

**THE EXISTENTIAL AND POSTMODERN INDIVIDUAL**

A Thesis

by

**LESLEY VIRGINIA HERRING**

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

May 2005

Major Subject: Philosophy

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May 2005

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**ABSTRACT**

The Existential and Postmodern Individual.

(May 2005)

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The theories of existentialism and postmodernism seem like very different ideas at first glance. Existentialism is a philosophy of individuals, while postmodernism is a theory focused more on society and less on individual existence. In this thesis, I will show that both of these ideas can be merged together to be seen as an individual philosophy. Using theories from each philosophical camp, I will describe both the existential and postmodern being. I will explain characteristics of these individuals and explain how they function in society. I will use several philosophers to explain this such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault, and finally, I will discuss *The Stranger* by Albert Camus. In *The Stranger*, the main character, Monsieur Meursault, exhibits the qualities of both types of individuals. I will use him as an example of the type of person that emerges from the philosophical ideas of existentialism and postmodernism. I analyze Meursault through the eyes of both the existentialist and the postmodernist, and conclude that Meursault personifies the traits and characteristics that are specific to these philosophies.

*For my mother and father*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. John J. McDermott for believing in my project, Dr. Theodore George for helping organize my thoughts, and Dr. Stjepan Mestrovic for sharing my excitement of *The Stranger*. Without each of you, this thesis would not have survived my fragmented thoughts.

Thanks to Jonathan Lynch for the many drinks we shared together. I know it helped relieve stress for both of us. We drank, socialized and made it through seven years of school together. Also thank you to Mathew Foust for your enlightening discussions about existentialism, pragmatism and relationships. Whether or not they were helpful for either of us, they were still entertaining.

I would also like to thank those who have helped me understand that philosophy is not everything, but philosophy is in everything that we experience. I have learned from you that we only have each experience once, and they should not all be had within office walls. Our experiences cannot be fully appreciated without philosophy, as philosophy cannot be fully appreciated without experiences.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis is titled “The Existential and Postmodern Individual.” As the title suggests, its major concern is what is an existential and postmodern individual and how can he be recognized within society. I will give insight into the individual, the most basic component of society, using both of these theories.

It is possible for one person to have traits that fit both the existential and postmodern models. This can be seen in Meursault, the main character from Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*. Though at first glance the existential and postmodern individual may seem like an outcast, upon meeting and understanding Meursault, we see that many of these characteristics are in each of us. The objective of this thesis is to explore exactly what this type of character looks like in society and how he appears to others. I will first explore what an existential individual is. This includes what this individual is to himself and also how he appears to others. Next, I will do the same for the postmodern individual followed by the example of Meursault.

This question has been posed for existentialists; however it has generally been approached as an individual crusade. What this means is that it is generally spoken of from the individual looking out, rather than from the others, or society, looking in. From this viewpoint, we can explore the individual as a free and self-conscious being; however, we also miss the characteristics that are seen in this individual by others and also how to

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This thesis follows the style and format of *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

identify this individual from others. In order to understand the existential individual, it is pertinent that we see this being from both perspectives.

The question of the individual is less frequently raised in postmodern discussions. Postmodern arguments usually focus on a larger scale, such as society. Also, in postmodern theory no one person or institution is given a privileged voice, and this has kept many from talking about the individual. If the individual is void of any authority or ability to create original texts,<sup>1</sup> then some believe that there is no individual to speak of. This, however, is not the case. The individual is the most basic component of society and must not be ignored, even if he has no privileged voice. This is a person who is still functioning in society, affecting others and is responsible for his actions. We must recognize how this individual functions, how he affects society and how he appears to other members of society.

Albert Camus gives us a look into this type of individual in *The Stranger*. The main character, Meursault, displays characteristics of both the existential and postmodern individual. These two types of individuals may seem like an anomaly, or even impossible; however, when we see Meursault, it is seen that an individual may exist as a unification of these two theories. Camus allows us to see the world from Meursault's perspective but also gives us an idea of how the world views Meursault and how Meursault feels he is being viewed. This allows us to see both how Meursault feels about his own existence as well as how he is seen in society.

The existential being is a self-conscious, free, and autonomous individual. He is conscious of this freedom, which may lead him to feelings of independence or loneliness.

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<sup>1</sup> A text can be any phenomenon or event.



He is also plagued by the absurdity of existence and accepts it as part of his own existence. This individual's understanding of his freedom and the absurdity in his life ultimately brings him to self-surrender and self-affirmation.

The postmodern being is one of an almost anonymous existence. He does not maintain or seek out caring relationships and remains independent of truth-seeking perspectives. Like the existential being, the postmodern individual prefers the temporary over the permanent and seeks immediate gratification. The postmodern man may be hedonistic, narcissist or both, portraying egoism and intellectualism, while at the same time remaining nonjudgmental and relaxed.

Meursault is all of these things. He is a self-conscious and free individual in his everyday life. He is existential in that recognizes his freedom and the absurdities that occur in his life as well as the consequences that arise from them, and this becomes evident in the murder that he commits and is punished for. He recognizes the consequences of his actions as the consequences of either choices that he has made or consequences of the absurdity of life, acts that there are just no explanations for.

Throughout Meursault's story, he leads an almost anonymous life as postmodern man does. Before his crime he is anonymous in that he is not often recognized, and after his crime he is anonymous in that no one understands him. In his personal relationships, Meursault seeks immediate gratification and does not think ahead to the future. It must be noted here that although Meursault does not look toward the future and future consequences that may arise from his actions, he does accept them as his own consequences when they arise; however, he does not recognize these consequences until

they are in the present. Meursault also demonstrates characteristics of the hedonist and narcissist while maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude towards others.

The purpose of this project is to bring the theoretical aspects of existentialism and postmodernism to the individual and to understand how they appear in the world. Often we do theory for theory's sake and forget its place in the world or even the purpose for the theory. Here the purpose of the theory is to add insight into the existence of man and Camus has created a man with whom we can do this with both existentialism and postmodernism.

## CHAPTER II

### THE EXISTENTIAL INDIVIDUAL

The individual self is an important theme in existentialist philosophy. It is often said that we are self-conscious beings, and this is exactly what an existential being is, one who is self-conscious. However, it is not always clear what this means. What are we conscious of when we are self-conscious? What is the self and how does it function? Much is done to explain what an existential being goes through in an effort to assert or maintain freedom; however, it is still unclear what this individual is like or how he appears in society.

I will show how individuals act from the perspective of the existentialist philosopher. Throughout my discussion, I will discuss the difference between an existential being and the individual who is not self-conscious. Also, I will show how an existential being functions in society. In other words, I will discuss how an existential being appears in society to other people.

Most existentialists believe that man is free and Jean-Paul Sartre also agrees with this view. "I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free."<sup>2</sup> Even when man tries to refuse freedom, he is still making a conscious, free decision. It is his choice to give another being the opportunity to make a choice, and he must still be responsible for that decision. Sartre goes on to explain, "Human reality may be defined as a being such that in its being its freedom is at stake because human reality perpetually

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<sup>2</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness* (Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1956), 567.

tries to refuse to recognize its freedom.”<sup>3</sup> We are all free beings; although, we do not all accept this freedom.<sup>4</sup> Freedom is the actual being of man and how he constructs himself, and therefore, is also our consciousness of being. This is because the acts of freedom are not distinct from my being, but “it is a choice of myself in the world and by the same token it is a discovery of the world.”<sup>5</sup> We are always threatened by the burden of having to choose ourselves. Our construction of our own reality and being rests upon our freedom to choose that reality and being.

Sartre also believes, though, that freedom is not without responsibility.

In this sense the responsibility of the for-itself<sup>6</sup> is overwhelming since he is the one by whom it happens that there is a world; since he is also the one who makes himself be, then whatever may be the situation in which he finds himself, the for-itself must wholly assume this situation with its peculiar coefficient of adversity, even though it be insupportable. He must assume the situation with the proud consciousness of being the author of it, for the very worst disadvantages or the worse threats which can endanger my person have meaning only in and through my project; and it is on the ground of the engagement which I am that they appear. It is therefore senseless to think of complaining since nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are.<sup>7</sup>

This responsibility is not resignation to our freedom. It is the accepting of the consequences of our freedom. Sartre also argues that there is no non-human situation.<sup>8</sup> It

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 568.

<sup>4</sup> We may try to reject freedom through bad faith, which will be discussed later. We may also try to avoid the consequences that arise from the free choices that we make.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 594.

<sup>6</sup> Being-for-itself is a term for conscious being. It can be likened to self-consciousness. The self refers to the subject in relation to himself. “The law of being of the for-itself, as the ontological foundation of consciousness, is to be itself in the form of presence to itself. (124)”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 707-8.

<sup>8</sup> Sartre explains that even situations of war and torture create a human state of things. Events that happen to a man through other men can only be human, meaning that all events such as war and torture occur through human freedom. Therefore, they are human experiences and consequences that are innately human in that they are only created by humans.

thus follows that man is always what is happening to him and how he reacts to the consequences. “Everything that happens to me is mine.”<sup>9</sup> The existential individual will embrace freedom and own up to all of his choices, regardless of the consequences. We are responsible for everything that occurs in our own lives because we make decisions on what to do and how to react to others’ choices.

Following this view of freedom and responsibility, Sartre believes that there are no accidents in a life. Every event that happens in my life is “in my image and I deserve it,”<sup>10</sup> because I have chosen it. Most of the time, however, Sartre believes that we flee from freedom through anguish and bad faith. In this attempt to overcome our freedom, we lie to ourselves about who we are and what we are.

