsciously feels that he is responsible for killing his
mother (or his nurturance), then he may find it appropriate to suffer by demonstrating to society that he killed the Arab and accepting death for his crime. Meursault reinforces this idea, but also stands in defiant revolt, at the end of the novel right before his execution: “For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there was a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate” (123). The large crowd of spectators with their greetings of “cries of hate” toward Meursault would represent Harper and Voigt’s idea of the need for society to inflict harm upon the murderer. But to take this a step further, Meursault’s wish for this would signify the pain that he wants to inflict upon himself. However, Meursault is being sentenced to death, he is not putting himself to death, which is the difference between Meursault’s committing suicide and the Absurdist view of “dying unreconciled” and not of one’s own free will (Sisyphus 55). Through this, Meursault revolts against suicide, conventional morality, and the limits of both.

If we can delve deeper into the idea of the relationship between Meursault and the killing of the mother figure, then examining Freud’s Oedipus complex may give a better explanation to Meursault’s actions. In Freudian psychoanalytical theory, the Oedipus complex signifies the emotions and ideas that the mind retains in the unconscious, through repression, that concentrate on a male’s desire to sexually possess his mother and to kill his father. In his Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Freud speaks on this idea of killing the father and marrying the mother: “[T]he little man wants to have his mother all to himself, that he feels the presence of his father as a nuisance, that he is resentful if his father indulges in any signs of affection towards his mother and that he shows satisfaction when his father has gone to a journey or is absent” (412).
The killing of one’s father and marrying one’s mother is not necessarily a literal interpretation to Freud, but more an idea of reestablishing the unconscious desire for the first love object, that is, the mother, and separating oneself from the entity that may stymie that reestablishment (the father) (Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis 409). In the course of the child’s psychosexual development, the complex is the male’s phallic stage formation of a sexual identity in which the source libido pleasure is in a different zone of the child’s body. (Rather than seeking pleasure from the mouth or the anus, the child now turns to the genitals.) To Freud, the child’s identity with the father is the resolution of the Oedipus complex, his fundamental psychological experiences of developing a mature sexual role and identity. Freud posits that a boy resolves the Oedipus complex through overcoming the threat of castration anxiety, whereas an unsuccessful resolution might lead to neurosis, pedophilia and homosexuality (The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex 175). According to Freud, ultimately, the Oedipus complex is “doomed to early repression; but it continues to exercise a great and lasting influence from the unconscious” (Five Lectures 51).

What interests me about Freud’s postulation is this idea of a continued influence on the unconscious. According to Harold Blum, in his article “Adolescent Trauma and the Oedipus Complex,” “[T]he Greek Oedipus drama of Sophocles and Freud are not about childhood in their manifest content. Oedipus is not a child, but a male adolescent who killed his father . . . then married his mother” (548-549). And so it is with the narrator Meursault. In The Stranger, Meursault is an adult, and the reader knows nothing of his childhood, but Freud’s idea of the Oedipus complex still lingers. As stated above, the novel begins with the death of Meursault’s mother, structured in an ambiguous
fashion: “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday” (3). This beginning paragraph evokes the distinction of Meursault’s character: apathy and indifference, while, simultaneously, structuring the novel with the relationship of his mother. For the former, this emulation of apathy and indifference is reverberated throughout the entirety of the novel, especially with Marie, a woman who is fond of Meursault: “A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn’t mean anything but that I didn’t think so. She looked sad” (35), and, when Marie asks to marry him, Meursault replies again without feeling: “I said it didn’t make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I answered the same way I had the last time, that it didn’t mean anything but that I probably didn’t love her” (41). Additionally, it is Meursault’s monumental indifference to the murdering of the Arab that he shows to the attorneys, jury, and judge that condemns him to execution. As Stephen Poser writes in his article “Unconscious Motivation in Camus’ The Stranger”: “Meursault does not lie—he simply does not feel” (261).

But is it simply that Meursault does not feel, as Poser suggests, or could there perhaps there be a more profound meaning associated with his affective disconnect? I posit that Meursault’s apathy and indifference are exhibited from repression, the trauma caused by the death of his mother serving as the catalyst. According to William Manly, in his article “Journey to Consciousness: The Symbolic Pattern of Camus’s L’Etranger,” Meursault is in a perpetual “dream-like” state because of his mother’s death: “Meursault’s failure to waken physically to his situation is symbolically associated with a
more metaphysical failure to become aware of death’s profound implications” (322). As I stated earlier, the reader knows nothing of Meursault prior to his mother’s death; therefore, judgments are difficult to justify concerning Meursault’s character preceding the trauma. But what is evident, as Manly suggests, is that Meursault is unaware of “death’s profound implications.” To Meursault, it seems as if his mother hasn’t even died: “For now, it’s almost as if Maman weren’t dead. After the funeral, though, the case will be closed, and everything will have a more official feel to it” (3). But this isn’t exactly the case as Meursault remarks after he buries Maman: “It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that really, nothing had changed” (24). Through these observations, it is as if Meursault does not fully comprehend and understand the event that he has experienced, the death of his mother. Because of this, his conscious mind attempts to protect itself by repressing the trauma associated with his mother’s death. This is why Meursault feels “nothing has changed”—to his conscious mind, nothing has.

Meursault’s inability to feel emotion and comprehend the death of his mother reverberates with the idea of repression. In *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* Freud remarks on a patient suffering from trauma: “In the first place, it must be emphasized that Breuer’s patient, in almost all her pathogenic situations, was obliged to suppress a powerful emotion instead of allowing its discharge in the appropriate signs of emotion, words or actions [emphasis original]” (14). To Freud, one crucial factor in the operation of the unconscious is repression. Freud believes that many people repress painful memories deep in their unconscious mind. The repressed memories become latent, and may eventually become a threat to the individual. Freud argues that the act of repression
does not take place within a person’s consciousness, and thus, people are unaware of the fact that they may have suppressed memories or traumatic experiences lingering in their unconscious (Five Lectures 20).

I utilize psychoanalysis to argue that the trauma associated with Meursault’s repression apropos his mother’s death becomes a veiled form of suicide when he engages in a battle of life and death with the Arab. Thus, the Freudian argument would be that Meursault’s unconscious attempt to commit suicide becomes exposed as an unsuccessful method of evading the Absurd through “revolt.”

Before I delve into the battle with the Arab, I want to discuss Freud’s theory of repression in the early parts of The Stranger so it becomes more evident why Meursault kills the Arab. When Monsieur Perez first speaks to Meursault about the scorching heat, he transitions to the death of Maman. Perez points to the hearse, and asks Meursault if that is his mother (16). According to Freud, since Meursault is unable to express his feelings apropos of the death of his mother he must then repress them. And this is exactly what Meursault does. When Meursault claims that the “glare from the sky was unbearable” he is really referring to the pain and lack of understanding associated with the loss of his mother. To further attest to my point, Meursault reaffirms his lack of understanding of the death of Maman as he admits “for now, it’s almost as if Maman weren’t dead” (3). After the funeral, though, the sunlight and heat worsen, and time seems to quicken for Meursault: “After that, everything seemed to happen so fast, so deliberately, so naturally that I don’t remember any of it anymore” (17). The fact that Meursault cannot remember the funeral would suggest the repression of the event and painful memories. In addition, the scorching heat and blinding sun thus become an external stimulus that later
discharges the trauma in aggression and rage (murder) when he meets the Arab on the beach.

