

L'etranger

A. Camus

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I heard about the book already at school. The basic plot was revealed and one of my fellow students had read it and been quite impressed. It is easy to see why, and why it was brought to the attention of students. It is a short book and the language is simple and the philosophy is quite transparent. In short, to be a bit cynical, it fulfills a definite didactic purpose.

A young man kills an Arab on the beach for no apparent reason. Is it an accident, or a case of a temporary insanity, or an act of a monster, a completely cold individual who has no empathy with people? I guess this was part of the explanation given at school, and if so I disagree with it. Maybe because I am naive. The book is a first person narrative and you always, whether you want to or not, tend to sympathize with a first person narrator. He gives you an individual perspective and you are easily seduced into seeing the world with his eyes, including the way he sees himself. This is a literary technique which provides a temptation to authors to elicit the readers sympathy even for most unsavory characters. Maybe I have fallen into that trap too.

The book starts with the protagonist going away to an old folks home some distance from his home in Algiers in order to attend his mother's funeral. It is a chore and it is a duty, not necessarily that he was not fond of his mother, but the child's love for its mother is something of the past. Our protagonist is in his early thirties and has no longer the need for a mother as a mother. She used to live with him but he decided that on his salary he could not provide for her properly and that she would be much better off at a home. The fact that he does not cry at his mother's funeral, that he has problems staying awake at the wake, and that he shows no interest in being shown her dead body will have fateful consequences.

Our young protagonist is a conscientious worker at some office. He has no particular ambition and seems quite content with the life he is leading, so when his boss offers him a transfer to Paris he turns it down. As a reader you may be frustrated and disappointed. Had you been in his shoes, as you to some extent are, you may have jumped at the opportunity. But of course it is meant to show that our narrator has no real drive, that he is passive, and indifferent to the opportunities life presents.

His life is simple. He has a few friends, one of them owning a restaurant at which he often eats, another one is a neighbor who seeks his companionship and support, fatefully as it will turn out, in dealing with an unfaithful mistress and her brother. Our protagonist is a young man with simple pleasures, such as swimming at the beach, or having sex with young women. One woman, with whom he struck up a temporary acquaintance when she was working as a typist in the office, he meets by chance just after returning from his mother's funeral. He is attracted to her, and fancies that it is not unreciprocated. They start an affair right away, which will also be held against him. He is fond of her and carnally attracted, but will he marry her? Does he love her? She asks him point-blank and

he becomes a bit evasive. He feels no particular desire to marry her but if she would insist he would not particularly mind. There is no deep passion, but on the other hand there seldom is between people who are attracted to each other. She accepts his stand, which the reader might find surprising. But after all how many men do not pursue beautiful women and are happy enough to be accepted without demanding real love in return. Exclusive love perhaps, but that is something else, more of a convention, concerned with vanity and status, not affection per se.

So there is a visit to a friend of his neighbor, a guy who has a place by the beach and a diminutive Parisian wife. The three men take a walk on the beach and encounter some Arabs, one of whom is the brother of the unfaithful mistress. There is a scuffle and there is a knife, and the neighbor is slightly wounded and seeks some medical assistance. He also has a revolver which he did not use but gives to our protagonist for safe-keeping. This makes a stir when they arrive back. Our young man decides to sit outside by himself in the sun and gets a bit dizzy by the heat. He takes a stroll on the beach being restless. The sun beats down relentlessly exacerbating his dizziness, and the glare of the sun almost blinds him. He seeks out some rocks which can provide some shade, and there he discovers the Arab they had encountered earlier in the day. He is drawn to him, without wanting to, and when he gets closer and sees the knife he impulsively fires a shot without really meaning to. Then he stops and fires a few more for good measure. Why? It is not clear. He does not understand why, and his inability to account for this, will of course hurt him.

He makes no attempt to escape, is taken into custody and assigned a lawyer. He is interrogated by an official rather sympathetic to him and who expects him to show remorse and believe in God. Our protagonist refuses, he has his integrity and he refuses to play the game, and as a reader you feel exasperated. Why not play along, why not make those small adjustments to your integrity? Who will it hurt? No one, but it will no doubt save you. But he refuses, maybe because he is after all a bit autistic? Unable to play the social games, ignorant, or maybe rather indifferent to conventions.

His appointed lawyer is hopeful that he will get off rather easily, a few years in jail and that will be it. But the persecutor outwits the lawyer easily and sways a jury. He presents the so called facts, some of which we have encountered above, and connects the dots and thus presents our friend as a monster who has forfeited every right to life. He wins his case and our protagonist is condemned to death by a public execution, however, with some possibility of reprieve, but we as readers will never know, the book ends with some existential insights, our friend becoming reconciled to an early death, what would be the point of living a few more decades? He finds some peace and imagines that his mother might have found a similar peace confronting her own death.

People believe in facts. But what are facts devoid of a context? In science a fact only acquires meaning in connection with a precise question. Here, on the other hand, the persecutor takes the liberty to interpret the facts, i.e. joining the dots as to comply with a preassigned picture of monstrosity. This can always be done, more or less easily. A given observation can be interpreted in so many different ways. There are so many scenarios that can fit a few anchored points. For the persecutor it is all a game, in fact it is his duty to present the worst possible spin, from the point of view of the perpetrator. He is not interested in presenting the truth. Likewise the duty of the defense is to puncture the

arguments and assertions of the persecutor, to defy the former and to show that the latter are groundless. Furthermore to demolish, or at least discredit the narrative constructed. Out of this opposition some sort of compromise judged by a jury of common sense will emerge supposedly being a fair approximation of the truth. This is democracy, everyone getting a hearing, and then a process to find some sort of consensus. What is truth? Absolute truth is unattainable, a pragmatic one is more realistic, and there really are not any feasible alternatives. Democracy is about pragmatism, therein lies most of its imperfections. In a sense one may see it as absurd, absurdities canceling each other out. Camus is a philosopher, all his literary writing is motivated by philosophical questions. As a writer he is above all sensitive to the absurd, and the book (or longer short story) is an exhibition of the absurdity of someone being sentenced to death because he did not cry at his mother's funeral.

It is a didactic book, the message is rather clear and spelled out. The French is very easy to understand, the vocabulary employed is very limited, the grammatical constructions very simple, yet he manages with those self-imposed limits to write quite evocatively of the settings. Maybe the simplicity of the prose is intended to show the simplicity of the protagonist. If so it would work better with Native French speakers (and readers), for a foreigner the constraints are not felt as such, the Natives on the other hand cannot but be aware of them, constantly impinging on their consciousness, even at times appearing irksome, as might very well have been the intention of the author.

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