Sartre defines anguish as the consciousness of one’s own freedom. Anguish is a type of self-consciousness and is experienced by man when he realizes that any conduct is possible. It is his choice and his responsibility as to which conduct is made actual. He literally has the freedom to choose any action, and he must accept the consequences for those actions. Anguish is different from fear in that “fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before myself.”<sup>11</sup> You can fear or be afraid of death, but anguish occurs when you are afraid of being afraid. You become filled with anguish before yourself in this situation.

A situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 708.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 708.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 65.

Anguish is always over oneself and arises from what I will do to myself. On the contrary, one fears what someone or something will do him. Oaklander gives his interpretation of anguish.

In anguish I am conscious that the decisions I make in the future are of the utmost importance to me now, since I am that future person, and yet now I am powerless to affect my future. Anguish with respect to the future involves the realization that, because of my radical freedom (that is, the spontaneity of consciousness), I have no more control over my future than I have over your future. In anguish 'I apprehend my freedom as being the possible destroyer in the present and in the future of what I am.'<sup>13</sup>

The existential individual realizes that freedom has this effect on his life. Being conscious of one's freedom and the impact of future decisions is what creates anguish. The existential being accepts freedom and the consequences of his freedom, and while most people try to avoid anguish by becoming beings of habit, the existential being does not. Many people will live tomorrow just as they lived yesterday and today. When we do this to ourselves, we are denying ourselves the freedom of choice. Many people claim that they must live every day the same: I must go to my job at this time and I must talk to the same people; however, this is not the case. This is merely an example of avoiding different consequences by deferring the choice to habit. The existential individual does not live by habit. Every time an existential person comes upon a decision, instead of reverting to habit, he realizes that he must remake that decision during that time. It may be the case that he does indeed make the same decision several times in a row, but it is because he is consciously using his freedom to make this decision. He realizes that he is responsible for this choice and does not claim that it was not in his power to choose.

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<sup>13</sup> Oaklander, L. Nathan, *Existentialist Philosophy An Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 222.

Most of the time, we flee freedom by using bad faith. In order to understand how most individuals use this mechanism to escape the anguish caused by freedom, we must first fully understand what bad faith encompasses. Sartre states that bad faith is the attitude “which is such that consciousness instead of directing its negation<sup>14</sup> outward turns it toward itself.”<sup>15</sup> This can be identified with falsehood in that bad faith is a lie to oneself.

The essence of the lie implies in fact that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding. A man does not lie about what he is ignorant of; he does not lie when he spreads an error of which he himself is the dupe; he does not lie when he is mistaken. The ideal description of the liar would be a cynical consciousness, affirming truth within himself, denying it in his words, and denying that negation as such.<sup>16</sup>

In the instance of bad faith, the person sees the truth and denies that truth at the same time. The person guilty of bad faith is lying to himself about his own facticity.<sup>17</sup> “The one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth.”<sup>18</sup>

Sartre gives the example of a homosexual to illustrate bad faith. He attempts to show that “bad faith involves distinguishing what I am for others (my essence, or

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<sup>14</sup> In this quotation we can take negation as being negative judgment. The denial of existence is a negative judgment.

<sup>15</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness* (Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1956), 87.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>17</sup> Facticity is our physical being. We exist at a certain time, in a certain place, with certain characteristics. We have facticity because we can be viewed as an object. We are a concrete being.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

facticity), and what I am for myself (my freedom, or transcendence) and, at the same time, affirming that what I am for myself is my essence.”<sup>19</sup>

A homosexual frequently has an intolerable feeling of guilt, and his whole existence is determined in relation to this feeling. One will readily foresee that he is in bad faith. In fact it frequently happens that this man, while recognizing his homosexual inclination, while avowing each and every particular misdeed which he has committed, refuses with all his strength to consider himself ‘a paederast.’<sup>20</sup>

In this example, the subject does not want to be seen as an object by others. He realizes that he is a homosexual for others; however, he does not feel that homosexuality is an objectifying quality. “It is not a fixed quality that determines his behavior.”<sup>21</sup> He could honestly claim that he is not a homosexual for-himself. “He has an obscure but strong feeling that a homosexual is not a homosexual as this table is a table or a red-haired man is red-haired.”<sup>22</sup> He makes a claim of not being in the same way of being. He understands “not being” as “not-being-in-itself.” “He lays claim to “not being a paederast” in the sense in which this table is not an inkwell.”<sup>23</sup> This makes him guilty of bad faith.

Here he is both recognizing that he is a homosexual (in his facticity) and also denying that he is a homosexual (in transcendence). He recognizes that he has engaged in these acts in the past but denies that this is a fixed quality that determines his behavior.

In virtue of freedom he is not (in the future) what he is (in the past) or at least he does not have to be. His future is open, his past does not determine what he will

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<sup>19</sup> Oaklander, L. Nathan, *Existentialist Philosophy An Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 237.

<sup>20</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness* (Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1956), 107.

<sup>21</sup> Oaklander, L. Nathan, *Existentialist Philosophy An Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 228.

<sup>22</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness* (Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1956), 107.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.



choose to be, and so on. Yet, he falls into bad faith when he affirms his facticity as being his transcendence. Qua facticity he is (in-itself) a homosexual, qua transcendence he is (for-itself) nothing. Bad faith arises when he claims that he is (in-itself or essentially) not a homosexual, or when he claims that he is (for-himself) a homosexual.<sup>24</sup>

Bad faith involves the shifting from facticity to transcendence, or in other words, from one being to another. Bad faith also includes identifying one being as the other at the same time. In other words, the homosexual believes himself to be both homosexual and not homosexual in the same instance. He understands that his actions have been of a homosexual nature and that he cannot escape those consequences. However, he also does not believe that he should be viewed as a homosexual object. He views his transcendence as facticity. It is also important, though, to point out here that this example is out dated. The gay community has changed since the time Sartre wrote and now most are not guilty of this type of bad faith. We can also see that because society plays a role in how an individual is portrayed, social constructs or social norms may be the cause of bad faith in many individuals.

Bad faith is not necessarily only denying what one is or what qualities one possesses. Bad faith is the attempt to assert that I am what I am not. The homosexual is attempting to assert that he is not a homosexual when he, in fact, is.

We can further explain this with respect to facticity and transcendence. Bad faith is the “oscillation between the two poles with which a person can identify him- or herself.”<sup>25</sup> It consists of the shift between facticity and transcendence. A human being’s facticity is what he is for others, and this includes how he appears now and in the past.

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<sup>24</sup> Oaklander, L. Nathan, *Existentialist Philosophy An Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 228.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

Facticity is the objectified being; much like we see tables and chairs, we see a human being. The other side to us is our transcendence. Transcendence is a peculiar entity that can be described as “that aspect of us in virtue of which we are capable of changing our past ‘essence’.”<sup>26</sup> Because we have freedom, our transcendence is somewhat made by us, since we have freedom and may make our own choices. We can make choices that are different from the choices we have made in the past, therefore changing our transcendence.

Bad faith is not a problem for the existential being. “If man is what he is, bad faith is forever impossible and candor ceases to be his ideal and becomes instead his being.”<sup>27</sup> The person that affirms his freedom and overcomes anguish has no need for the use of bad faith because He accepts who he is and that he has made what he is through his freedom. For the existential individual, there is no need to oscillate between facticity and transcendence, because they are equal entities. He is not trying to hide who he is for others; therefore, he has no need to hide whom he is for himself.

Paul Tillich is an existentialist philosopher who talks about Sartre’s view and builds upon it. He begins with Sartre’s explanation that man’s essence is his existence.

This sentence is like a flash of light which illuminates the whole Existentialist scene. One could call it the most despairing and the most courageous sentence in all Existentialist literature. What it says is that there is no essential nature of man, except in the one point that he can make of himself what he wants.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>27</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness* (Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1956), 101.

<sup>28</sup> Tillich, Paul, “The Courage to Be.” (*Existentialism*. Edited by Robert Solomon. New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1974), 318.

Tillich is concerned with man's courage to do just that – to make what he wants of himself. He claims that the courage of man to be himself is just that courage of man to make himself what he wants to be.

Tillich also describes something that he calls the “courage of despair in the noncreative existentialist attitude.” He says that the noncreative existentialist attitude is that of the cynic. He explains that the word cynic does not mean a critic of contemporary culture or a revolutionary. The cynic is someone who is not willing to follow any other person and does not attempt to follow any norms. “They have no belief in reason, no criterion of truth, no set of values, no answer to the question of meaning.”<sup>29</sup>

Tillich goes further into the explanation of the noncreative existentialist.

Their courage is expressed not creatively but in their form of life. They courageously reject any solution which would deprive them of their freedom of rejecting whatever they want to reject. The cynics are lonely although they need company in order to show their loneliness. They are empty of both preliminary meanings and an ultimate meaning, and therefore easy victims of neurotic anxiety. Much compulsive self-affirmation and much fanatical self-surrender are expressions of the non-creative courage to be oneself.<sup>30</sup>

As seen in both Sartre and Tillich, the existential being has the freedom to make his self into the being that he desires to be. I believe that Tillich's non-creative existentialist best describes this act. We are bound by many factors in our lives; however, the non-creative existentialist has the courage to break down as many boundaries as possible using his freedom to become the individual that he seeks to be. It is his choice to be the cynic. He is lonely in a crowd because he looks around and finds no other non-creative existential beings. He must also have others objectify him in order to be conscious of his loneliness, and he becomes empty of meaning because he realizes that ultimately, there is no

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 319.

meaning that he can know. He must surrender to the consequences of his self-affirmation and freedom. These things are the causes for compulsive self-affirmation and self-surrender.

