

### The Role of the Sun and Heat in ‘The Outsider’

In ‘The Outsider’ Camus uses Meursault to explore Absurdist philosophy (and to some extent Existentialist philosophy), and contrast it with Christian beliefs. The sun and heat are often used to illustrate Meursault’s life and his views on the universe. He does not have a purpose to his life in the normal sense, so he pursues physical comfort and small pleasures. The sun and heat are the main things that determine his physical comfort and it is clear that they are very important to him, because although he often gives no details about his emotions, he mentions the sun and/or heat in every chapter but one. However it is sometimes unclear whether Camus has used sun and heat to show some elements of Absurdism, and discuss whether Meursault is controlled by his environment, or if Meursault talks about the environment because he does not know how to express his emotions.

In ‘The Outsider’ heat is often a cause of suffering. For example at the funeral in Chapter One Perez tries to keep up but cannot. He is exhausted by the time he reaches the funeral and ‘great tears of frustration and anguish were streaming down his cheeks’ (P.22). He later faints. In this case the sun is a representation of the universe as a whole and Camus is showing that the universe is uncaring, which is one of the beliefs in Absurdism. The universe’s indifference to Perez’s suffering represents its indifference to all human actions. Alternatively Camus could also be trying to show that society can be indifferent to suffering when it is caring is not required by society’s rules. Despite the fact that Perez has a limp none of the people try to help him in any way, even when he has to take a short cut. They are abiding by the ‘rules’ of a funeral procession – walk in a calm and constant manner – and they are more concerned with doing this than helping him.

Meursault’s response to the sun and heat in this chapter is also significant. When he is keeping vigil over his mother it seems that he is more affected by his physical surroundings than any emotional pain. He falls asleep, and when he wakes the room is very light, so much so that ‘There wasn’t a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to the eyes’ (P.15). The fact this description is so vivid shows that Meursault’s physical surroundings are all he is focusing on. He also uses a list, which shows the reader the sheer level of detail he observes.

In part 1 ‘Chapter 6’ Camus uses imagery of the sun and heat to build up tension towards the climax of Meursault shooting the Arab. When Meursault goes out onto the street the ‘bright morning sunshine hit [him] like a slap in the face’ (P.49). Up till this point Meursault generally describes the sun as benign or friendly, so this sudden change makes it seem that the sun has turned against him. Camus uses the hard sounding words ‘hit’ and ‘slap’ to increase the violence of the sentence and shock the reader more. The sudden change shifts the mood and builds tension by foreshadowing the other dramatic changes that are soon to happen in Meursault’s life.

After this there is a brief reduction in tension, before the mentions of the sun become more frequent and the imagery becomes more violent and vivid. Near the start of the chapter Meursault says ‘the heat of the sun made me doze off a bit’(P.53). Although the word ‘made’ suggests that the heat is controlling or forcing this action, the fact he is sleeping shows that he is relaxed, which is emphasised by the use of the word ‘doze’ From then on Meursault describes the sun and heat more and more negatively. For example he says ‘the heat was pushing full against me’(P.58) and ‘I felt the blast of its hot breath on my face’(P.58). Camus’s use of tactile imagery puts the reader in Meursault’s shoes, and shows that he is feeling claustrophobic and powerless. This raises tension because it shows that Meursault is under great stress, so he could lash out without reason.

The sun and heat often seem to control Meursault’s actions. The most dramatic example of this is when he shoots the Arab. He moved towards the Arab because he ‘couldn’t stand this burning feeling any longer’(P.59). Camus uses the word burning because when you touch an object which is too hot you automatically withdraw. This makes it seem like Meursault’s actions are simply reflexes. This helps the reader understand that no logical thought is going into his actions, they are simply a reaction to his environment. However an alternative explanation is that the ‘burning feeling’ is actually a desire for revenge. Although this feeling would be unusual to Meursault, it is clear that having friends does matter to him.

His eyes ‘were blinded by [a] veil of salty tears’(P.60) The tears suggest that he felt fear, or unhappiness at what he was about to do. The use of the word ‘veil’ suggests he is unable to see or think clearly, and that he is a passive victim. Then the sun is ‘gouging out [his] stinging eyes’(P.60). The fact the sun takes his sight symbolises that it is making him powerless and vulnerable. Moreover his physical blindness is symbolic of his moral blindness. Camus uses this symbol to get the reader to question what would prevent someone from killing if they had no morals.

