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Teaching Albert Camus's

The Stranger

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Stranger*

THE *STRANGER* IS BEST CATEGORIZED as a work of philosophical fiction, a genre that is oftentimes difficult to define neatly. Philosophical fiction typically calls the reader to ponder perennial philosophical questions that are not confined to just the text in question, but human existence in general. In some ways, all fiction is moderately philosophical, yet the texts that are given the label *philosophical fiction* can be characterized as philosophical texts and not just fiction that happens to deal with philosophic matters.

The Stranger is written in a way that forces the reader to take a more active role in interpretation. Camus does not craft the text in such a way that yields ease in understanding through concrete details. In fact, Camus does not offer the reader all of the information necessary to come to a robust conclusion about the plot, which the reader can see through the use of a non-sequential and perhaps “gappy” narrative structure. Since the majority of the text is riddled with ambiguity, Camus places the responsibility for interpretation fully on the reader. That is not to say that the reader of any other text is less responsible for interpreting, simply that the reader of *The Stranger* has an increased responsibility.

When dealing with contextual information, *The Stranger* offers another host of complications. For example, the historical setting of the novel—namely the French-Arab Algerian conflict—is important for the reader to recognize. Yet, *The Stranger* does not contain many historical particulars, which may render a historical reading somewhat empty. What is also important to note is that the novel’s lack of reliance on much outside context gives it a contained feeling—all the more establishing its role as a philosophical text.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *The Stranger*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Examining the role of Meursault's id in Part One of the novel

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Worksheet A for Psychoanalytic Theory Activity One and Worksheet B for Psychoanalytic Theory Activity One.
2. Divide the class into an even number of groups.
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) either the “Prosecution” (Worksheet A) or the “Defense” (Worksheet B).
4. Have each group follow the instructions on its worksheet and prepare its argument.
5. Reconvene the class and conduct a sort of mock trial in which one set of groups prosecutes the case (argues that Meursault is driven by pure id), and one group provides the defense (argues that Meursault is not driven by pure id).

NOTE: Depending on the size of the class, the number of groups, and the time allowed, you may want to complete this step using one of the following variations:

- Allow all Prosecution groups to present their side, followed by all Defense groups.
 - Alternate Prosecution and Defense groups until every group has presented its arguments. (You may want to follow each Prosecution-Defense presentation with a class discussion.)
 - Allow one class period for steps 1 through 4 and then another class period for the trial(s).
6. If time allows, allow students to cross-examine each side, using their “rebuttal” notes, after each argument is heard.



Feminist Theory Applied to *The Stranger*

Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Investigating Meursault's treatment of Marie in *The Stranger*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Stranger: Feminist Theory Activity One Worksheet*.
2. Divide the class into seven groups, or a number of groups divisible by seven.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following portions of the novel, focusing on a particular stage in the development of Marie and Meursault's relationship
 - Chapter Two of Part One—the relationship as it begins
 - Chapter Four of Part One—Marie's question to Meursault and Marie's reaction to Raymond's domestic dispute
 - Chapter Five of Part One—Marie's question to Meursault, her reaction to his answer, and how Meursault treats Marie
 - Chapter Six of Part One—contrasting Marie's disposition with Meursault's
 - Chapter Two of Part Two—how the relationship has changed due to Meursault's imprisonment
 - Chapter Three of Part Two—how Marie is described and how her presence affects Meursault
 - Chapter Four of Part Two—focusing on the moment right before the verdict
4. Have the groups provide the requested information on the handout and prepare to present their findings to the class.
5. Reconvene the class and have each group present its findings to the class.

NOTE: In order for students to be able to follow the development of Meursault and Marie's relationship throughout the novel, have the groups present in order.

6. As a class, discuss the progression of Meursault and Marie's relationship, how it explores stereotypes of men and women, and how it changes throughout the course of the novel.



Marxist Approach Applied to *The Stranger*

Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Examining evidence of class conflict in *The Stranger*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Stranger*: Marxist Theory Activity One Worksheet.
2. Divide the class into five groups, or a number of groups divisible by five.
3. Assign each group, or allow each group to choose one of the following relationships:
 - Meursault and Raymond
 - Meursault and Masson and his wife
 - Meursault and his boss
 - Meursault and Céleste
 - Meursault and Marie
4. Have the groups examine the novel and answer the questions on the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and have each group present its findings.
6. As a class, using Meursault as the common denominator, explain how class differences manifest themselves through Meursault's interactions with various characters.