Tillich then goes on to describe the limits of courage. Tillich says that, “courage is self-affirmation “in spite of,” and the courage to be as oneself is self-affirmation of the self as itself.”<sup>31</sup> He then asks, “what is this self that affirms itself?” To this he gives the existential answer, “what it makes of itself.” He claims that anything besides this answer would limit the freedom of the existentialist. However, I do not think that this is a complete answer. The self is, indeed, what it makes of itself, but it must recognize itself in both facticity and transcendence and be authentic to its self. If the self is guilty of bad faith, there is no courage present at all. Authenticity must be recognized in the existential being; therefore, if we are not authentic when it comes to the self, it is not possible for us to be courageous when it comes to existence.

When we discuss the individual’s reaction to life, we must not forget to talk about the absurdity of life. The existential man is also what Albert Camus calls the absurd man. Camus’ works are infused with the theme of the absurdity of life. According to Oaklander, Camus “approaches the existing individual through a consideration of whether life is worth living or not.”<sup>32</sup> Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* by saying “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>32</sup> Oaklander, L. Nathan, *Existentialist Philosophy An Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 340.

philosophy.”<sup>33</sup> Camus is interested in the individual’s choice that life is not worth living. He is concerned both with the relevance and consequences that occur due to the existence of absurdity. For Camus, absurdity is an alienation between man and his life, and this is both an emotional and intellectual alienation. This information is between man’s life and the questions he has no answers for.

...in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.<sup>34</sup>

This divorce between man and his life is precisely what the absurd is. The absurd can be an event that for which man has no explanation. It is the questions in our lives that we cannot find any plausible answer for. It is here that the question arises whether or not life is worth living.

According to Oaklander, when Camus speaks of the intellectual aspect to absurdity, he attempts to show that, “we have a desire to understand the universe, ourselves, and our place in it, but that such an understanding can never be achieved.”<sup>35</sup>

Camus explains this further.

So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of its nostalgia. But with its first move this world cracks and tumbles; an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*. (Translated by Justin O’Brien. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1991), 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Oaklander, L. Nathan, *Existentialist Philosophy An Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 340.

<sup>36</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. (Translated by Justin O’Brien. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1991), 18.

This lack of understanding causes despair or, as Sartre calls it, nausea. Once we recognize this lack of understanding it is almost impossible to overcome. Camus goes on to say that “what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”<sup>37</sup> This is precisely the cause of despair. As humans, we yearn for understanding and a rational explanation of the universe, but the absurd takes control of our lives and robs us of any possible clarity.

This begs the question, how does the absurd man live. Camus believes that once absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion and that there is a happiness in realizing the absurd. The absurd man is no longer bound by the need to gain an understanding of the world. When you find the absurd, you give up the illusion that there are answers to the universe. You give up your search for the ultimate understanding of the universe. “A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it. A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future.”<sup>38</sup> The absurd man is completely free and has found his existential freedom. This freedom comes from the realization that we cannot find meaning in the universe. He is no longer restricted by the future. This individual cannot escape the absurd, and it is impossible for him to ignore it. Once you have recognized the absurd, you cannot forget its place in the world.

I would now like to look at the individual from the perspective of existential psychology. R.D. Laing has done work focused on the self-conscious individual. Because his work is influenced by Sartre and other existential theory, I will use self-conscious and existential synonymously here. This will help us understand how an existential being functions in society and how he may appear to others. Laing states that

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 32.

self-consciousness implies “an awareness of oneself by oneself, and an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else’s observation.”<sup>39</sup> We can see here that this theory follows Sartre’s view on existentialism, in that an existential individual is aware of himself by himself and also as an object for others.

According to Laing, self-consciousness can torment a person. This individual is tortured by “the compulsive nature of his awareness of his own processes, and also by the equally compulsive nature of his sense of his body as an object in the world of others.”<sup>40</sup> Sartre and Camus have described similar feelings relating to anguish and absurdity as we have previously discussed. If a person is self-conscious, they have realized their freedom to make choices and their responsibility to the consequences. This person has also recognized the absurdity of life and recognizes that there are not always rational answers to the universe.

It is also important to notice that the self-conscious individual thinks that he is more the object of the other’s interest than he really is. The self-conscious being will go out of his way to avoid confronting other people. He may cross a street to avoid a crowded entrance, or he may avoid eating alone or other such activities that will draw attention to his himself as an outsider or an individual. He is reacting this way to situations in which others are not really watching him at all.

Laing argues that guilt is an important feature in a self-conscious individual.

The look that the individual expects other people to direct upon him is practically always imagined to be unfavourably critical of him. He is frightened that he will look a fool, or he is frightened that other people will think he wants to show off.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Laing, R.D, *The Divided Self* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1990), 106.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

This could easily be seen as a situation in which the individual secretly wants to be the center of attention and that this desire is charged with anxiety and guilt, which makes the situation unable to be experienced in such a way.

Every time his body is on show, therefore, the neurotic guilt associated with this potential avenue of gratification exposes him to a form of castration anxiety which 'presents' phenomenologically as 'self-consciousness.'<sup>42</sup>

Laing argues that this guilt can be seen as a sort of ontological insecurity and a way to attempt to overcome it; in other words, it is a way to deal with the anguish that Sartre spoke of. This feeling comes from one's own self, not from fear outside of one's self. It is a defense against the danger of failed decisions and bad consequences.

As Laing describes, there are two roles that self-consciousness plays in an insecure person. The first is that self-consciousness allows the individual to know that he exists. If he is aware of himself and is aware of other people knowing him, then he can deduce that he in fact does exist. If he feels that his world is unreal, he must be an object in someone else's world in order to be real. This is a basic issue of existence that the ontologically insecure person must deal with. Part of the self-awareness may also include temporality. Being aware of oneself in time is also a way of proving existence, and this is especially true when we see ourselves as a succession of moments. "The loss of a section of the linear temporal series of moments through in-attention to one's time-self maybe be felt as a catastrophe."<sup>43</sup> One must always be aware of oneself at every minute.

Self-consciousness may also be a way of recognizing danger. "Self-consciousness, then, may be the apprehensive awareness of oneself as potentially

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 109.



exposed to danger by the simple fact of being visible to others.”<sup>44</sup> Becoming invisible is the obvious defense mechanism against this danger. You could also expect to see distrust in the other’s awareness. “Quite often, in fact, the balance swings right over so that the individual feels that his greatest risk is to be the object of another person’s awareness.”<sup>45</sup>

The self-conscious person has been caught in a paradox. He may feel the need to be seen and recognized to maintain his sense of existence. However, he may also feel that the other represents a danger to his reality. This can be overcome by bad faith for many individuals and can be seen in the example of the homosexual given earlier. He sees himself as both homosexual and not homosexual. He is in bad faith because he is not allowing himself to honestly admit what he is. His facticity and transcendence do not match. This is what the self-conscious person that has not overcome his reality will practice in order to attempt to completely affirm existence.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 110.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE POSTMODERN INDIVIDUAL

Postmodernism is usually associated with societal theories and overarching views that span large scaled groups of people. It is often the project of the postmodernist to deconstruct a part of society; however, little is said about the individuals who are left after their world has been torn apart. The individual beings are forgotten.

In this chapter, I will give a diagnosis of the postmodern individual. I will briefly explain why postmodernists are not ordinarily concerned with the cause of the individual, for it is important for us to realize that, while we do live in a society, we are still individual beings. Postmodern literature tends to forget this aspect of our lives.

Postmodern dialogue often concentrates on the author and the reader.<sup>46</sup> Postmodernists attempt to take away the privileged voice from the author and give the reader the opportunity to interpret texts. “No longer is the reader a passive subject to be entertained, instructed, or amused. S/he is given the freedom to attribute meaning to the text without consequence or responsibility.”<sup>47</sup> This does not make the reader a privileged voice, as every reader may interpret the same text differently. The postmodernist would argue that no two texts or two readings of the same text are ever identical, and if this is indeed the case, individuals would be accountable for the many different texts and readings. The privileged voice of the author may be dying, but the author still has the

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<sup>46</sup> The author is a person who writes or creates a text. The reader is an observer. The reader is reading and acting upon the texts that have been created by the author. A text may be any phenomenon.

<sup>47</sup> Rosenau, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25.

freedom to produce texts, even if they are individually interpreted by others. The reader is very much alive and uses his freedom to interpret texts every day. Postmodernists use these overarching terms, the author and the reader, and forget about *the* author and *the* reader. While the author is being deconstructed, this individual is also being given freedom as a reader, which means that individuals are being deconstructed and freed simultaneously. While these individuals may not have authority over any other individuals, they are still functioning physical beings that make up society and should be recognized as such.

As the moderns attempted to totalize human society, postmodernism does just the opposite. “Insofar as the function of reason was defined in the thought of both the ancients and the moderns as a drive toward the totalization and unification of human experience, the stance of postmodernity becomes that of other than reason.”<sup>48</sup> As Lyotard mentions, “scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge.”<sup>49</sup> This can also be translated in the social and cultural arena because one culture or one being does not represent the totality of societies. However, although no voice is privileged, consciousness or being is still important.

Postmodernists criticize what the modern subject has brought us. “They criticize the subject for seizing power, for attributing meaning, for dominating and oppressing.”<sup>50</sup> What type of person is this modern individual? The modern subject is hard working, and responsible and has a distinct personal identity, for example, he will be subordinate to the

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<sup>48</sup> Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997),

<sup>49</sup> Lyotard, Jean-Francois, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

<sup>50</sup> Rosenau, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 42.

majority and respect rational rules. He believes in rationality and science and that these things will spawn progress.<sup>51</sup> The modern individual believes in timetables and facts and that there is order to be had by every aspect of life.

