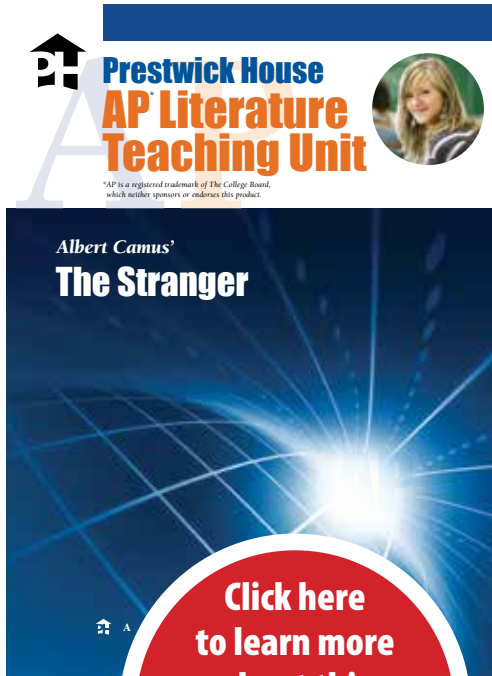




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Teaching Unit

The Stranger

by Albert Camus

written by Michael Stacey



Prestwick House

Item No. 307578

The Stranger

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, students will be able to:

1. Better understand the effect of a first-person narrator on the overall meaning and impact of a novel.
2. Explore the relationship between philosophy and literature.
3. Examine how ambiguity can affect the meaning of a text.
4. Analyze the creation and development of motifs and imagery and the role they play in the novel.
5. Explain the how narrative structure can affect the understanding of a text.
6. Explore the role of dialogue in prose fiction.
7. Understand the role of external and internal conflict, namely person vs. person, and person vs. self.
8. Place the novel in its general historical context.

Background Notes

Where does *The Stranger* fit into literary history?

The first half of the twentieth century gave birth to a large range of important and diverse literary pieces. Literary Modernism raged in the Anglo-speaking areas of the world, which included many major Western European cities. Although Literary Modernism typically is boxed in with an arbitrary ending date of around the time of World War II, Modernism cannot be explored in a vacuum. Therefore, there are some ways that this novel has some Modernist qualities, but also as will be explained below, its classification as a philosophical text makes the novel timeless as it grapples with basic human concerns of identity, fate, community, justice, etc.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War and the Disfiguration of Western Consciousness:

The Stranger was published many years after World War I, but the World War's effects were still being felt at the time of this novel's publication. Even though the novel's publication coincided with World War II, the problems that the novel explores are more likely to be products of the ideologies formed after World War I. World War I disfigured Western consciousness due to the scale of the war and the impact it had on the entire world (not just militaries and geopolitics). At the time of World War I, the general public was not as desensitized to the atrocities of war as it is today. The new ways of waging war moved like a shockwave, not only affecting the soldiers. World War I saw the beginning of a more mechanized warfare, and a more dehumanizing warfare, in which combatants did not necessarily see the "whites of their opponents' eyes." In addition, the roots of modern chemical warfare were planted during World War I. All of these atrocities challenged the preconceived notion that going to war was a glorious thing, and much literature has been written that addresses that point. The United States was affected by World War I in a unique way namely due to the unhealed fissures of the American Civil War, which were still fresh in the consciousness of America (both militarily and in the general public). While *The Stranger* does not deal with the United States, it is important to realize that World War I was something that did not affect only Europe, which is generally the focus of common historical narratives about the war. Ultimately, the entire Western world was changed from the trauma; new philosophies emerged, including a refreshed rendition of nihilism by Friedrich Nietzsche. World War I is typically tied to Literary Modernism, which is commonly an America-centric literary category, but as we see—the war's grasp was wide.

The Stranger

Part One

Chapter One

1. What is significant about the ambiguity in the first paragraph of the chapter?

2. How would you characterize Madame Meursault's opinion of being in the nursing home based on Meursault and the director's conversation?

3. Explain how the point of view of this chapter forces the reader to consider the narrator's psychological state.

4. How does Meursault earn the title "stranger" in this chapter?

5. What is significant about Meursault's not wanting to see his dead mother? (Pay close attention to how other characters react about this.)

6. How is time portrayed in this chapter?

7. Why is Meursault's realization that the letter he is writing is to a Moorish girl?

8. How do the multiple settings of this chapter contribute to the chapter's overall meaning?

9. Meursault wants to go home to eat potatoes for dinner, yet Raymond offers him a dinner of meat. What does this suggest about Meursault's economic status?

10. What role does Chapter Three play in the development of the novel's plot?

Part Two

Chapter One

- 1. In what way does the focus on Meursault's perceptions illustrate the power of first-person narration?

- 2. Why does Meursault's lawyer ask questions about Maman's funeral? Do these questions pertain to his case at all?

- 3. Knowing what you know about Meursault, what is significant about the fact that he "lost the habit of analyzing" himself in regard to the narration of the novel?

- 4. What emerges as the relationship between Meursault and the legal system (lawyer, magistrate, etc.) in the early pages of the chapter?

- 5. Describe how Meursault's laziness in explaining his situation correlates with Camus's theory of the absurd?

6. Explain Meursault's view of death in this chapter and then state why it is nihilistic.

7. How does Meursault's assertion that he does not want any help change from the previous chapter?

8. Meursault suggests or seems to suggest that he could have lived his life another way. How is this stance compatible with a fatalist world view?

9. Does Meursault fully accept the nihilist worldview toward the end of the chapter? Analyze the ending of the novel paying close attention to the unanswered questions that it raises. Also, consider how the ending of the novel breaks traditional plot structure (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement.)