This idea of the weather and sun as metaphors for the death of Meursault’s mother becomes more evident as Meursault travels across the land to watch his mother buried. As the day continues, the weather worsens: “Seeing the rows of cypress trees leading up to the hills next to the sky, and the houses standing out here and there against that red and green earth, I was able to understand Maman better. Evenings in that part of the country must have been a sad relief. But today, with the sun bearing down, making the whole landscape shimmer with heat, it was inhuman and oppressive” (15). Meursault is beginning to understand Maman better through his musings and reflections, but the weather and sun stifle their relationship. Meursault is like a prisoner to the weather now as it is both inhuman and oppressive. The language here is interesting as Meursault’s feelings about the weather is much like his unconscious feelings toward his mother’s death as the sweat soon begins to “pour” down Meursault’s face (16). Meursault soon becomes overcome by the weather, just as he is by the death of his mother. But his inability to express himself leads his feelings to repression.

After the funeral, the first time Meursault thinks of his mother is when Salamano loses his dog: “I realized he [Salamano] was crying. For some reason I thought of Maman. But I had to get up early the next morning. I wasn’t hungry, and I went to bed without any dinner” (39). When Meursault hears Salamano crying, his unconscious mind immediately evokes repressed memories as a symptom in the conscious mind. This is why he thinks of Maman, but he doesn’t know why he thinks of Maman. According to Freud: “The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he
cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it [my emphasis]" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 19). And this is how it is with Meursault. He is unaware that he has repressed the trauma of his mother's death, yet, Salamano’s crying strangely provokes his conscious mind to think of Maman. This sudden crying juxtaposes with the earlier scene when Meursault is at Maman’s funeral and one of the women started crying abruptly: “She was crying softly, steadily, in little sobs. I thought she’d never stop. [...] the woman kept on crying” (10). To Freud, the scenes would be connected in a way that Salamano’s crying over a lost pet triggers Meursault’s unconscious mind to express the same symptom, that is, the thought of his mother. With this explanation in mind, it becomes clearer why Meursault thinks of his mother when he hears Salamano’s crying, and why he is unable to understand why he makes that association.

But what of Meursault and his pre-Oedipal desire to reconnect with his lost object of love, that is, his mother? In the beach scene, Meursault mentions the intensity of the sun, multiple times, beginning with its noxious effects: “The sun was shining almost directly overhead onto the sand, and the glare on the water was unbearable” (52). This idea of the sun as “unbearable” is reverberated as Meursault makes his way closer to the Arab: his head rings, and the pressure of the sun swells his forehead; the heat from the sun makes it difficult to progress forward (57). The Arab in the distance becomes “just a form shimmering before my eyes in the fiery air” (58). To Meursault, the Arab becomes intangible; he becomes dream-like (earlier, Meursault regarded the people at the funeral as a shimmer). Poser remarks on this scene as Meursault taking on a “hallucinatory quality” and that it seems as if “his body were being moved along by a power entirely outside his mind or his will” (“Unconscious Motivation” 262). Similarly, Terry Otten, in
his article “‘Maman’ in Camus’ ‘The Stranger’” argues that the murder of the Arab is unavoidable: “Meursault is passive; he exists in a dream world [. . .] in which he is subject to external forces. He can no more control his actions at the beach than he could at the funeral” (108).

The Arab is not important to Meursault, as he appears but as an obstacle to the return of Maman, that is, his first love object, and this is why the Arab is only seen as a shimmer. This connection is elucidated in the next passage when Meursault is again blinded by the sun: “The sun was starting to burn my cheeks, and I could feel drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows. The sun was the same as it had been the day I had buried Maman, and like then, my forehead was especially hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin” (58-59). But what of this sun, and its stifling effects on Meursault? It is interesting that Meursault juxtaposes the present sun with the sun that occurred on the day of his Maman’s funeral: “The sky was already filled with light. The sun was beginning to bear down on the earth and it was getting hotter by the minute. [. . .] But today, with the sun bearing down, making the whole landscape shimmer with heat, it was inhuman and oppressive [my emphasis]” (15). Later, in the courtroom, the judge asks Meursault why he murdered the Arab and Meursault cannot think of an answer only that “it was because of the sun” (103).

Much attention has been given to the ambiguous nature of the sun by critics: Carl Viggiani suggests that the sun is symbolic of “the ultimate vision of truth,” while S. Beynon John considers the sun to symbolize “violence and destruction” (quoted in Manly 324). I posit, however, and to take Poser’s analysis of “hallucinatory” a step further, that Meursault is being motivated and pushed forward by his unconscious pre-Oedipal
desires. The sun then serves as a link, reestablishing Meursault’s unconscious with its first love object, Maman. Since the sun was “inhuman and oppressive” during Maman’s burial, it consequently becomes a link to Meursault’s unconscious trauma. Thus, when the sun becomes unbearable to Meursault, it triggers the repressed memory of his mother’s death. This is why Meursault is unable to turn away from the sun and avoid the encounter with the Arab: “It occurred to me that all I had to do was turn around and that would be the end of it. But the whole beach, throbbing in the sun, was pressing on my back. [...] It was burning which I couldn’t stand anymore, that made me move forward” (59). Meursault cannot turn around; the sun (his repressed trauma) prevents him. To reiterate Poser and Otten, Meursault is in a “hallucinatory state” or that of a “dream world”; he is outside of his conscious mind. This is why Meursault remarks that he was made to move forward. The unconscious desire is so powerful that it propels him forward, despite the displeasure associated with it. In other words, the unconscious would rather face the initial displeasure of moving forward, in exchange for the greater pleasure of reconnecting with the mother. Meursault is forced to move forward by his unconscious, and by doing so, he is attempting to reestablish his unconscious desire to marry his mother.

If Meursault is unconsciously repressing the desire of his mother’s death, it seems as if he should rather flee the scene than face it. This raises the question: why would the conscious mind increase the displeasure by facing it rather than decrease the displeasure by leaving? I suggest that in addition to Meursault’s being unable to turn around because of his “hallucinatory state,” he is also attempting to master the trauma associated with the
death of his mother. Freud remarks on this idea of deliberating encountering trauma in an attempt to gain mastery of it when discussing the case of a boy named Hans:

The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. . . . What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it. . . . He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful ‘da’ ['there'] [emphasis and brackets original]. This, then was the complete game—disappearance and return. As a rule one only witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act. (*Pleasure Principle* 14)

Freud relates this idea of “disappearance and return” to that of trauma. When Hans throws away the wooden reel, he is in a passive situation and overwhelmed by the action, but, by repeating and continuously subjecting himself to this displeasure, he takes an active part in it, and can consequently begin to master the trauma (*Pleasure Principle* 15). Freud believes that the reason that Hans is participating in this staged displeasure is so he can prepare himself for when his mother leaves him. It would not be a great stretch, then, to parallel Meursault’s situation with that of little Hans. Even though Meursault is receiving displeasure by approaching the Arab, he may suppose that the only way he can ever attempt to master the trauma associated with his mother’s death is by subjecting himself to this very displeasure.