What now may be said about the postmodern individual? The postmodern individual personifies none of the characteristics that we see in the modern individual. According to Rosenau, the postmodern individual

will have an almost anonymous existence. S/he will be a person but will not be held accountable for events, actions, outcomes; nor will s/he be the author of “caring” relationships (humanist) or creative individualism. S/he will be so independent of all identifiable truth-seeking perspectives that s/he is, in short, no subject at all!<sup>52</sup>

There are several parts to this statement. It is the case that the postmodern individual may be able to lead an almost anonymous existence; however, I disagree with the other pieces to this statement. It is impossible for an individual to not be held responsible for actions and outcomes, and this is because there are still many modern infrastructures in our society. If this were possible, the postmodern individual would not lead an almost anonymous life but a completely anonymous life. Also, we are still held under sovereign governments that punish for wrong doings, which will be discussed later in more detail. The postmodern being will be held accountable for actions, but he will not assign a truth-value to the consequences or to the act that was committed. He recognizes that some things just *are*, much like his own self. The postmodern individual may not have any truth-seeking perspectives, but this does not make him any less a subject. If we refer to the condition of being a subject as the condition of individuality and self-awareness, we will see that the postmodern individual is both of these.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 53.

Rosenau also describes some characteristics of the postmodern individual. “The post-modern individual is relaxed and flexible, oriented toward feelings and emotions, interiorization, and holding a “be-yourself” attitude.”<sup>53</sup> This individual works at constituting his own reality but makes no truth claims about what this means. This individual also looks to immediate gratification. “Preferring the temporary over the permanent, s/he is contented with a “live and let live” (in the present) attitude.”<sup>54</sup> The postmodern man is also concerned more with his own life than others and is more in tune with his own satisfaction than the satisfaction of other people. This leads him to care less about modern institutions such as marriage, family, and church. The postmodern individual is self-conscious and freedom seeking.<sup>55</sup> This type of individual is more free than others who are bound to cultural, moral and societal institutions. “In some cases s/he tends to excessive self-criticism, cynicism, indifference, narcissism, hedonism, apathy, egoism, anti-intellectualism.”<sup>56</sup> Because postmodernism generally holds that there is no one objective truth, the postmodern individual is also nonjudgmental; therefore, he does not believe that there is any objective truth for him or for any others. If this is true, he cannot assess any truth-value to any other individual’s life or lifestyle.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the societal system of punishment. He argues that the power of the sovereign embodies all social phenomena, and we will see that this can also include the individual. He describes the modern penal system and explains how societies have moved away from the pre-modern view and have evolved punishment. Foucault argues that societies have moved from the modern view of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 55.

punishing the physical body to more “humane” methods of punishing the soul. There is also more surveillance on people in current societies. Foucault explains the difference in these two methods.

In physical torture, the example was based on terror: physical fear, collective horror, images that must be engraved on the memories of the spectators, like the brand on the cheek or shoulder of the condemned man. The example is now based on the lesson, the discourse, the decipherable sign, the representation of public morality.<sup>57</sup>

As we see here, society has moved from punishing the body to rehabilitating the mind or soul. The modern aspect of punishment that is still with us today is in the rehabilitation process. There is still an objective sense of what is right and what is wrong. While rehabilitating a person, they are not put out on display for the public like they once were; however, they are told that their previous way of living was wrong. This is not necessarily any more humane than punishing the body; it is merely changing what part of the person is punished. Instead of the body being held for torture, the mind and soul are tortured. One way of punishing the mind is to force a confession of a crime. Both ways, however, are methods of the sovereign enforcing power.

When a person is convicted of a crime and jailed or sent to death, their punishment is put on a timeline. When in prison or a mental institution, the condemned are on a schedule, and objectivity becomes a normal part of life. There is a definite right and wrong, and every event is scheduled and timed. “In a system of discipline, the child is more individualized than the adult, the patient more than the healthy man, the madman and the delinquent more than the normal and the non-delinquent.”<sup>58</sup> Foucault argues that in a society the individual belongs to this production of power and discipline. This power

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<sup>57</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 109-10.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

works to normalize judgment and punishes those who do not adhere to this idea. The postmodern individual will no doubt run into trouble in this type of society. He will not accept any normalized judgment or objective ideal or morality unless it happens to match up with what he already believes, and furthermore, he will not adhere to any sort of norms set by the sovereign if it can be avoided. Although this cannot be avoided in the case of a prison or mental hospital, the postmodern individual will be cynical towards the institution.

Foucault also describes a society in a constant state of surveillance. To describe the beginnings of this surveillance, Foucault describes the Panopticon.

We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an angular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building...All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in the central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy.<sup>59</sup>

This building was a way for the sovereign to always keep an eye on the less powerful. “Visibility is a trap.”<sup>60</sup> There is no privacy or authority in always being visible. The main effect of the Panopticon is to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”<sup>61</sup> As well as always being visible, the watched must always feel visible. We can see this phenomenon today with the introduction of security cameras in every facet of our lives. We are watched in shopping centers where everything we do from purchasing to traveling is tracked. The Panopticon “should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 201.

relation independent of the person who exercises it.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, the surveillance sends us into a state of consciousness where we always feel watched if we are not the sovereign. The sovereign always feels in control and the “subjects” always feel watched even after the physical act has ceased.

For Foucault, power dominates over compassion and other humanistic characteristics. In many cases, these humanistic qualities are merely facades for power plays. Examples of this range from friendship in a platonic relationship to human rights of a prisoner. Foucault believes that we may use something like friendship to gain power over the other person, so during this relationship, the person using friendship as a façade is the sovereign. This individual is constantly watching the other and looking for opportunities to exert his power. For the prisoner, it may seem as if he has basic unalienable human rights when they have already been taken away. The prisoner may lose the right to speak or defend oneself or even the right to not endure bodily harm before a conviction has been made. However, the sovereign has been able to disguise this and is therefore not questioned.

Foucault’s diagnosis of how society operates also fits the description of a narcissistic individual. This individual assumes the role of the sovereign along with the power of surveillance and the power to punish. As the sovereign in this type of society will manipulate others to maintain power, the postmodern individual will do the same. Punishment of the body and mind may also be used by this type of individual to maintain power. I will later explain the characteristics of the narcissistic individual in more detail.

Of postmodernism, Bauman says

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 201.



Postmodernity does not seek to substitute one truth for another, one standard of beauty for another, one life ideal for another. Instead, it splits the truth, the standards and the ideal into already deconstructed and about to be deconstructed. It denies in advance the right of all and any revelation to slip into the place vacated by the deconstructed/discredited rules. It braces itself for a life without truths, standards and ideals.<sup>63</sup>

This is similar to how the postmodern individual lives, in that he does not seek one truth for another. He recognizes that perhaps the truth may not always be known and current ideals should be questioned. While postmodernity braces itself for a life without truths, standards and ideals, the postmodern individual does the same. Without truths, he cannot set standards or ideals and by understanding that there are no truths in the future, so he lives mainly in the present. Bauman also states of postmodernity, “we are bound to live with contingency<sup>64</sup> (aware of contingency, face to face with contingency) for the foreseeable future.”<sup>65</sup> Our starting points are also contingent. It is difficult to uphold a set of truths and ideals when we realize that we may begin, or even end, at any point.<sup>66</sup> Bauman also states that tolerance must be secured in the form of solidarity and that there must be tolerance for different sets of truths and ideals.

To understand this, we may look to a description of postmodern culture. This type of culture is one of pluralism<sup>67</sup>. Postmodern culture has an “absence of universally binding authority, leveling up of hierarchies, interpretive polyvalence.”<sup>68</sup> Because there is no privileged voice in postmodernity, there can be no one true authority or hierarchy.

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<sup>63</sup> Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), ix.

<sup>64</sup> Bauman has taken the terms contingency and solidarity from Richard Rorty. (Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.198).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>66</sup> This can be said for all texts and all people composing narratives.

<sup>67</sup> Pluralism emphasizes diversity and multiplicity.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Every individual may have his own view of the truth, and this is acceptable because there is no distinctive line of development in the postmodern culture. In observation, this type of culture appears to be constantly moving and is made up of fragmented parts that are not connected. “The old expression ‘cultural scene’ implied a scenario, a plot, a denouement, inter-twining of roles, a director. None of these can be sensibly implied under the conditions of postmodern culture.”<sup>69</sup> This is because it is made up of individuals with different truths and ideals, which is what makes the postmodern individual important.

Bauman also explains morality in a postmodern world. He does this with a comparison to television.

The world split into a multitude of mini-dramas has no clear-cut cohesiveness or direction. This world itself is soft – one in which time can easily be reversed, so that the episodes which fill it can be re-arranged in any order of succession (and are subject to no order but that of haphazard succession). As all consequences such episodes may have are eminently temporary and redeemable, such a world must and can do without standards, moral standards included. Morality, as it were, is a functional prerequisite of a world with an in-built finality and irreversibility of choices. Postmodern culture does not know of such a world.<sup>70</sup>

This is the way a postmodern individual leads his life, without finality. In living in the temporary, it is possible for this individual to live without truths and moral standards. Bauman suggests that these television dramas are not only re-enacting life, but they are creating life. People and events in the real world “play for television.” In this role reversal of “real life” and drama, the differences have been skewed. The lack of morality and a linear time progression that was once only seen in television has now found its way into our culture, and this is just how the postmodern individual lives his life. Many of the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 33.

acts and situations the postmodern being may find him self in will be viewed as amoral. He may, indeed, get up and go to work on a set time schedule, but he in no way lives based only on this sort of schedule. This schedule has been imposed upon him by modern society; however, the postmodern being does not have this type of temporal compass. He will dronely go through the motions of modern life but will break away from the strict structure. He uses his freedom for spontaneity.

