Albert Camus  
*The Outsider*

References

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Serraillier, Ian *The Silver Sword* London: Jonathan Cape and Puffin Books; (as *Escape from Warsaw*) New York: Criterion Books and Scholastic, 1956


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We ask a good deal of a class reader. It must be (on some level) comprehensible to everybody in the class, yet offer substance to the most able. It should contain enough interest to maintain response over several periods, yet (preferably) be of a length which can be managed by the class within a reasonable time. Above all, it should seem strong enough to form the backbone of a course of work and seem worth the teacher's effort necessary for its successful presentation.

Camus' *The Outsider* (published in the United States as *The Stranger*), which I have taught to senior classes (age fifteen and over) in both Britain and America, seems to fulfill all these requirements. It is a book to which those of a more meditative turn of mind will respond most fully, but it offers interest at lower levels: I have never met a class that hasn't been captivated by Camus' portrait of the old man Salamano and his dog. Students of this age are naturally intrigued by the cool, apparently asocial attitude of the protagonist, Meursault, and, from this interest, the teacher can develop understanding of the book.

*The Outsider* seems to me preeminent as a book which benefits from good teaching: the variety of interpretations that it has received suggests that its direction is not, to the unaided reader, obvious. This is partly because of ambiguities and contradictions in the novel itself—the result, I believe, of the transmutation of philosophy (that of *The Myth of Sisyphus*) into narrative. It is, for example, difficult to feel that Meursault's responses are always "benevolent,"¹ as Camus apparently intended them to appear. More relevant to our concern, though, is the fact that *The Outsider* is a different kind of novel from that to which our students are generally accustomed.

A philosophical novel may seem a strange choice for a nonspecialist English class in a secondary school. But the "philosophy" of *The Outsider* appeals to the young (Camus started the book in his mid-twenties) and it can be brought out in a very concrete way by comparing Meursault with other...
characters in the book. I find Chapter 5 of Part 1, in which Camus has Meursault encounter several “socialized” individuals, a useful focus for class discussion of Meursault’s detachment from the forms, meanings, and securities on which others lean. I usually ask members of the class first to discuss, in groups, the other characters in the chapter—Marie, the employer, the old man, the robot woman. Questions such as: “Why is this person as he/she is?” “What gives him/her security or meaning in life?” prompt perceptive responses, and an understanding, by contrast, of Meursault comes more easily.

Approached in this way, the book has a clear appeal to young people at a stage of personal development when they are seeking to establish their personal selves within and against their social environment. (The old man’s failure to do this is one of the most graphic of Camus’ portrayals, and one which is readily appreciated by every student.) Most important to the adolescent in his achieving a “mature” self are his sexual relationships, and the two moments when Meursault tells Marie (in response to her question) that he doesn’t think he “loves” her always gain a rapt response from my classes.

In discussion, I ask why Marie asks the question; when someone points out her need for reassurance, and the questions this raises about what her “love” is, I have, I believe, experienced that electric feeling in the classroom when new understanding is being generated in one’s students’ minds.

Because The Outsider deals with fundamental issues—the problem of being oneself within society; the effect on one’s life of an awareness of death—I have no difficulty in finding other literature which illuminates Camus’ ideas. I do not, however, use The Outsider as one element in a “thematic study” of death, personal relationships, or anything else. I prefer to regard the book as the backbone from which surrounding reading and activity can grow: it remains primary and is fully considered.

As might well be expected, the poems of Blake, that great “unaccommodated man” of the eighteenth century, startlingly illuminate Camus’ vision. The Song of Experience “A Little Boy Lost” is almost a miniature of The Outsider, and the couplet “he who kisses the joy as it flies/Lives in Eternitys sun rise” is a very Camusian thought. Equally unsurprisingly, Lawrence comes to mind: several of the short poems about love and work can relevantly be read against Camus’ treatment of Marie, Salamano, and Meursault’s employer. And—with a clever class—I find it possible to read extracts from The Myth of Sisyphus (particularly the account of “absurd” experience).

Clearly, my own reading of The Outsider dominates the approach outlined. With a book such as this, which does present difficulties to the inexperienced reader, I am unashamed to provide “the grain of rigour they taste delight-