With the death of Maman, Meursault attempts to rise out of his phallic stage with Marie, someone that is outside of his family. To Freud, a child should take his parents as
the first objects of love, but eventually project these feeling onto others: “But his libido should not remain fixated to these first objects; later on, it should merely take them as a model, and should make a gradual transition from them on to extraneous people when the time for the final choice of an object arrives” (Five Lectures 52). Since Maman has died, Meursault is attempting to project his feelings of desire onto Marie. Meursault does not feel love for Marie, as stated earlier in this essay when Meursault explicitly tells her twice that he does not love her, but there are multiple instances where he feels a libidinal connection to her: “I held her to me and we hurried to catch a bus, get back, go to my place, and throw ourselves onto my bed” (35); “When she laughed again I wanted her” (35); “I felt her legs wrapped around mine and I wanted her” (51). But these feelings that Meursault has for Marie are only sexual—they are not feelings of love. According to Pichon-Riviére, Meursault’s relationship to Marie is a failed attempt to understand the death of Maman (quoted in Chaitin 169).

But since Meursault has not yet successfully resolved the Oedipal complex—as Freud states that the successful resolution is contingent on a connection to his father—his relationship with Marie remains distant and without love and consequently fails as he is unable to develop a mature sexual identity with her. Additionally, Marie fades from Meursault’s conscious mind during his trial: “That reminded me that I hadn’t tried to catch Marie’s eye once during the whole trial. I had forgotten about her; I’d just had too much to do” (105). If we examine this scene closely, Meursault is too busy to notice Marie because he is focused on his trial and the accusations of the murder of his mother). Through this, we can begin to see why his attempt to establish a lasting libidinal connection with Marie is unsuccessful. From the Freudian perspective I am exploring,
this is why Meursault's relationship with Marie fails. Since Meursault is still fixated on his mother, he remains in the phallic stage and his sexual development and identity wavers and struggles due to repression (*Five Lectures* 52).

I have given much attention to the pre-Oedipal mother figure in these pages, but what of the father? To Freud, the association with the father in the pre-Oedipal phases evokes castration anxiety in the boy. Castration anxiety refers to the unconscious fear of penile loss originating during the phallic stage of sexual development. This is brought forth when the male becomes aware of the differences between male and female genitalia. The boy, then, assumes that the female's penis has been removed, and consequently becomes anxious that his will be severed by his rival, the father figure, as castigation for desiring the mother figure. To Freud, castration anxiety lasts a lifetime, placing the male in a perpetual state of anxiety (*Introductory Lectures* 393).

There is only one reference to Meursault's father in *The Stranger* and Meursault remarks that "he never really knew him" (110). But if we can stretch the Oedipus complex idea of a father figure a bit further by combining it with that of a threatening character or a character that attempts to disempower Meursault from reaching his mother, then we could turn to the Arab and the scene where Meursault struggles with him:

And this time, without getting up, the Arab drew his knife and held it up to me in the sun. The light shot off the steel and it was like a long flashing blade cutting at my forehead. At the same instant the sweat in my eyebrows dripped down over my eyelids all at once and covered them with a warm, thick film... All I could feel were the cymbals of sunlight crashing on my forehead and, indistinctly, the dazzling spear flying up
from the knife in front of me. The scorching blade slashed at my eyelashes and stabbed at my stinging eyes. That's when everything began to reel.

My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. (59)

The ambiguously sexual language in this scene cannot be accidental: the “long flashing blade”; the “warm, thick film”; “the dazzling spear flying up from the knife in front of me”; “the scorching blade”; his hand squeezing the revolver, all of these passages echo the unconscious fear of castration. To Gilbert Chaitin, in his article “The Birth of the Subject in Camus’ L’Etranger” these castration symbols serve as a barrier preventing admittance to his source, Maman, “his whole being” (171). This “source,” to my argument, would be Meursault’s access to his mother. By reading the Arab as an obstacle for Meursault’s unconscious to overcome in order to reconnect with his mother, Meursault’s castration anxiety becomes evident through the desire of her as he feels that he will be punished by the father figure for his attempted pursuit. This is why Meursault must kill the Arab (the father figure); otherwise, he feels anxious as if that he will be castrated with his knife.

But when Meursault fires upon the Arab, he remarks with disdain: “I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of the beach where I’d been happy. Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times to the door of unhappiness” (59). From a Freudian standpoint, this scene would signify the ambivalence that the child feels toward his father figure. Meursault kills the Arab to protect himself against castration, and ultimately to reconnect with his mother, but it leads to “shattered harmony” and unhappiness. This is because, to Freud, there is a feeling of ambivalence
that the child feels toward the parents: “The feelings which are aroused in these relations between parents [. . .] are not only of positive or affectionate kind but also of a negative or hostile one” (Five Lectures 51). Through this ambivalence, Meursault has mixed feelings toward the Arab: he *loves* the father, yet he simultaneously *fears* and *hates* him; he wants to kill him, but it leads to “shattered harmony” and unhappiness. Consequently, as Poser suggests, the murder evokes Meursault’s “libidinal connection with his father” (“Unconscious Motivation” 265). But, because of this ambivalence, Meursault’s conscious mind only becomes aware of this feeling after the act.

Not only can we see the Arab as a father figure to Meursault, but what about the justice system that imprisons him and ultimately sentences him to death? Again, if we can view a father as a threatening figure or a being that disempowers Meursault, then the justice system clearly fits this role. Interestingly enough, the prosecutor compares Meursault’s crime to that of parricide:

> He went so far as to hope that human justice would mete out punishment unflinchingly. But he wasn’t afraid to say it: my callousness inspired in him a horror nearly greater than that which he felt at the crime of parricide. And also, according to him, a man who is morally guilty of killing his mother severs himself from society in the same way as the man who raises a murderous hand against the father who begat him. (102)

Meursault has *not* killed his mother, yet the prosecutor feels as if he has morally. If we can examine the prosecutor as a second father figure, then what is happening here is that the father is blaming the *son* for the death of the mother. As I have argued earlier, Meursault possesses a level of ambivalence toward the father figure, but, to Freud, the
child has these feelings toward both parents. This scene would then suggest the
*ambivalence* that Meursault has for the mother figure. To Freud, Meursault’s alleged
indifference to Maman’s death would consequently appear as “negative” and “hostile”
behavior. This is why the prosecutor asks Pérez if he had seen Meursault cry during his
mother’s funeral” (91). The prosecutor knows that Meursault loves his mother, as
Meursault remarks earlier to him, “I probably did love Maman,” but because of his
apathetic nature, it isn’t entirely convincing (65). The defendant notices the harsh
accusations that the prosecutor is exercising over Meursault and responds: “Come now, is
my client on trial for burying his mother or for killing a man?” (96). The crowd laughs,
suggesting the silliness of the notion, but when the prosecutor replies to the court “I
accuse this man of burying his mother with crime in his heart!” the crowd suddenly
grows quiet and the defense attorney begins to shake (96). The prosecutor (father figure)
feels that since Meursault didn’t express sadness during Maman’s death, he did indeed
did kill her. The silence of the crowd and nervousness of the defense attorney would
confirm this, and because of this accusation, Meursault is not only sentenced to death for
the killing of the Arab, but also, his mother.

Meursault is not only on trial for the murder of the Arab (a father figure), but also,
the prosecutor blames him morally for the death of his mother, and, the death of his
*father*. After the scene where Meursault is blamed for the death of his mother, the
prosecutor then suggests to the judge and jury that Meursault should be tried the same
way as a man who kills his father (102). Freud remarks on the ideas of parricide in regard
to Oedipus: “Mother-incest was one of the crimes of Oedipus, Parricide was the other”
(Introductory Lectures 416). During the trial, when the prosecutor brings up Maman,
Meursault feels overwhelmed as he remarks that "I had this stupid urge to cry, because I could feel how much all these people hated me" (90). Again, the thought of Maman forces the unconscious mind to evoke a coded symptom of his mother in the conscious mind. This is why Meursault has the urge to cry and feels that everyone hates him because of his unconscious desire to be with his mother. The court feels that because Meursault felt indifferent to his mother's death, he should be punished (executed) as if he has actually killed her.