As previously stated, the postmodern individual has many characteristics that coincide with hedonism and narcissism. Hedonism is the view that pleasure or the absence of pain is the only intrinsic good in life. “The hedonist may hold that, questions of morality aside, persons inevitably do seek pleasure; that, questions of psychology aside, morally we should seek pleasure; or that we inevitably do, and ought to, seek pleasure.”<sup>71</sup> Seeking only pleasure, the hedonist lives for pleasure in the present and future. Some extreme hedonists may forego all morality to get the pleasure that they seek. Some hedonists use the motivation of present and future pleasure. It may also be the case that “all choices of future actions are based on one’s presently taking greater pleasure in the thought of doing one act rather than another.”<sup>72</sup> The hedonist is normally only concerned about his own pleasure, which is a characteristic that also fits the postmodern individual. The postmodern man leads and almost anonymous life. In his anonymity, he is maintaining his individuality. This anonymity and individuality allows him to be concerned with only himself, or his own pleasure.

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), s.v. “Hedonism,” by James A. Montmarquet, 364.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

A hedonistic value theory is dependent on what activities yield the most pleasure. It may also be the case that some hedonists hold certain activities as having more value or creating more pleasure. In the case of the postmodern individual, he would probably look for instant gratification. Future pleasure cannot be assured as present pleasure can, because, as stated before, postmodern culture is fragmented and nonlinear. The use of time, or even space, does not mean much to a postmodern individual. The postmodern individual will look towards activities that create the most pleasure in the present time. It is true that this culture and this individual are constantly moving; however, they are not moving in any certain direction or to any specific time scale unless one is imposed upon them by an outside source.

It may be a bit more difficult to characterize the narcissistic individual. It is often said that the narcissist is in love with himself; however, he is in love with his reflection.<sup>73</sup> This means that the narcissist depends on the existence of the reflection. The narcissist also lacks any objective view with which to judge his reflection. For him, love is interchangeable with any other emotion. “The narcissist deems his mere existence as sufficiently unique to warrant the kind of treatment that he expects from the world.”<sup>74</sup> He achieves this uniqueness through the eyes of other people. Therefore, the narcissist is forced to use other people in order to feel that he exists. It is through their eyes and through their behavior that he obtains proof of his uniqueness and grandeur. He is a habitual “people-junkie.” With time, he comes to regard those around him as mere instruments of gratification, as two dimensional cartoon figures with negligible lines in the script of his magnificent life.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Vaknin, *Malignant Self, Love Narcissism Revisited* (Prague and Skopje: Narcissus Publications, 2005), 31.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-4.

The way he begins to see other people also becomes the way he sees life. He is not restrained by moral or ethical boundaries, and he is not bothered by the exploitation of his situations. He becomes indifferent to all that is around him: consequences of his actions, social condemnation, pain he inflicts on others. He is devoid of care, and like the hedonist, he is concerned only with his pleasure.

The narcissist avoids intimacy in relationships. “Intimacy makes unique beings out of us all. It, therefore, negates the self-perceived uniqueness of the truly and exclusively unique – the narcissist.”<sup>76</sup> The lack of intimacy allows the narcissist to maintain a separate-ness in his relationships. The narcissistic individual is incapable of intimacy and becomes completely lacking of empathy.

The narcissist is predisposed to maintaining asymmetrical relationships, where he both preserves and exhibits his superiority. Even with his mate or spouse, he is forever striving to be the Guru, the Lecturer, the Teacher (even the Mystic), the Psychologist, the Experienced Elder.<sup>77</sup>

The tone of the narcissist often seems patronizing or condescending. He believes that the world should adapt to him, and so he treats others as objects. Because of this lack of emotion, the narcissist is sometimes described as inhuman or emotionless. This coincides with the lack of a central authority in postmodernism. If there is no authority, it is fine for the subject to only react to his needs in a relationship. It is also normal for him to be patronizing or condescending because he is the sovereign. This is a way for him to maintain power.

Now that we have characterized the narcissist, we can discuss how he looks in a social setting. How can we identify a narcissist interacting in society? Posture is one

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 48-9.

telling sign of a narcissist. “The narcissist adopts a physical posture which implies and exudes an air of superiority, seniority, hidden powers, mysteriousness, amused indifference.”<sup>78</sup> He may also be territorial and avoid physical proximity. The narcissist will also participate in social events but he will often remain an observer. The narcissist also shows idealization or devaluation. Vaknin explains.

The narcissist instantly idealises or devalues his interlocutor. This depends on how the narcissist appraises the potential his converser has as a Narcissistic Supply Source. The narcissist flatters, adores, admires and applauds the “target” in an embarrassingly exaggerated and profuse manner – or sulks, abuses, and humiliates her.<sup>79</sup>

He goes on to further explain how the narcissist reacts.

Narcissists are polite only in the presence of a potential Supply Source. But they are unable to sustain even perfunctory civility and fast deteriorate to barbs and thinkly-veiled hostility, to verbal or other violent displays of abuse, rage attacks, or cold detachment.<sup>80</sup>

A narcissist also has a different way of speaking than other people. “The narcissist likes to talk about himself and only about himself.”<sup>81</sup> The narcissist will act bored or angry if he feels someone is intruding on his time or space, and he is impatient and has a short attention span for any subject other than himself. “He may possess a subtle, wry, and riotous sense of humour, scathing and cynical, but rarely is he self-deprecating.”<sup>82</sup> Although the narcissist will be angry and bored with others, he will never be this way with himself. In the view of society, he does not belong.

These – the lack of empathy, the aloofness, the disdain, the sense of entitlement, the constricted sense of humour, the unequal treatment and the paranoia – render the narcissist a social misfit.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 393-4.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 395.

He goes on to explain further how the narcissist is viewed.

He is perceived to be asocial at best and, often, antisocial. This, perhaps, is the strongest presenting symptom. One feels ill at ease in the presence of a narcissist for no apparent reason. No matter how charming, intelligent, thought provoking, outgoing, easy going and social the narcissist is – he fails to secure the sympathy of others, a sympathy he is never ready, willing, or able to reciprocate.<sup>83</sup>

The narcissist never has lasting relationships because of these traits that he possesses.

The uneasiness that he creates keeps most people keeps most people from getting too close to him. Although he may always be around people, he is always alone.

Now that we have seen several characteristics of a postmodern individual, we must combine them to get the complete individual and to see how they fit together. As said previously, the postmodern individual leads an almost anonymous life. For this reason, it is difficult for him to have any caring or humanistic relationships. Also, since he cares less about modern social institutions, he will have no desire to get married or gain relationships at a church or other gathering.

He also likes to be in control and have power in a situation and is a freedom-seeking individual. The power and control that he tries to maintain allows him to exercise his freedom. This is another reason that he may not care for social institutions such as religion. If the individual believes in some sort of sovereign deity, he automatically loses power and freedom. The postmodern individual is not concerned with truth-seeking perspectives. This would include religion and belief in any sort of sovereign or scientific power; although, this individual may not actively speak out against these institutions unless it is forced upon him, but he also will not actively participate.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 396.

He portrays what appears to be indifference towards these institutions and so is relaxed and flexible in this sense.

The postmodern being prefers power over compassion. This is true for all of his relationships. He lacks empathy for others, so this characteristic comes very natural to him. He is nonjudgmental with others, but this comes from his apathy. He is hedonistic. He looks toward immediate gratification and cares more about the temporary than the permanent. He lives a life without truths, standards or ideals. Because of this, he only has the temporary. You cannot look toward the future without truths and you cannot plan for the permanent without standards or ideals. He lives in a state of pluralism. He has no one answer to anything, and his actions are based on pleasure or lack of pain.

This individual is also narcissistic. He is self-conscious and aware of the power he has over others and likes to maintain that power. Surveillance ties in with narcissism and power. The narcissist likes to observe others without necessarily being involved. This type of surveillance gives him power over the people that he is watching. Like the narcissist, the postmodern individual is seen as a social misfit or as an asocial person.

Postmodern culture does not give anyone a privileged voice. Because of this factor, the individual must use these mechanisms as a way to achieve power. Once this individual achieves that power, he will use mechanisms such as an anonymous existence, narcissism, and surveillance to maintain that power. There may also, however, be a postmodern individual trapped within a modern society. This individual becomes very self-aware and seeks to use his freedom to escape the world of objectivity and hard facts. In both cases, this individual becomes an outcast, unwilling to submit to any other form



of authority and give up his freedom. This man may seem chaotic, but he is very calculated, yet free-flowing. Next, we shall see an example of this very man.

## CHAPTER IV

### MEURSAULT: THE MAN AND INDIVIDUAL

Albert Camus tells a story of an individual plagued by the absurdity of life in *The Stranger*. This individual makes tragic choices and in some perspectives may be viewed as an anti-hero. The purpose of this chapter is to give insight into ordinary life through what seems to be the extraordinary life of Monsieur Meursault. Meursault can be used as an example of an existential and postmodern being, reaching freedom, and interacting with the other. He is estranged from all realms of society including social institutions and practices. His life is, as we see it, a triptic, is defined by three deaths. These deaths, however, are not defined by reason. He also shows us that there is not always an answer to our situations. We are not always rational beings. At times, we just act. We are defined by our experiences and how they affect us, not by reason, and this is what Meursault teaches us.

Camus uses Monsieur Meursault to define an existential being. He quantifies authenticity, freedom, and experience. Meursault personifies all of the characteristics of an existential person, but Meursault also can be considered a postmodern being. There is an element of the absurd in the postmodern individual. One can only imagine that in a world with unanswered questions, many of these questions lie in the individual's life. In *The Stranger*, Monsieur Meursault acts much like a postmodern individual would act. We can see this through a social reading of this novella.