However on some level it seems Meursault knows the implication of what he is about to, and that this action will change his life irrevocably. He says ‘The sky seemed to be splitting from end to end and raining down sheets of flame’(P.60). The apocalypse is the destruction and end of the world, so this apocalyptic imagery shows that Meursault knows that shooting the Arab will cause life as he knows it to end, and the destruction of his contentment.

However there is some suggestion that rather than the sun controlling Meursault, Camus is using pathetic fallacy to show the reader what Meursault is feeling. For example when Meursault is on the bus for his mother’s funeral he says it was ‘the glare of the sky reflecting off the road that made me doze off’(P.10). Some people sleep a lot in response to grief to help them cope. However Meursault is not in touch with his emotions, so he blames his tiredness on the sun.

There is even a possibility that by describing his surroundings Meursault can express emotions which he cannot otherwise articulate. For example when Meursault is in his cell he says ‘there were two things I was always thinking about: the dawn and my appeal’(P.108). The dawn is the start of a new day, and the appeal means the possibility of a new life. In his mind they are one and the same as they both represent hope. This shows he has a strong association between the environment and the events in his life. When he is at the beach with Marie and his friends he says the ‘sun wasn’t too hot’(P.37). This may be his way of saying that he is happy. In contrast when he has to see the examining magistrate he says ‘It was very hot’(P.66). This could be literal, or Meursault could be feeling fear or guilt. It could be that Meursault does not recognise his emotions for what they are, so he blames positive or negative feelings on the temperature or weather – things he feels more comfortable with.

There are many other places in ‘The Outsider’ when Meursault’s descriptions of physical comfort correspond with events which cause him to be calm or happy, but also reflect on the Absurdist view of life. For example during the funeral procession in Chapter One where the nurse explains that heat causes illness one way or another, Meursault says, “ She was right. There was no way out.” After his confrontation with the Chaplain images of the evening and coolness, like ‘The wondrous peace of this sleeping summer flooded into me’(P.116), coincide with his calm acceptance of death and his identification with the indifferent universe. It may be that this acceptance has changed the way he sees the world, which makes the positive things in his environment more noticeable.

In conclusion Camus uses the sun and heat to help the reader understand Meursault’s personality along with Absurdism. He also uses vivid imagery of the sun and heat to build tension and create rising action towards the climax of the book. It is ambiguous whether Meursault completely lacks normal emotions and his actions purely controlled by his environment, or if he has some normal emotional responses but is unable to express them in the same way as most people.

1,444 words

### **Bibliography**

*The Outsider* – Albert Camus

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### 'The Outsider' Reflective Statement

*How was your understanding of cultural and contextual considerations of the work developed through the interactive oral?*

In our interactive oral we discussed a number of topics including Camus' reason for writing 'The Outsider' and how Absurdism and the French occupation of Algeria impact on it.

The interactive oral helped me understand the reason for Camus' beliefs. He wrote 'The Outsider' during WWII. This was a period of time when many people were questioning their beliefs and religion because they could not reconcile the idea of a loving God with the atrocities they had witnessed. The illogical and unnecessary death of the Arab would have struck a chord with contemporary readers.

Learning more about Absurdism has developed my understanding of how the minor characters are used. Most are used chiefly to highlight or contrast elements of Meursault's personality, and thereby contrast Absurdism with more conventional viewpoints. For example the relationship between Salamano and his dog is one ruled by strong emotions, including at times hate, which contrasts with the relationship between Meursault and Marie.

At the time of 'The Outsider' Algeria was under French rule, and despite the fact they made up 90% of the population Algerians were treated as second class citizens. It was extremely unusual for French people to be convicted of killing Algerians. This deepened my understanding of 'The Outsider' because it showed me that Meursault was not convicted because of his crime but because of his character. The Arab's death does not seem to be the main focus of the trial; the jury are judging Meursault instead on his response to his mother's death. Moreover he would only have had to fake a small amount of regret for the murder to not be convicted but he still does not because he refuses to lie or say more than he feels.

Camus' questioning of social conventions may be due to the time he lived in Algeria, because there he would have witnessed a completely different culture. It is possible that the expected responses to emotions like grief or love were slightly different between the two cultures.

336 words

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