In addition to the court system acting as a father figure to Meursault, the chaplain that interacts with him in the last chapter of the book can be viewed as one as well. The chaplain does not disempower Meursault as the court system does, but rather, seeks to embrace him. Yet this has an interesting effect on Meursault. After refusing to see the chaplain four times, Meursault assents indifferently upon his next arrival. The chaplain asks Meursault if he can sit next to him, and Meursault immediately refuses, revealing the tension that Meursault has for his father figure (116). The chaplain first addresses Meursault as "my friend," (117), but, shortly later, begins to address him as "my son" (119), and this is when things begin to change. The chaplain then asks Meursault why he is calling him "monsieur" and not "father." The idea of the chaplain as his father angers Meursault and he responds with anger: "That got me mad, and I told him he wasn't my father; he wasn't even on my side" (120). There is again this concept of "libidinal connection" in this scene. As stated above, to Freud, the child loves the father and hates and fears him, which brings forth a feeling of ambivalence. Meursault wants to love the father he has never had, but the chaplain is not his father, and he isn't even on his side.
This is why Meursault is filled with rage: the idea of the chaplain pretending to be his father evokes his pre-Oedipal desires toward his real father.

But the true anger that Meursault has for his real father figure is revealed when the chaplain again calls Meursault “my son” and places his hand on his shoulder” (120). Again, Meursault acts with rage, but much more than his previous elicitation: “Then, I don’t know why, but something inside me snapped. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him and told him not to waste his prayers on me. I grabbed him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy” (120). This reaction is much different from Meursault’s usual stoic character: he is more upset when the chaplain touches him and calls him “my son” than when he murders the Arab and the court sentences him to death. Interestingly enough, this is the first, and only, time in the novel that Meursault shows a complete loss of control over his emotions. Meursault responds with rage when the chaplain asks him to call him “father,” but the inexplicable rage occurs only when he touches Meursault. To Freud, this would suggest the unconscious resentment he feels toward his actual father. The response of rage suggests castration anxiety toward the father figure, and his unconscious desire that he will prevent him from being with his mother.

With the acceptance of his death, Meursault, again, reverts back to his mother in the final pages of the novel:

For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman. I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a ‘fiancé,’ why she had played at beginning again. Even there, in that home where lives are fading out, everything was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must
have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her. And I felt ready to live it all again too. . . . Finding it so much like myself . . . I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. (122-123)

What interests me is the juxtaposition of beginnings and endings in this scene. Meursault’s identification with Maman serves as the separation from his phallic stage. Through this identification, he finally realizes that he can no longer sexually possess his mother and this liberates him: he feels free and ready to live again, despite the irony that he is to be executed shortly. Because of this, he can now finally begin to understand his father, as and why his father went to the execution: “I remember feeling a little disgusted by him at the time. But now I understood, it was perfectly normal. How had I not seen that there was nothing more important than an execution, and that when you come right down to it, it was the only thing a man could truly be interested in?” (110). As Poser suggests, now that Meursault is in prison awaiting his execution, he can finally relate to his father attending the execution” (“Unconscious Motivation” 263). This would then satisfy the connection that Meursault has forever longed for with his father: If Meursault is to be executed then his father would consequently be interested in him. Through this final connection with his mother and father, Meursault’s death becomes meaningless to him, as for the first time in his life, he recognizes happiness. To Freud, Meursault’s connection with his father would be the resolution of the Oedipus complex. In a way, Meursault has conquered his trauma; it is no longer repressed, and he can finally “live it all again.”
Through the application of psychoanalytic theory, Freud's theorization of the Oedipus complex explains why Meursault kills the Arab in Camus' *The Stranger*. Although Meursault may seem like a cold and indifferent character, the reader must remember that one does not *know* Meursault before the death of his mother. Meursault is unaware that he has repressed his mother's death, so, to him, it is impossible for him to begin to realize that she has even died. But, through the failed relationship with Marie, the murder of the Arab, the disempowering of his father figures (the court system, the prosecutor, and the chaplain), and the reconnection with his own father, he finally begins to realize this. Maman is dead; he has accepted it, and he can finally live again. Through this, Meursault's death becomes meaningless—it doesn't matter whether or not he dies; he can now finally live. To Meursault, he has become happy, and he is happy again (123).
Chapter III: Acceptance through Belief and Faith

In addition to suicide, in existential Absurdism, acceptance through belief is also seen as a method of combating the Absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* belief is the second stage that an individual faces in his or her life. As briefly explained in Chapter I, having belief in an existence and being beyond that of the Absurd could essentially create meaning. However, just as with suicide, Camus rejects the idea of faith in a higher being. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes different types of beliefs that I will illustrate later but begins first with belief in God. Camus describes belief in God as a means of hiding: “The leap [leap of faith] in all its forms, rushing into the divine or the eternal . . . all these screens hide the Absurd” (91). Additionally, Camus deems the idea of faith as being “philosophical suicide” (*Sisyphus* 41). This means, to Camus, that faith in a divine being is essentially a method of escapism as there is neither “logical certainty” nor “experimental probability” that could justify the existence of God (*Sisyphus* 40).

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus evokes Søren Kierkegaard and criticizes Kierkegaard’s theory on acceptance through belief, and consequently faith, as a method of countering the Absurd. Kierkegaard states in his journals that a “leap of faith” is required to attempt to understand and make sense of our existence: “the absurd, or to act by virtue of the absurd, is to act upon faith . . . I must act, but reflection has closed the road so I take one of the possibilities and say: This is what I do, I cannot do otherwise because I am brought to a standstill by my powers of reflection” (458). To Kierkegaard, the Absurd, or to act by virtue of the Absurd, is to act upon faith.

In addition to a leap of faith, Kierkegaard states in his journals and papers that faith transforms the Absurd, overcoming it:
The absurd is a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or of the relationship to the divine. When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it, but in every weaker moment it is again more or less absurd to him. The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd—if not, then faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a type of knowledge. (7)

To Kierkegaard, when the believer has faith (a higher form of hope) for immortality, and acts with blind faith, (the leap) then, consequently, the Absurd no longer serves as an absurdity. In other words, the Absurd, transforms, or abates, through a relationship to the divine: it becomes lessened in a way that the believer overcomes it. But Camus rejects this idea, labeling it a mask or a screen: “The leap in all its forms, rushing into the divine or the eternal, surrendering to the illusions of the everyday or of the idea—all these screens hide the absurd” (The Myth 91). Camus also uses a metaphor of Italian priests that use painted screens to hold in front of the face of condemned men, in order to hide the scaffold from them (91). This idea of a screen, or mask, hides the Absurd, but it does not remove it. To Camus, by having faith you are surrendering logic for an idea that is unattainable and illusory. Because of this, Camus would refer to Kierkegaard’s philosophy and logic as philosophical suicide.