This story begins with an end, as many of our lives do. Chapter one opens with Meursault speaking to himself about his mother's death. "Maman died today. Or

yesterday maybe, I don't know."<sup>84</sup> His apathy may seem strange to some, but for him it is only natural. His mother was living in a home. Meursault was so far removed from his mother for so long, that his feelings come very natural to him. We all lose touch with others and become free, independent individuals. His lack of empathy is a characteristic common to postmodern individuals. The independence that Meursault exhibits is the first sign that he is a truly existential and postmodern being. Throughout the story, he does not look for answers to unanswerable questions from anyone or anything else.

Meursault also refers to death as having an official feel to it. He explains that it does not seem like his mother is dead because he has not seen her. He travels to her funeral at the home and shows little emotion. It is almost as if he doesn't even know her. He does not look at her body, and he does not cry. He appears annoyed when he hears her friends crying.

It is in this first chapter that Meursault appears as a stranger to many readers. He is a stranger to our cultural norms and mores. It is evident that Meursault does not seek to offend or to be hated. His actions appear very natural for him through which he displays an insensitivity to what most people would consider normal feelings.<sup>85</sup> He does not show the sensitivity that, as we will see later in the story, society demands.

Here we first see into Meursault's narcissistic personality. He lacks empathy, which may be translated into arrogance.<sup>86</sup> He also shows a sense of entitlement. By this I do not mean that he believes he entitled to more power or possessions than anyone else.

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<sup>84</sup> Camus, *The Stranger* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1988), 3.

<sup>85</sup> Sprintzen, *Camus a Critical Examination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 23.

<sup>86</sup> Capron, "Types of Pampering and the Narcissistic Personality Trait," *Journal of Individual Psychology*, Spring 2004, Vol 60, Issue 1, 76.

He does, however, expect people to understand his actions and words, although they do not. His actions, as we will see, show that he feels he is entitled to his freedom. This is evidence of his postmodern character.

The day after arriving back home in Algiers, he goes for a swim at the beach. He encounters an old acquaintance, Marie. They decide to go see a movie later that night. She is very surprised that Meursault's mother has just died because Meursault does not appear to be in mourning. Throughout the story, Meursault seems to be void of any emotional profundity. Meursault does not show any feelings toward Marie except for physical advances. He also mentions that he does not like to be questioned by other people. He avoids incidents where this would happen. This expresses his want for entitlement. It is here that we also see that Meursault is sensitive to heat and light. When he experiences these feelings, he becomes agitated. "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."<sup>87</sup>

This quote seems to show that Meursault is living a life of boredom.

It becomes obvious that the author regards monotony as the greatest single cause of unhappiness among men. To suggest, as some critics have, that Meursault is happy before his crime is wrong; he is too taciturn for such a positive emotion.<sup>88</sup>

The crime is a murder that will be discussed in more detail later. I disagree with this comment by Masters. As we will see, Meursault's life is hardly what one would classify as monotonous. He experiences more in a matter of months than most of us experience our entire lives. Also if he is incapable of such a positive emotion, he is also incapable of such negative emotions. Throughout the beginning of this story, Meursault does not

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<sup>87</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, 24.

<sup>88</sup> Masters, *Camus: a study* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), 22.

express emotion of either happiness or unhappiness, for he only expresses facts. His feelings are interchangeable and he does not deal in predictions or guesses. For the postmodern individual, it is not just that he is unable to express empathy, however, it is the case that he has trouble expressing any emotion.

We see that the only desire that he has with Marie is physical desire. He does not appear to have any other ambition. This is part of his postmodern quality. As Sartre says, “desire is a lack of being. It is haunted in its inmost being by the being of which it is desire.”<sup>89</sup> Meursault is not haunted by desire other than physical desire. He does not have this particular lack in his existence.

Meursault returns to work on Monday. He runs into his neighbor Salamano and his dog. The dog has mange, and Salamano is always swearing at the dog. Meursault doesn't think anything of swearing at and beating his dog. He also runs into another neighbor, Raymond. People in the neighborhood think Raymond lives off women, but Raymond says that he is a warehouse guard. Meursault does not pass judgment on either of his neighbors; He merely observes them. He does not give himself a privileged voice over any one else. His nonjudgmental quality is a characteristic of the postmodern individual, as was discussed previously.

Raymond also wants Meursault's advice about a woman that he was seeing who he found cheating on him. He still has sexual feelings for her but wants to punish her for cheating. Raymond wants Meursault to write a letter to the woman for him because he feels that Meursault is better at those kinds of things. Raymond wants her to feel sorry for what she did. Raymond's plan is to have her back at his apartment, go to bed with the

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<sup>89</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 137.

woman and at the last minute spit in her face and kick her out. This follows Foucault's diagnosis of modern societies. When the sovereign is offended, it seeks first to punish the body then moves toward punishing the soul. Raymond will be doing both of these things to his "prisoner." Meursault agrees to write the letter. He tries to please Raymond because, he says, he has no reason not to. He often says that there is no reason to his actions.

Meursault recognizes Raymond's intent of getting even with the woman, but he himself shows no emotion about the situation. The emotions that are expressed by Meursault are merely observations. He is not concerned with the implications of writing the letter. He has no reason to not do this for Raymond at the present time. This is what he bases his decision on. He is reacting opposed to acting.

The two characters introduced in this chapter can be seen as modern characters. They both represent power structures. Salamano has power over his dog and Raymond is trying to maintain power over his girlfriend through revenge. Meursault has power over Marie, but it is a mental power. Meursault does not punish her physically; however, throughout their relationship, he objectifies Marie and does not submit to her requests for an emotional commitment. This follows Foucault's model of a postmodern power structure.

Raymond sends the letter that Meursault wrote. Marie comes over Sunday, and Meursault and Marie go for a swim at the beach. He acknowledges a physical relationship with her but not an emotional one. "A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn't mean anything but I didn't think so. She looked sad."<sup>90</sup> This is

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<sup>90</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, 35.

an example of contingency in language. It seems here that love to Marie means something completely different than for Meursault. It is clear that Meursault's discourse does not match up to the discourse of Marie or society. Meursault is ahead of his time although his obsession is not a particular theory or political edge. His obsession lies in the foundation of existence. He is obsessed with *being* in its present form, whether it is due to physical emotion or chance. He is obsessed with not living on the foundation of reason. This makes Meursault the exemplary existential being because he is caught up in his own existence. He is self-conscious of his existence and his state of being, and he is able to recognize that chance and absurdity help make his existence.

When they are back at Meursault's apartment, they hear a fight in Raymond's room and a woman scream. Meursault tells Marie that he will not go get a policeman. A policeman does come and stop the fight and tells Raymond to wait to be summoned by the police station. Raymond tells Meursault that he did what he intended, but he had to beat the woman up because she slapped him. Meursault agrees to be a witness for Raymond and say that the woman was cheating on Raymond.

Salamano lost his dog and seems very flustered. He wants reassurance from Meursault that he will get his dog back. Meursault hears him crying through the walls. For some reason this makes him think of his mother, but he still does not seem to show any feelings. When he mentions his mother here, he does not say that he is sad or happy, rather he merely states the fact that he is reminded of her.

Three relationships are seen here. Meursault's relationship is much different than the other two. Salamano is very upset that his dog is missing. Despite the abuse inflicted upon the dog, Salamano still cares about the dog and has feelings for his pet. Raymond's

relationship with the girl is also abusive; however, Raymond does seek emotional status from her. He is obviously upset that she is cheating on him, so he wishes to punish her for hurting him. He seeks revenge through power. This is opposed to Meursault's relationship with Marie. In this relationship, Meursault does not show any feeling or any need to have emotion in the relationship. It is in this way that Meursault has power over Marie.

Raymond calls Meursault at the office and invites him to his friend's beach house for the weekend. He invites both Meursault and Marie. He also says that a group of Arabs, one being the woman's brother, has been following him. Marie comes over that afternoon and asks Meursault if he would marry her. He says "sure." He says that marriage is not serious and also agrees that he would probably marry any woman that asked him. Here we see that Meursault does not value the modern institution of marriage.

We see his relationship here with Marie as an example of how his relationships are physical and spontaneous. They are only rooted in the present. "Meursault lives entirely for what he is feeling now; he does not remember what he felt yesterday, nor does he anticipate what he will feel tomorrow."<sup>91</sup> Love and marriage mean nothing to him because he cannot predict the future. He recognizes that he cannot know the future of his reality. He cannot know what feelings, if any, he will have or maintain, and therefore, he cannot make a statement about the permanence of things. "His life is a succession of unrelated instants, valuable in themselves, but losing all value when they are over. Not looking backwards, he cannot know remorse. Not looking forwards, he

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<sup>91</sup> Masters, *Camus: a study*, 23.



cannot know hope.”<sup>92</sup> This feature alone makes Meursault seem a stranger to many. A person who lives only in present tense is odd. His actions are spontaneous responses that lack any conceptual interpretation or social propriety. We regularly hear the phrase “live for today,” but it is rarely achieved in the manner that Meursault lives. Meursault is the only person in his society that achieves this type of lifestyle. Meursault is a purely contingent being.

Meursault, Marie and Raymond take the bus to the beach. The beach house is outside Algiers. Masson is Raymond’s friend at the beach house. After lunch, the three men go for a walk on the beach. They see two Arabs on the beach, one of which is the woman’s brother. They fight and Raymond gets injured and goes to see a doctor. When Raymond gets back, they go for another walk. Raymond has a gun but gives it to Meursault. The Arabs back away so the three men leave.

