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Happiness and Meaning in *The Stranger*

Apathy and the unwillingness to participate in one’s own life are crippling when it comes to finding happiness. An individual must be prepared to engage in passion and one’s own self in order to feel purpose. In the movie *Happy,* it is said that 40% of an individual’s happiness is dependent upon intentional behavior and seeking the “spice of life,” while 10% is reliant on jobs and careers. In other words, 50% of potential happiness is reliant upon the individual. Meursault in *The Stranger* is indifferent and passive. His mother dies, and he does not feel sadness for her death. He goes through life not caring about anything. When Meursault murders an innocent man for no reason and is subsequently put on trial, he begins to see the errors in the way that he has been living his life. Meursault must come to grips with his own mortality and choices in order to recognize the potential for him to create meaning in his own life. *The Stranger* by Albert Camus offers a blunt examination of the meaning of life, illustrating that alienation from self, alienation from others, and a lack of a pursuit of a meaningful life are all obstacles to achieving happiness.

Throughout the book, Meursault narrates with the air of a man who is emotionally detached to all facets of life. He is passive to all events in his life, and somewhat narcissistic in terms of his reactions to other people. After his mother’s death, Meursault comments, “It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed” (24). Instead of feeling the deep grief that normally accompanies the loss of a mother, Meursault feels as if nothing in his life will be affected by this death. He exists by satiating his own shallow desires, and he never pushes himself to feel anything. As a man, Meursault is little more than a passive observer. He is very focused on the physicality of the world and does not care for forming deep relationships with anyone, even his own mother. When his boss asks him how old his mother was when she died, Meursault said, “‘About sixty,’ so as not to make a mistake” (25). Instead, he spends his life watching other people live theirs. After he has returned from his mother’s funeral, Meursault describes an entire day that he spent on his balcony watching people walk by underneath as he narrates, “It was a beautiful afternoon. Yet the pavement was wet and slippery, and what few people there were in a hurry… At five o’clock some streetcars pulled up, clanging away. They were bringing back gangs of fans from the local soccer stadium. … They were shouting and singing at the tops of their lungs that their team would never die. … Then the street lamps came on all of a sudden and made the first stars appearing in the night sky grow dim. I felt my eyes growing tired from watching the street filled with so many people and lights” (22). Instead of being one of the hundreds of people that he is seeing on the street, laughing and engaging in life, Meursault chooses to spend his life observing, physically removing himself from society and other people. He alienates himself from others, and, as a result, cannot create meaningful relationships.

It is only when he is on trial for the murder of the “Arab,” as he is known in the book, that Meursault begins to recognize his alienation from his own self. Judges and lawyers make assumptions and argue about Meursault’s soul, giving him the impression that his consciousness is being removed from his physical body. As his lawyer presents his closing argument, Meursault notices something peculiar in that he was saying “I” whenever he spoke of Meursault. Meursault comments, “He went on like that, saying ‘I’ whenever he was speaking about me. … I thought it was a way to exclude me even further from the case, reduce me to nothing, and, in a sense, substitute himself for me. But I think I was already far removed from that courtroom” (103). His consciousness is removed from his physical body, and he becomes a literal stranger to himself. When Meursault finds himself being so easily replaced, he questions the point of his presence if he can be so easily replaced by another, and in this way is suddenly aware of all the happiness that he once had that he took for granted.

The author, Camus, uses Meursault as a personification of the dangers of not taking responsibility for your choices and seeking meaning in his life. According to Camus, there is only one correct response when one recognizes “The Absurd” (the ridiculousness of human desire to find meaning in a meaningless universe): for the individual to take responsibility for their own choices and to seek and find meaning in their own lives. For the majority of the novel, Meursault is the living embodiment of the improper way to deal with the Absurd. He recognizes the meaninglessness of the universe, but makes no attempt to give his life meaning. He is offered a job in Paris, but he turns it down because he “isn’t unhappy” in Algiers. He only finds meaning in his life after he kills the Arab. For a long time, he is confused when people call him a murderer, forgetting that he is responsible for a man’s death. As he is interviewed by a very religious chaplain who is trying to find meaning in his meaningless action, Meursault begins to come to grips with his choice. He realizes that he did not appreciate his freedom until it was gone. After he is finally sentenced to death, Meursault says:

As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself— so like a brother, really— I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate (122-23).

Meursault finally realizes that he had missed his opportunity to live a meaningful life by taking his happiness for granted. In the face of the meaninglessness of the world, he decides that he would rather have people greet him with cries of hate than not greet him at all, because has finally taken full responsibility for his actions, and hate offers some meaning to his existence. He has finally recognized the impact that he has had on his own life, and, in the face of death, realizes that he does not want to leave his life. However, he knows that he is the only person who is responsible for his circumstances, as it was he who killed the Arab. If this is the way his life must end because of his choices, he wants to be greeted with cries of hate, as a way to fulfill all of the strong emotion that he held at arms length for his whole life. Instead of simply allowing others to label him as a murderer, he accepts that identity for himself and no longer feels disconnected from his own self.

It can be hard to find meaning in life, especially when faced with the overwhelming absurdity of the universe. However, oftentimes it is up to the individual to take an active role in his/her own life and find his/her passion in order to achieve happiness. As evidenced by Meursault, it is dangerous to estrange oneself from life. When you live life numbing yourself to the joys and pain of reality, you cannot be happy because you are not being authentic to your own emotions. When you don’t take responsibility for your own actions and do not in turn define your identity, instead of allowing others to define you, you are not living an honest existence, which can remove one from the opportunity to find meaning. Eventually, Meursault comes to terms with himself and his choices, and how much he has taken for granted, and finally figures out how to determine his identity for himself. He is no longer a stranger to himself, nor is he a stranger to others. He is happy when he releases the negativity that has been building inside for so long, and finally feels the peace of recognizing the Absurd, yet seeking his own meaning, as opposed to doing nothing in the face of it. The movie *Happy* offers many examples of choices in life that add meaning to an individual. Close relationships, focus on intrinsic goals, social equality, hard work, and compassion are all gateways to achieving individual happiness. By neglecting and ignoring our power to be happy, and ignoring the call to define meaning within our own lives, we ourselves become strangers.