I make reference to the issue of philosophical suicide in Chapter I as it is a method of unsuccessfully dealing with the Absurd; but I wish to expand on it here. Camus references philosophical suicide in The Myth of Sisyphus:

I am taking the liberty here to call the existential attitude philosophical suicide. But this does not imply a judgment. It’s a convenient way of
indicating the movement by which a thought negates itself and transcends itself in its very negation. For the existentials negation is their God. To be precise, that God is maintained only through the negation of human reason. (42)

Camus includes a footnote to this passage stating that it is not the affirmation of God that is questioned, but rather the logic leading to this affirmation (42). What Camus means by this is that Gods are provisional and ultimately unstable. Camus is not so much interested in whether or not God exists, but rather in how people come to affirm that they exist. Camus critiques the leap, stating that there “are many ways of leaping,” but concludes that when the leap is taken, it goes against the nature of Absurdism (42). He eschews philosophical suicide because belief in a religious order strays away from rationality. Camus states that religious organizations always resolve life with “the eternal,” and because of this, one is always required to leap. This, again, goes against accepting that life is absurd and transitions to my next point: hope.

Kierkegaard writes in *Philosophical Fragments* on the idea of hope, primarily focusing on a transition of birth and rebirth through an afterlife:

Inasmuch as he [the true believer] was in untruth and now along with the condition receives the truth, a change takes place in him like the change from “not to be” to “to be.” But this transition from “not to be” to “to be” is indeed the transition of birth. But the person who already is cannot be born, and yet he is born. Let us call this transition rebirth, by which he enters the world a second time just as birth. (124)
Camus is against such hope as it is very similar to faith in being motivated by illogical claims and unanswerable questions. To Camus, hope for an ultimately meaningful life becomes an act of eluding, which distracts from accepting the Absurd and living life to its fullest. Camus comments as follows in *The Myth of Sisyphus* about an act of eluding in life, which consequently becomes hope:

> We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which daily hastens us towards death, the body maintains its irreplaceable lead. In short, the essence of that contradiction lies in what I shall call the act of eluding. . . . The typical act of eluding, the fatal evasion that constitutes the third theme of this essay, is hope. Hope of another life. (7)

What Camus means by this passage is that the struggle with the Absurd requires an ineluctable avoidance of hope. Hope fraudulently provides meaning which divorces the Absurd and devalues the Absurdity of human life. According to Camus, being deprived of hope is not despairing, but rather, can grant a meaningful life. To Camus, the Absurd has meaning only insofar as it is defined as meaningless (*Sisyphus* 31).

Much as in the case of suicide, the notions of belief and God are largely absent in *The Stranger*. An evident amount of belief in God, however, can be seen in the scene after Meursault is arrested, when he meets with the court’s magistrate. The examining magistrate is a religious man and Meursault doesn’t take him seriously, thinking that the interrogation is like a “game” (64). Almost immediately after introducing himself to Meursault, the magistrate states he will help Meursault, if he repents his sins to God:

> “After a short silence, he stood up and told me that he wanted to help me, that I interested him, and that with God’s help, he would do something for me” (68). Meursault is
reluctant at first, but speaks with the magistrate nevertheless, which attests to Camus’ view that belief is an attempt to counter the Absurdity of life. As Meursault continues to answer the magistrate’s questions, the scene escalates, revealing the true nature of the magistrate: “Suddenly he stood up, strode over to a far corner of his office, and pulled out a drawer in a file cabinet. He took out a silver crucifix which he brandished as he came toward me. And in a completely different, almost cracked voice, he shouted, ‘Do you know what this is?’” (68). Meursault assents quickly, stating he does, and this agitates the magistrate: “He told me that he believed in God, that it was his conviction that no man was so guilty that God would not forgive him, but in order for that to happen a man must repent and in so doing become like a child whose heart is open and ready to embrace all” (68).

This passage is interesting in multiple ways. First, this passage evokes Camus’ ideas of belief as a method to counter the Absurd in The Myth of Sisyphus. But, additionally, the mentioning of a child reverberates with Freud. To Freud, a “child whose heart is open and ready to embrace all” would signify Meursault’s pre-Oedipal desires. Meursault’s rejection of God suggests the love and desire that he has for his mother as his open heart is ready to embrace her. But the idea of God, or a theological father figure, stymies that relationship and would explain Meursault’s rejection of the magistrate, the crucifix, and of God. Meursault’s absence of the father figure in his life would only lead for him to blame the death of his mother on his father.

Camus utilizes Meursault as dismissing belief in God as it is a fraudulent method of dealing with the Absurd. But the magistrate is persistent, and turns the conversation from his belief in God to that of Meursault’s: “[H]e asked[d] me if I believed in God. I
said no. He sat down indignantly. He said it was impossible; all men believed in God, even those who turn their backs on him” (69). The magistrate becomes angry that Meursault does not share similar beliefs with him and “all men,” or the automated majority. Since Meursault does not believe in God, the magistrate feels threatened, as if Meursault were compromising his own belief. The magistrate’s anger apropos of Meursault’s rejection of God would suggest his own insecurity or inadequacies in his own belief.

As the argument continues, the magistrate becomes angrier and even vehement. The magistrate even goes as far to say that Meursault’s doubt in God makes his own life meaningless (69). If we go back to Camus’ definition of meaning (a provisional and unstable social construction that may be found in active participation in life itself) then it becomes clear why the magistrate is angry. If Meursault were to accept God, and thus commit philosophical suicide, then the magistrate would become “an active participant in life” and consequently perpetuate the idea of meaning for the magistrate. However, since Meursault refuses to accept God, then this shatters the magistrate’s idea of meaning and tosses him in a state of meaningless. Since the magistrate feels threatened by Meursault’s lack of belief, he is being turned back toward the Absurd. Rather than accept and choose to resolve the Absurd, the magistrate reverts back to his belief in God so he can avoid the cold embrace of the universe:

As far as I could see, it didn’t have anything to do with me, and I told him so. But from across the table he had already thrust the crucifix in my face and was screaming irrationally, ‘I am a Christian. I ask Him to forgive you your sins. How can you not believe that He suffered for you?’ I was struck
by how sincere he seemed, but I had had enough. It was getting hotter and hotter. As always, whenever I wanted to get rid of someone I’m not really listening to, I made it appear as if I agreed. To my surprise, he acted triumphant. (69)

As stated before, the anger from the magistrate would suggest the insecurities that the magistrate has about his own beliefs. Camus states in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that religion is a false antidote to providing meaning for life. He references Kierkegaard in this regard: “Kierkegaard wants to be cured. To be cured is his frenzied wish, and it runs throughout his whole journal. The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antinomy of the human condition. An all the more desperate effort since he intermittently perceives its vanity when he speaks of himself, as if neither fear of God nor piety were capable of bringing him to peace” (39). Similarly, the magistrate wants to be cured and to have a purpose or meaning just as Kierkegaard did; but Meursault’s rejection of God compromises his belief. In addition, the magistrate can be perceived as “vain” as he is proud that he is able to convert the most “hardened criminals.” The significance of this is that the magistrate is becoming more desperate as he sees the difficulty of converting Meursault increases, just as Camus finds an irrational desperation in Kierkegaard.

Likewise, when Meursault does not accept forgiveness from God, the magistrate becomes increasingly upset. This is why he becomes angry, and it is also why he becomes triumphant when he believes that Meursault has sided with him in the end.