Upon arriving back at the beach house, Meursault decides to go back out for a walk. “To stay or to go, it amounted to the same thing.”<sup>93</sup> He mentions that the heat is affecting him. He sees Raymond’s man lying in the sun. Meursault shoots him once then four more times. “I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a 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 on the door of unhappiness.”<sup>94</sup> Meursault mentions happiness and unhappiness here, but they appear to be no different from Meursault’s actions.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>93</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, 57.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 59.

This is the event, which is yet another end, that was another beginning for Meursault. He understands the consequences of his actions. As he said, he knew he shattered the harmony of the day. All events for Meursault are now described in terms of this event. “The natural order is shattered. The cyclical time of a habitual life immersed in nature is transfigured by a single event.”<sup>95</sup> Meursault will now not be able to avoid being held up for interpretation by society. “The socialized demand for coherence and purposefulness now takes control.”<sup>96</sup> Even after this murder, Meursault is still only describing the event. He does not express regret or remorse for the action. This further shows his narcissistic personality. He cannot show empathy or any other humanistic emotion.

Meursault is questioned several times after his arrest. Meursault does not understand this because he believes that his case is simple. His assigned lawyer tells him that he thinks he will win the case even though it is tricky. Both the lawyer and the examining magistrate question Meursault about his mother and her funeral. Meursault cannot understand the purpose of this. He is also questioned about why he fired all five shots and why he paused between the first and second shots. Meursault does not have an answer for these questions. Meursault is given a lawyer and treated fairly, but he does not believe that he is being understood. He does not understand why the sovereign is interested in these questions and answers, and it is never explained to him.

Meursault constantly says that there is no answer to these questions. The events just happened. The sun on the back of his neck and the heat of the day was the cause. The unbearable force of the sun and light seem to have a numbing effect on Meursault

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<sup>95</sup> Sprintzen, *Camus a Critical Study*, 26.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

that makes him lose control. He offers no other interpretation of the crime. Existentially, the event was no more than an experience. He merely happened to be on the beach with the gun and pulled the trigger. Meursault cannot offer an explanation of the experience because he is not the experience itself, but he is only how he responds to the experience.

The examining magistrate begins to ask Meursault if he believes in god. He comes at Meursault with a crucifix and says that it is impossible for anyone to not believe in god. He tells Meursault that life would be meaningless without the belief in god. He also asks Meursault if he is at least sorry for what he has done. Meursault replies that he is more annoyed than sorry and notices that the magistrate does not understand what he means. He has no objective compass with which to judge his actions or words.

Meursault does not acknowledge the values of others. It is almost as if he does not accept the existence of others. He sees others as objects, but he is realizing that others also see him as an object. As Sartre says of the other “he belongs to my distances; the man is there, twenty paces from me, he is turning his back on me.”<sup>97</sup> This is how Meursault is still seeing the other. The other is defined by Meursault. Although Meursault is connected to others through society, he is still an independent being and continues to function in that way.

Meursault is moved to a cell by himself. Marie comes to visit him. She is still talking about marriage. Marie says that they will get married when he gets out of prison. It is upon talking to one of the guards that Meursault realizes that he is in prison to have his freedom taken away. Upon sitting in prison for five months, he says that his main problem is killing time. He found a newspaper article about a Czech man to pass time.

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<sup>97</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 343.

He reads this article several times. He also realizes that he has been talking to himself the entire time he has been in prison. He finally realizes that the sovereign is punishing his body and his mind.

Here we begin to see the change occurring in Meursault's life. He is now seeing his own life in a linear way. In order to kill time, he looks back to his memories. This is something that we have not seen him do before when he was only living in the present. He is now able to look into his past and also his future. It is with the recognition of the passage of time that we can see how the absurd affects Meursault. He now recognizes the possibilities of his future and the events in his past. However, the only future he sees is death. He still does not recognize the significance of these events. For example, he still does not understand the importance of not crying at his mother's funeral and why this is viewed negatively by others.

It is June. This marks the beginning of Meursault's trial, and he says that he is interested in seeing a trial because he has never seen one before. He is also having a difficult time understanding why there is so much attention being put on him. "Usually people didn't pay much attention to me. It took some doing on my part to understand that I was the cause of all the excitement."<sup>98</sup> He is having a difficult time overcoming his previously near anonymous existence. During the court scenes, it is as if Meursault is on the outside looking in. He is a spectator to his own trial. He is able to transcend the events taking place. When we speak of an "existential experience," a transcendence takes place and we are able to observe existence. This is one of the many existential moments Meursault experiences. Meursault's trial also gives us insight of how

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<sup>98</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, 83.

Meursault not a modern character. He does not view himself as the center of his trial. It is chaos to him because he does not understand the structure or purpose. Meursault is the center that is located outside of the structure. He is ultimately not part of the totality but finds himself immersed, trapped, inside of it.

Meursault once again notices the heat of the courtroom. Meursault is questioned by the judge and is asked questions about his mother again. He still does not understand why this is important. When the judge questions the events with the Arab, Meursault says that the actions just happened the way that they did. All of Meursault's acquaintances were also questioned. It was brought to the attention of the jury that the liaison between Meursault and Marie began the day after his mother's funeral and that he did not intervene when Raymond was beating up the girl.

Meursault says that it bothers him that his lawyer will not let him intervene during the trial. He is bored with the prosecutor's speech. The prosecutor claims that the crime was premeditated and points out that Meursault shows no emotion. Meursault admits to himself that he does not show emotion and does not have any remorse for what everyone else is calling his crime. He says that he has never felt much remorse for anything because his mind is always on tomorrow. He never has intentions for his actions. He merely acts. When asked if he intended to kill that day on the beach, he responds by saying that killing was not his intention. He claims that he did so because of the sun and heat. He is annoyed by the pointlessness of the trial and wants to go back to his cell. The jury finds him guilty, and he is to have his head cut off in the public square. Although Meursault doesn't understand why, his crime has offended the sovereign, or the jury in this case, and has been sentenced to death. He does not understand the authority. For

Meursault as an outsider in his own trial, the trial is a simulacrum<sup>99</sup>. He does not experience the events as reality. He merely observes as a spectator.

“Meursault is condemned and executed because he refuses to sacrifice his dignity and authenticity to the empty charade of a set of courtroom procedures.”<sup>100</sup> Meursault never changes his story about the murder. He never tries to plead self-defense. He never gives in and attempts to show remorse that he does not have. It is in this aspect that he remains authentic throughout the story. Meursault does not exhibit bad faith. He is what he is, and he will accept what his freedom brings to him. “If man is what he is, bad faith is forever impossible and candor ceases to be his ideal and becomes instead his being.”<sup>101</sup> Meursault is this man whose candor is his very existence. “He is constantly loyal to the truth of his own feelings, this being the only truth that he can know, that he can be sure about.”<sup>102</sup> In this sense, Meursault is the quintessential existential individual because he is just that, an individual. He makes free choices for himself and does not follow any one else’s choices unless they are imposed upon him by societal institutions that cannot be avoided. He can only know how he has experienced the world and how he has responded to his freedom and the absurdity in his life. Because of this, he cannot be responsible for anyone else’s actions or feelings nor can he be required to understand them.

Meursault has refused to see the chaplain several times. He says that he understands now that an execution is the only thing that a man can be truly interested in.

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<sup>99</sup> The term simulacrum is a postmodern term that means a copy of a copy for which there is no original. For this instance, the trial is a simulacrum for Meursault because he is not experiencing it as reality. He cannot tell what is reality and what is not reality. He does not understand the events taking place or the importance that these events hold.

<sup>100</sup> Thody, “The Anti-Heroes of Sartre and Camus: Some Problems of Definition,” *Studies in Literary Imagination*, Spring 1976, Vol 9, Issue 1, 115.

<sup>101</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 101.

<sup>102</sup> Masters, *Camus: a study*, 27.

He says that the trouble with the guillotine is that you have no chance. It is too precise and too structured to fail. Meursault criticizes how death has become completely structured. He criticizes his modern execution much like Foucault criticizes modern execution in *Discipline and Punish*, in that his punishment is now a public spectacle on a timetable.<sup>103</sup> He always waits for the dawn because that is when the execution calls are sounded. During the daytime, he thinks of his appeal. He says that it does not really matter at what age you die because others will naturally go on living. He goes on to wonder about Marie and if she is still alive. It occurs to him that she could be sick or dead. “Anyway, after that, remembering Marie meant nothing to me. I wasn’t interested in her dead. That seemed perfectly normal to me, since I understood very well that people would forget me when I was dead. They wouldn’t have anything more to do with me. I wasn’t even able to tell myself that it was hard to think those things.”<sup>104</sup> Although his death is upon him, he still cannot show emotional feelings. He is still operating based on physicality, the present and what he can know as truth.

Meursault is finally living for the future when he comes to realize that he will be put to death. The absurd that Camus also describes takes over. We live for the future, but we will ultimately die. For many people this realization comes at a certain age or when a life-threatening event occurs. For Meursault, this existential realization of the absurd comes at the announcement of his death.

The chaplain comes in to see Meursault but he does not have any news on Meursault’s appeal. The chaplain wants to know why Meursault has been refusing to see him. Meursault replies that he does not believe in god. The chaplain tells Meursault that

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<sup>103</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 7.

<sup>104</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, 115.

god can help him, but Meursault replies that he does not want anyone's help. This shows the existential characteristic of responsibility in Meursault. He does not want or expect anyone else to be responsible for the choices that he has made. The chaplain tells him that he is carrying around the burden of sin to which Meursault replies that he does not even know what that means. Meursault says of the chaplain that, "his presence was grating and oppressive."<sup>105</sup> The chaplain is trying to force Meursault to confess or show remorse for his crime. While his body is to be punished at the guillotine, his mind is being punished for what he does not believe and what he does not believe is a crime with intent.

