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Acceptance of Death

In the French Algerian novel *The Stranger*, written by Albert Camus and translated by Matthew Ward, Camus shows the importance of going beyond understanding death to accepting it, using Meursault's evolution of thought at the end of the novel to drive his point. In the beginning of the final chapter, Camus shows Meursault merely understanding death, but not aware of it. Throughout the middle of the final chapter, Camus shows Meursault getting closer and closer to accepting death. Finally, at the end of the novel, Camus shows Meursault accepting death. Camus shows the reasoning and process of accepting death. Camus shows not only the process of accepting death, but the necessity of it.

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In the French Algerian novel *The Stranger*, written by Albert Camus and translated by Matthew Ward, Camus shows the importance of going beyond understanding death to accepting it, using Meursault's evolution of thought at the end of the novel to drive his point. The understanding of death is the simple knowledge that one is going to die. However, accepting death goes beyond the knowledge of death to the realization and awareness of it. Through the last chapter, Meursault starts out understanding but not aware of death, and slowly begins to become aware of it until he finally accepts death.

In the beginning of the final chapter, Camus shows Meursault merely understanding death, but not aware of it. At the very beginning of the chapter, Meursault is trying to imagine ways of “escaping the machinery” (Camus 108). Camus starts with Meursault's thoughts at a basic position, trying to avoid death. However, later Meursault complains that “the trouble with the guillotine was that you had no chance at all, absolutely none” (Camus 111). The guillotine, again representing death and its inevitability, still bothers Meursault; however, he does understand that it is inevitable. Camus shows how people, after getting past trying to avoid death, can understand death's inevitability. Next, Camus brings up the misconception that the guillotine is raised on a scaffold that the condemned man would climb onto, because of everything “taught or shown about it” (Camus 112). Instead of facing the reality of death, the guillotine on the same level as the person approaching it, Meursault sees it as something far away, on top of a scaffold. Camus's strong metaphor shows how death is something that is close to life, not the distant faraway future people would like to see it as. After the guillotine, Camus says Meursault was always thinking about “the dawn and my appeal” (Camus 112). Camus frequently uses the theme of day and night, or being awake and sleeping, to represent awareness and unawareness of death. Camus contrasts the dawn, foreshadowing Meursault's moment of awakening and awareness, with his thoughts of the appeal, in which Meursault is still unaware. This leads into his next reflection. After midnight, when Meursault is listening for footsteps, upon the slightest sound, he rushes to the door and hears “the sound of his own breathing... like a dog's panting” (Camus 113). In this period of nighttime, when Meursault is unaware, Camus alludes to Salamano's dog, who finally escapes from his collar even though it was loose for “a long time” (Camus 38). After hearing no footsteps, Meursault feels relieved that he “gained another twenty-four hours” (Camus 113). Through exemplifying Meursault listening and feeling relieved at the thought of delaying his death, Camus shows that even after knowing that death is inevitable, people still fear it. Lack of awareness of death restricts Meursault; he merely understands it and has not yet began to accept it. As Meursault gets closer to accepting death, he is less and less restricted.

Throughout the middle of the final chapter, Camus shows Meursault getting closer and closer to accepting death. Camus starts Meursault off with the obvious: all people will die. Next he goes on to say that “deep down I knew perfectly well that it doesn't much matter whether die at thirty or at seventy...” (Camus 114). This “deep down” knowledge is Meursault's understanding of death. However, Camus still points out the “terrifying leap” that Meursault would feel his heart take at the idea of living another 20 years. While Meursault fully understands death, he still is not able to become aware of it, because he still prefers the prospect of life over that of death. The prospect of being pardoned fills him with a “delirious joy” (Camus 114). Camus shows how emotions blind us from becoming aware of death. Immediately after Meursault's emotional period, Camus presents a sharp contrast by casually mentioning that Meursault had denied his appeal (Camus 115). Camus's contrast between Meursault's irrational joy for life in the last paragraph with his sudden choice to reject his appeal as a turning point in Meursault's thoughts. While earlier, Meursault's emotions work their way above his rational thoughts and require mental effort to control, now Camus shows Meursault starting to accept what he understands rationally. Camus combines the strong contrast with the casual wording of Meursault condemning himself to death to draw the reader's attention to make the change in Meursault's character clear. To further emphasize this, Camus shows Meursault thinking about Marie, “remembering Marie meant nothing to me... [because] people would forget me when I was dead” (Camus 115). This contrasts with Meursault thinking that he originally looked for Marie in the walls (Camus 119). Again, Camus contrasts Meursault's original emotional state with his new more aware and rational one. Camus uses this shift in Meursault's character to show the process of going from knowing death to accepting it.

Finally, at the end of the novel, Camus shows Meursault accepting death. At the end of his conversation with the chaplain, Meursault finally snaps and yells, “pouring out... everything” (Camus 120). This is the point where Meursault finally accepts death. Meursault says that “nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did he” (121). Both Meursault and the chaplain have the basic knowledge that they will die. However, Camus uses this sentence to contrast the two characters and emphasize Meursault's change from the beginning of the chapter. Though they both know they will die, Meursault has finally become aware of his death. Meursault again brings up the point that everyone will die, and the method of death is unimportant (121). Although the statement he makes is similar to the one he made earlier in the chapter, Camus makes an important distinction. Although the thoughts are similar, in this scene, Meursault has finally accepted death. Camus demonstrates Meursault's acceptance by showing, unlike in the earlier scene, that Meursault does not experience joy at the thought of extending his life. After the chaplain leaves, Meursault is “able to calm down again,” in contrast to earlier in the chapter when his rational thoughts just gave him “an hour of calm” (Camus 122, 115). Camus uses vivid imagery of sounds of the country side, smells of night, earth, and salt air, and stars to emphasize how this acceptance leads to peace. Camus describes it as a “wondrous peace of that sleeping summer” (Camus 122). While everyone is asleep and unaware, Meursault is finally waking up in the “dark hour before dawn” (Camus 122). This dawn is in contrast with the dawn earlier in the chapter, where Meursault would rush to his door to listen for the footsteps of the guards coming to take him to be executed. Camus uses this contrast to reiterate Meursault's change in becoming aware of death. Camus shows how acceptance of death makes Meursault “happy again” (Camus 123).

Camus shows the reasoning and process of accepting death. However, that brings up an important question. Why should one accept death? What is the reason for this pursuit? The answer to this question can be found by contrasting Meursault with Perez. Whereas Meursault is able to accept death, Perez is not. Perez attempts to run after Maman's hearse, not accepting death, but instead chasing after it, seeking a way out of it, just like Meursault at the beginning of the final chapter (Camus 17). And as a result of this lack of acceptance of death, Perez faints like a rag doll (Camus 18) when he finally catches up. In contrast, Meursault is finally “happy again” (Camus 123). Camus shows not only the process of accepting death, but the necessity of it.

Works Cited

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. New York: Vintage International, 1989. Print.