When the magistrate discovers that Meursault has been feigning his acceptance, he becomes distraught: “‘You see, you see!’ he said. ‘You do believe, don’t you, and you’re going to place your trust in Him, aren’t you?’ Obviously, I again said no. He fell
back in his chair” (69). At this point the magistrate, realizing he is unable to persuade Meursault, gives up on the conversation:

The magistrate seemed to have lost interest in me and to have to come to some sort of decision about my case. He didn’t talk to me about God anymore, and I never saw him as worked up as he was that first day. The result was that our discussions became more cordial. . . . As the magistrate put it, my case was taking its course. And then sometimes, when the conversation was of a more gentle nature, I would be included. I started to breathe more freely. (70)

Since the magistrate is unable to sway Meursault’s disbelief in God, he abandons the idea, and ceases the conversation about religion. The magistrate “loses interest in him” and never speaks to him about God anymore. The reasoning behind this is presumably that, if Meursault is going to hell anyway, the magistrate can relax and accept him as he actually is. Besides, to continue arguing unsuccessfully with an unrepentant sinner could lead the magistrate to question and doubt his own belief, as seen. Not willing to risk facing the Absurd, the magistrate clings to his fraudulent method of dealing with this ambiguous condition of existence, and thereby perpetuates his own escapism. By avoiding the issue with Meursault, and consequently the negative response, he is thereby avoiding disbelief and doubt.

To further expand on the issue of facing the Absurd, Camus explains further in *Myth of Sisyphus* the advantages of abandoning hope: “The imagination can add many others inseparable from time and exile, who likewise know how to live in harmony with a
universe without future and without weakness. This absurd, godless world is, then peopled with men who think clearly and have ceased to hope” (92). After the encounter with the magistrate, Meursault becomes exiled, alone in his godless world, ceasing to hope. Since Meursault “thinks clearly,” he cannot live in harmony with the magistrate. This would further reveal why the magistrate avoids the issue of God with Meursault. In addition, Meursault’s ability to breathe more freely would attest to this idea as well. The dissociation of the automated majority allows Meursault to live his life to the fullest without regard for the delusions of others.

In addition to avoiding Meursault, the magistrate makes a joke at the end of the scene in an attempt to restore faith in his own beliefs, and consequently, to devalue Meursault’s rejection of God. The comment is made at the end of a hearing with the magistrate regarding Meursault’s trial: “I was almost surprised that I had ever enjoyed anything other than those rare moments when the judge would lead me to the door of his office, slap me on the shoulder, and say to me cordially, ‘That’s all for today, Monsieur Antichrist.’ I would then be handed over to the police” (71). It’s interesting that Meursault is referred to as Monsieur Antichrist. Meursault does, however, admit that he does not accept the belief of God numerous times in The Stranger, so I interpret Camus as using satire here. Additionally, Meursault’s being labeled as the Antichrist would suggest hyperbole. In addition, and because this is a particularly comical passage, the reader can understand that the magistrate is making a joke to Meursault.

Freud writes about jokes and their effect on the unconscious in The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious. Freud argues that jokes may have “tendencies” that suggest hidden meanings. Jokes may be an expression of the unconscious with a particularly
veiled purpose (89). If we can take Freud’s idea of a joke into consideration, then the magistrate’s calling Meursault “Monsieur Antichrist” would further attest to the hypocritical self-righteousness of the social elite. Be referring to Meursault as the Antichrist, the magistrate subtly suggests why Meursault’s rejection of God threatens his own ability to continue in a fraudulent method of dealing with the Absurd. By ostracizing Meursault, the magistrate recreates harmony for himself which allows him to further demonstrate his beliefs.

Just as the fallacy of acceptance through belief and faith is evoked through the scene with the magistrate, it is also evident in the scene with the chaplain at the end of the novel. I examined this scene in Chapter II, but I want to now explore it with a new lens. As mentioned before, the scene is short, yet these few pages are critical and align strongly with The Myth of Sisyphus and with how faith is a fraudulent method of dealing with the Absurd. In The Stranger, a few days before Meursault’s execution, the chaplain visits him. After refusing to see him four times, Meursault finally agrees to see him, but then uses the opportunity only to reject him directly. Taking the chaplain as an obvious example of conventional faith, we see that Meursault’s repudiation of his offers to help represent his complete rejection of such. However, what interests me more is Meursault’s agreement to meet with him in the first place. By doing this, it would appear that Meursault tentatively is preparing to evade the Absurd through the idea of faith. The chaplain asks Meursault if he can sit next to him, and Meursault immediately refuses, revealing the tension between Meursault and traditional escapist faith (116).

The chaplain first addresses Meursault as “my friend,” (117), but, shortly after, begins to address him as “my son” (119), and this is when things begin to escalate. The
chaplain then asks Meursault why he is calling him “monsieur” and not “father.” The idea of the chaplain as his father angers Meursault and he responds with anger: “That got me mad, and I told him he wasn’t my father; he wasn’t even on my side” (120). The anger suggests the frustration Meursault feels about religious belief. But the true anger that Meursault has for faith is revealed when the chaplain again calls Meursault “my son” and places his hand on his shoulder” (120). Again, Meursault acts with rage, but much more than his previous elicitation: “Then, I don’t know why, but something inside me snapped. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him and told him not to waste his prayers on me. I grabbed him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy” (120). As stated in Chapter II, Meursault responds with rage when the chaplain asks him to call him “father,” but the incomprehensible rage, and joy, occurs when the chaplain places his hand on Meursault’s shoulder. The joy Meursault experiences here reflects the conscious decision that Meursault feels as he is now able to assert his individuality and sense of control through defiant revolt in lieu of acceptance of religious faith.

If we look at this scene with a psychoanalytic lens, then we must refer back to an earlier part in *The Stranger* when Meursault is at the funeral of his mother. During this time, Meursault encounters a priest that stands outside the building that holds the casket: “Out in front of the building stood the priest and two altar boys. One of them was holding a censer, and the priest was leaning toward him, adjusting the length of its silver chain, as we approached, the priest straightened up. He called me ‘my son’ and said a few words to me. He went inside; I followed” (14). Earlier in my thesis, in Chapter II, I make the argument that Meursault represses the trauma apropos the death of his mother.
Consequently, through repression, the hot sun explains the murder of the Arab. By comparing this priest with the chaplain that Meursault insults and becomes angry with before his execution, and applying Freud’s theory of repression, then, again, the anger Meursault exhibits becomes more easily explained. The chaplain thus becomes a symbol for the earlier priest. If Meursault’s unconscious associates the first priest with the death of his mother, then the conversation with the second chaplain could be responsible for the evocation of the repressed anger and rage. Since the priest initially blocked the passageway to Maman’s casket, Meursault’s unconscious mind interprets the chaplain also as a source that prevents him access to his mother. This could also relate to why Meursault allowed the chaplain to meet with him. If Meursault believes that the chaplain has the ability to grant access to Maman, just as the earlier priest did, then Meursault would view the chaplain as a means to reestablishing his pre-Oedipal desires to be with his mother.

Throughout the scene with the magistrate and chaplain, Meursault is nobler and more honest than those who judge him. According to Eamon Maher’s “Spiritual Revolt: Learning from Albert Camus,” “The magistrate and the chaplain seem to be part of a group of people who look on religion as a safeguard against suffering and despair” (12). Mahler’s interpretation reveals that the magistrate and the chaplain are the “weak ones,” as they have never questioned the basis from which their beliefs have originated and on which they rest (12). Meursault’s ability to disrupt their complacency adds to Camus’ ideas of belief as an unacceptable method of dealing with the Absurd.