While the chaplain is pushing god on Meursault, Meursault realizes that nothing matters. We will all be condemned one day, even the priest. Everything in our lives leads to this moment. Everything leads to our condemned fate, which has been plagued by existential absurdity. How we approach this fate helps define who we are or who we were, even if we are forgotten. The priest will approach this moment in fear. Meursault approaches this moment with triumph and joy. Meursault makes the link between the leap of faith and rejection of life that the chaplain fails to see. Meursault's attachment is to this life. He will not deny this life in order to hope for some hypothesis of life after death. "His truth had been of this earth, and it will remain so."<sup>106</sup> He accepts the finitude of man. He is not overwhelmed by reason or trying to explain the meaning of this life.

After the chaplain leaves, Meursault falls asleep. He awakens to the sound of the execution call. It is at this moment that Meursault is free again. He wishes for the

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>106</sup> Sprintzen, *Camus a Critical Examination*, 35.



spectators of his execution to look at him with hatred. Meursault is not thinking that death will take him to a place to reconcile his life. He has already reconciled. He has opened himself up to the gentle indifference of the world and has become happy. Simone de Beauvoir says, “if it came to be that each man did what he must, existence would be saved in each one without there being any need of dreaming of a paradise where all would be reconciled at death.”<sup>107</sup> Meursault has done just this.

What we see throughout this novella is man living through experience. He is a culmination of his experiences and his responses to these experiences. Meursault rarely gives us any reasons for his actions. The story is told in a simplistic style. This is because Meursault is a simple man disguised in extraordinary circumstances. This is, in reality, what all of us are. We complicate our lives with indulgences while Meursault just *is*. His senses guide him. He has no need to look back at the past or ahead to the future. At the time that he is to go to death he has a realization. “Meursault goes to his death at his moment of conscious realization that, though life be absurd, it must be lived.”<sup>108</sup> This does not, however, represent any kind of revelation, as he has understood the value of his attitudes throughout the story. We should, though, come to this realization earlier in our lives. It is to Meursault’s benefit that he recognizes the absurdity of life. It is of value to understand that there is not always reason to the world. There are questions without answers. If we choose to not lose value of the natural life, as did the chaplain, it is imperative to have this realization. “Meursault is an epicurean hero of pagan stock, a man who seeks harmony with the natural world in opposition to the Christian, who withdraws from the world. The pagan enjoys physical contact with the world, avoids

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<sup>107</sup> Oaklander, *Existentialist Philosophy An Introduction*, 356.

<sup>108</sup> Masters, *Camus: a study*, 32.

abstractions which cannot bring happiness (love, ambition, hope), adapts himself to what he has and makes the most of it.”<sup>109</sup>

Meursault is man that is deprived of sensitivity but possesses a passion of the absolute and truth in its place. The normal reader of this text may overlook this and only see a person that is indifferent to life. When we see Meursault for who he is, we are drawn into a world where we are not always sure how we would act. We question our own values and beliefs and even what we are living for.

Meursault is a truly existential being. He is a free and self-conscious being. He recognizes his freedom in every situation that he is in and embraces it. He also accepts the responsibility for those actions resulting from his choices. He is what Tillich would call a true existential cynic. He is not willing to follow any other person or conform to their norms or values. In light of all the events that occur in his life, he embraces the absurdity that he encounters. He does not look for answers to the unanswerable. At the end of the story, we witness his own self-affirmation and self-surrender.

This is what postmodern writers describe for our society. The absurdity comes from the many questions we are unable to answer. The illusion of reality is absurd; for if it is an illusion, it is not really reality. Most postmodern writers contend that we cannot know reality, which is what Meursault embraces. Our lives cannot be defined by reason because we cannot foresee the future. What may be reason now may be an inconsistency tomorrow.

Foucault’s description of punishment can be applied to individuals to see what a narcissistic personality is like. This could translate into a person that punishes himself

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 34.

either physically or mentally. Meursault could be doing this by not allowing himself to feel different emotions; however, it may also be the case that Meursault is not capable of producing these types of emotions. Foucault also talks about surveillance in prison. Not only is Meursault watched in prison, throughout the story, he also watches others. He notices how other people feel and what they are doing. Often he sits by his window and watches people walk by. Through this, Meursault maintains power over others. The overarching punishment and discipline enacted by Meursault and upon Meursault is largely to the mind and soul. Meursault never physically harmed his mother or Marie, but he certainly never showed them any emotion. Upon entering the home, Meursault's mother was very upset, and Marie's actions toward Meursault shows us that on several occasions, she was also disturbed by Meursault's words. Also, when Meursault shot the Arab on the beach, it was a sort of mental punishment towards himself. Meursault is a self-conscious and autonomous being, characteristic of existential individuals. He had a choice to pull the trigger that day. Recognizing the consequences of his actions as negative is punishment on the soul. He never denies what happened; he merely says that he does not know the reason for it happening. He is also mentally punished for this by the members of the court and the chaplain. He will not confess to the crime because he thinks that it is not his fault. He is punished with verbal attacks.

It may also be helpful to recognize that major events, such as his mother's death and the crime he committed, occur outside of his home, Algiers. This signifies that these events are outside of what he sees as reality. Although he does understand that his mother is dead and he shot the Arab, he does not understand the specific events. He does not understand the significance of not showing emotion at your mother's funeral. He

does not understand why others cannot understand that the murder just happened without reason. These events themselves are a simulacrum. They are an illusion of what really occurred; however, no one else can understand what happened.

Rosenau points out several characteristics that a postmodern individual would demonstrate. The postmodern individual will have an almost anonymous existence. This is true of Meursault until his crime forces him into the structure of society. The postmodern individual will not be the author of caring relationships. This is apparent in his relationship with Marie. Meursault is oriented towards feelings and is “an active human being constituting his own social reality, pursuing a personal quest for meaning but making no truth claims for what results.”<sup>110</sup> He looks to immediate gratification and prefers the temporary over the permanent. According to Rosenau, “postmodern individuals are concerned with their own lives, their particular satisfaction, and self-promotion. Less concerned with old loyalties and modern affiliations such as marriage, family, church, and nation, they are more oriented toward their own needs.”<sup>111</sup> As discussed earlier, Meursault shows all of these qualities. He is a postmodern individual. He is the product of a failing modern structure that contradicts his existential qualities of autonomy and freedom along with his postmodern characteristics. In the end, this contradiction is what ultimately leads to his self-affirmation.

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<sup>110</sup> Rosenau, *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences*, 53.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Throughout his works, Albert Camus has tried to find if there is a legitimate meaning to life. In *The Stranger*, he does just this with the character Meursault. I have shown that Meursault can be seen as both existential and postmodern in nature, but Camus has given us a meaning for life through Meursault. While this character embraces freedom and shies away from objective truths, Meursault knows that he is all he can know. He is the type of individual that can show us how to face freedom and absurdity and through it find our own self-affirmation.

Camus has done this for many characters throughout many literary works. In an interview, he was asked, “What can the artist do in the world of today?”<sup>112</sup>

He is not asked either to write about co-operatives or, conversely, to lull to sleep in himself the sufferings endured by others throughout history. And since you have asked me to speak personally, I am going to do so as simply as I can. Considered as artists, we perhaps have no need to interfere in the affairs of the world. But considered as men, yes. The miner who is exploited or shot down, the slaves in the camps, those in the colonies, the legions of persecuted throughout the world – they need all those who can speak to communicate their silence and to keep in touch with them.<sup>113</sup>

Camus did not write for philosophical fame or to devalue society and lift up the individual. Camus looked to everyday life to find inspiration for his individuals that he gave a voice to. He continues to explain this.

But from my first articles to my latest book I have written so much, and perhaps too much, only because I cannot keep from being drawn toward everyday life, toward those, whoever they may be, who are humiliated and debased. They need

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<sup>112</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 210.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

to hope, and if all keep silent or if they are given a choice between two kinds of humiliation, they will be forever deprived of hope and we with them.<sup>114</sup>

Camus takes the social misfit or the asocial individual and shows the world that even he may be a hero. Camus is not creating these characters. They already exist in every arena of our lives. Camus takes these individuals and gives them the voice that they have never had. These individuals are the existential and postmodern beings that have been previously described.

Camus believes that he is an artist in language. In order to make a difference, he cannot be involved in any sort of social preaching. His articles and books pursue the lives of characters that have an effect on social order through language. “We must simultaneously serve suffering and beauty.”<sup>115</sup> This is what we see in *Meursault*. He is a character that shows us suffering. He shows us how tragic life can be, how absurdity can take over. He also shows us the beauty of life. He shows us how we can live freely, and in the end he shows us that after it all, we can still have self-affirmation, no matter what type of individual we may be.

Camus believes that as an artist his main objective is to fight oppression despite any dangers or bitterness.

One of the temptations of the artist is to believe himself solitary, and in truth he hears this shouted at him with a certain base delight. But this is not true. He stands in the midst of all, in the same rank, neither higher nor lower, with all those who are working and struggling. His very vocation, in the face of oppression, is to open all prisons and to give a voice to the sorrows and joys of all. This is where art, against its enemies, justifies itself by proving precisely that it is no one's enemy.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

Camus looks to individuals to begin his art and to society to finish his art. He looks to a lonely, cynical individual who is already aware of his own existence and shows society that this individual does in fact exist. From the outside looking in to Meursault, you may see a man in chaos, but he is the freedom we fight to achieve after the revolution of our lives. Through existentialism and postmodernism, we can put the pieces together to see how this is achieved within the individual being.

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