Through both The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus Camus illustrates that to adopt a religious or metaphysical solution to a problem in an attempt to solve the
Absurdity of life through belief is as destructive as physical suicide. This is seen through both the magistrate and chaplain, where the religious believers remove themselves from the confrontation with the Absurd, replacing it with a façade that prevents them from living life to the fullest. They both choose to escape the Absurd through God, but Meursault eventually chooses the more courageous and honest alternative, defiant revolt, which I will illustrate in my final chapter.
Chapter IV: Defiant Revolt

Although Camus rejects suicide and faith as acceptable responses to the Absurd, he does, however, advocate revolt in the form of awareness and defiance. Defiant revolt is the third and final method of dealing with the Absurd treated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It also becomes the third and final stage illustrated in *The Stranger*, when Meursault chooses to stand in defiant revolt against the Absurd shortly before his execution. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes of a revolt devoid of future: “Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his moral consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his life time” (66). Additionally, Russell Blackwell states apropos of Camus that through an inner revolt meaning can be made in one’s life: “We can give our lives meaning by what he [Camus] portrays as an inner revolt against our condition. Nothing about the universe limits our inner freedom to make our own assessment of values and to live accordingly in the situations where we find ourselves” (“Meaning and Life” 56). However, this involves more than just revolting against the Absurd in an attempt to make meaning of one’s life; it is also continuing to live in it despite the absurdity that life offers. In revolting against the Absurd, acknowledges the importance of maintaining this self-awareness. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus regards freedom as “that which a human heart can experience and live” (60). This means that without religious or moral restraints, one could essentially live his or her life and become content living it despite the irrationality of the Absurd.

As mentioned in Chapter I, Camus utilizes the ancient Greek story of Sisyphus and his fate in Tartarus as a model for the Absurd. I want to expand on Sisyphus and his relation to the Absurd. To Camus, The gods had condemned Sisyphus to eternally roll a rock to the top of a mountain from whence the stone would fall back, and Sisyphus was
forced to arbitrarily roll the boulder back up again. Camus believes that the reasons the
gods punished Sisyphus with this idea of perpetual labor is because those deities “had
thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and
hopeless labor” (88). Camus retells the myth of Sisyphus in The Myth of Sisyphus and I
will summarize it briefly. Camus states that Sisyphus, being close to death, desired to
test his wife’s love for him. Before his death, Sisyphus ordered his wife to depose his
unburied body in the middle of the town square. After Sisyphus died his wife did exactly
that. When Sisyphus “awoke,” he was in the underworld. Camus states that Sisyphus was
annoyed by his wife’s obedience “so contrary to human love” that he received permission
from Pluto to return to earth to chastise his wife. He then told Pluto that he would return
to the underworld after his act (88-89). But when Sisyphus returned to earth he enjoyed
water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal
darkness (89). The gods repeatedly threatened Sisyphus to return back to the underworld,
but he ignored them and spent several more years on earth. The gods eventually had
enough of Sisyphus’ treachery, so Zeus had Mercury seize Sisyphus, leading him forcibly
to the underworld, where, Camus states, “his rock was ready for him” (89).

To Camus, Sisyphus is the “Absurd Hero.” Since he had defied death in rebelling
against mortality, and rejected the will of the gods, he was able to live his life to the
fullest after his arrival back to earth. What Camus finds interesting about this is that
Sisyphus is punished for his passion for life: “His passion for life won him that
unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.
This is the price that must be paid for the passions on the earth” (89). Because of this,
Sisyphus is condemned, chained to his rock, a long effort of forcing a stone uphill, only to watch it roll back down after his labor.

But the return, and consequently Sisyphus’ moment to admire the rock falling back down the hill is what interests Camus. Camus refers to this ephemeral moment as a “pause” (89). Camus associates Sisyphus’s pause with consciousness and reflection:

I see that man going back down with a heavy year measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of these moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger that his rock. (89)

Just as Sisyphus, Camus is suggesting that an individual who possesses consciousness of the Absurd and chooses to stand in defiant revolt of the absurdity of life can become superior to his or her fate, stronger than their rock. Camus compares Sisyphus’ fate like that of the everyday workman performing the same labor over and over again and for no real purpose; Sisyphus’ fate is no less absurd. But the difference, to Camus, is that Sisyphus is conscious of his fate, he understands that his life is Absurd and devoid of hope and yet he still continues to push the boulder up the hill. Sisyphus thus stands in defiant revolt of the Absurd, granting him victory over his torment. To Camus, the Absurd Man says “yes,” and “his effort will be unceasing” as there is no higher destiny, there is just one’s personal fate. This is Sisyphus. To Camus, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (91).
By comparing the *Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* I suggest that Meursault can be interpreted as a modern-day Sisyphus. F. P. A. Demeterio writes on Sisyphus and Camus in his article “A Comparative Study on the Theme of Human Existence in the Novels of Albert Camus and F. Sionil Jose”: “For Camus, the greatness of Sisyphus is manifested ‘at each moment when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods,’ to start his task over and over again. Having accepted his sentence with courage and condemnation, he becomes superior to his condemnation” (57). In both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* Camus’ answer to absurdity is defiant revolt. Through this, both Sisyphus and Meursault are championed as instances of the Absurd hero. Meursault comes to this defiant revolt of the Absurd only at the end of the novel, when he realizes that his life possesses no meaning or goal. Meursault eschews suicide and acceptance through belief, like the magistrate and chaplain, and understands that living his life is more than enough. Demeterio argues in his essay about Meursault’s coming of defiant revolt:

Through the life narrative that is bewildering both to the reader and to the main character himself, Meursault found the key to his meaningless, goalless, Godless and indifferent existence after taking an insult from a well-intentioned prison chaplain on the eve of his execution who paternalistically told him: ‘I am on your side. But you have no way on knowing it, because your heart is blind. I shall pray for you.’ The code that would give sense to this fragmentary narrative is Meursault’s rather late realization, that occurred with his inner revolt against the prison chaplain
and society at large, that man does not need meaning, nor God to fill up
his empty life, to live is more than enough. (53)

The strength of Demeterio’s article is he effectively interprets Camus’ theories from *The Myth of Sisyphus* while applying them to *The Stranger*. Demeterio’s argument coincides with mine as we both maintain that Meursault’s revolt against the chaplain is a revolt against belief in God and the automated majority of society that sides with the fraudulent method of dealing with the Absurd. Meursault does not need suicide or acceptance through belief in God to fill his empty life in a feigned attempt to conquer the Absurd. Rather, his triumph consists in choosing to stand in defiant revolt against the absurdity of life. This alone lets him live freely: “And I felt ready to live it all again too. As if that blind rage has washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again” (*The Stranger* 123).

Demeterio states that the chaplain was the catalyst for Meursault to stand in defiant revolt against the Absurd; but I argue that it is actually *all* of Meursault’s experiences that lead him to defiant revolt of the Absurd and his happiness. Muriam Davis states in her article regarding Absurdism, “‘A New World Rising’: Albert Camus and the Absurdity of Neo-Liberalism”, that each individual must seek to maximize his or her own interests in an Absurd life: “‘Having accepted that this life has no other aspect other than the absurd, one must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living’ (229). What Davis means by this is that one is not defined by some arbitrary spiritual or moral “quality” of his or her actions, but rather by the sheer quantity and
variety of experiences that one accumulates. This would suggest that all of Meursault’s experiences led to his defiant revolt and constant awareness of the Absurd, rather than, as Demeterio suggests, solely the insult from the chaplain. Meursault’s experiences from magistrate, the judge, and the surrounding society liberates him from his Freudian desires. This is why Meursault, despite the ironic nature of the passage, feels happy and free even though he is in prison and soon to be executed. It is because he is content with his life experiences and has come to terms with the fact that his life is Absurd that he can open himself to the gentle indifference of the world.

To Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, one spends an entire lifetime in confrontation with the Absurd, and it is a never-ending struggle with one’s existence. This brings forth the concept of time (23). To Camus, one that confronts the Absurd must maintain constant awareness of it and is in a “conscious dissatisfaction” (23). Additionally he posits that: “A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it” (24). Time and existence is often studied within the philosophy of the Absurd as the Absurd, ultimately, ends with death. Camus states in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that “there can be no absurd outside this world either.” What this means is that, with death, the Absurd no longer exists. As previously stated, it is both in the relationship (divorce) with the universe and that of an individual. Therefore, when one dies, the Absurd dies with that individual. With this in mind, I would like to expand more on the relationship between the Absurd and time.

On *The Stranger*’s treatment of time, Rachel Bespaloff comments in her article “The World of the Man Condemned to Death”: “Having neither past nor future, he [Meursault] has only a present which is crumbling away and does not involve a memory.
Time, until the final revolt, is nothing for him but a succession of distinct movements, which no Cartesian God pieces together, which no vital impulses spans, which no remembrance transfigures” (93). The interesting part of Bespaloff’s argument is that Absurd Man possesses neither a past nor future. From a psychoanalytic point of view, too much focus on the past can manifest depression, while too much focus on the future can evoke anxiety. The Absurd Man focuses on the present, thereby living life to the fullest. The past and future are irrelevant.

Bespaloff’s ideas attest to the lack of a present or a future throughout Camus’ work. Therefore, Camus’ temporal strategies employed in The Stranger are not accidental. Camus purposefully disregards Meursault’s past and future, to aid in painting a meaningless existence. There is nothing known about Meursault before the beginning pages of the book and the reader does not bear witness to Meursault’s execution. This is because the Absurd lacks a sense of the eternal. Camus refers to this in The Myth of Sisyphus when he states: “What, in fact, is the absurd man. He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to get with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. . . . He lives out his adventure within the span on his lifetime” (66).

Meursault is both courageous and possesses reason at the end of the novel before his execution: “Sounds of the countryside were drifting in. Smells of night, earth, and salt air were cooling my temples. The wondrous peace of that sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide” (122). Despite Meursault’s impending execution, he is living
without appeal, and living for the moment, for the present. He is not afraid to be
executed; he is courageous in confronting his death.

Meursault’s reasoning and understanding of Maman and her choice to take a
fiancé at an elderly age allows Meursault to maintain awareness of the Absurdity of his
own life. This allows him to maintain defiant revolt and live his life of the fullest. After
his musing, Meursault states “And I felt ready to live it all again too” (122). Time
becomes irrelevant. Camus is arguing that it is the present that matters, not the past nor
the future, and Meursault is championed for living in the now.

The idea of time and the present is also explored when Meursault is first
imprisoned in *The Stranger*. Meursault is not burdened by the fact that he is in prison;
rather, he compares the inauthentic experience of time with the attitude of someone
gazing at life from the hollow of a dead tree:

> At the time, I often thought that if I had nothing to do but look up at the
sky flowering overhead, little by little I would have gotten used to it. I
would have waited for birds to fly by or clouds to mingle, just as here I
waited to see my lawyer’s ties and just as, in another world, I used to wait
patiently until Saturday to hold Marie’s body in my arms. Now, as I think
back on it, I wasn’t in a hollow tree trunk. There were others worse off
than me. Anyway, it was one of Maman’s ideas and she often repeated it,
that after a while you could get used to anything. (77)

Indeed, one could get used to anything — but more to the point was that one should learn
to appreciate what one has, while one has it. Meursault used to live life, growing
complacent to things, but his attitude has now changed as he stands in defiant revolt.

Time and setting become irrelevant to Meursault as he expresses that “after a while you could get used to anything.” Meursault is much like Sisyphus in this regarding, rolling up the hill day after day only to watch it roll back down the hill. He must then repeat the journey for the rest eternity. Like Sisyphus and Meursault, Camus’ Absurd hero is a man without a past or a future as he is consciously aware of his impending death.

Meursault’s acceptance of his death and the meaninglessness of his life reveals his acknowledgement of the Absurd and of inner freedom. Through doing so, Meursault’s death becomes meaningless—it doesn’t matter whether or not he dies; he can now finally live. To Meursault, he has become happy, and he is happy again (123). He stands in defiant revolt against the Absurd, and through this, he can finally live.
Chapter V: Conclusion

To Camus, an individual can travel through three stages of revolt in his or her life in an attempt to find and make meaning in an Absurd world. However, not all whom follow this path are able to reach the stage of defiant revolt. By utilizing The Myth of Sisyphus and The Stranger Camus is able to begin to understand and clarify life by demonstrating three methods of resolving the Absurd. To Camus, if individuals can recognize the concepts of suicide and acceptance through belief and faith as fraudulent methods of dealing with the Absurd, then they can focus on accepting that life is Absurd. By standing in defiant revolt against the Absurd, Camus argues that one could then lead to freedom in an Absurd world by constantly rebelling without appeal. This idea of understanding is a process to Camus and this is why he uses Meursault to demonstrate these stages of dealing with the Absurd. Meursault can thus be seen as a representation of humankind in society. By returning to Camus and the Absurd, an authentic individual can begin to understand and protest suicide, philosophical suicide, and acceptance through faith in everyday life. Not only that, but Absurdism offers a lens and exploration of the human condition and a reflection of self. If Camus believes that all human beings face absurdity in their lives and venture through these three stages of revolt, then we are all Meursault’s searching for meaning and purpose in our own lives. However, whether or not we can find it becomes up to the individual.

My thesis then acts as a contribution to Camus’ scholarship by analyzing critical readings of The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus. Through my research, The Stranger can then be seen as an enactment of The Myth of Sisyphus. By utilizing a theoretical lens of Freudian psychoanalysis and using it to analyze the novels, we can begin to unravel
the tension between the two works. By utilizing psychoanalysis and applying it directly to Meursault, the reader is able to better understand Meursault. In sum, the resolution of the Oedipus complex of Meursault evokes his ability to understand and make sense of the convoluted nature of Camus' Absurdism. Meursault may not be able to make sense of himself, but through the process of reaching consciousness he is able to eschew suicide, philosophical suicide, and acceptance through faith. As a result, Meursault’s working through his Freudian desires and psychological issues (repression, unconscious desires, anxiety) grants him a level of consciousness that allows him to understand his Absurdist tendencies and beliefs. Ultimately, this leads him to final stage of defiant revolt at the end of the novel right before his execution. When Meursault reaches the stage of defiant revolt, he transforms into Sisyphus. He becomes greater than his execution just as Sisyphus becomes greater than his rock. Just as it was with Sisyphus, one must imagine Meursault happy.

Throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*, the conceptualization of human existence is placed at the plateau of Absurdism, where man and woman, powered by the logic of the accumulation of wealth, finds him or herself saturated with isolation and without meaning. According to Demeterio, “In his plateau of modernism, Camus decided to continue the modernist journey, where other intellectuals have either languished in nihilism or taken the leap in the postmodernist horizon” (66). Even today, in the twenty first century, Camus’ Absurd individual stands. By focusing on Camus’ theme of the Absurd and human existence, we can begin a lucid, more understanding form of life.
Works Cited:


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