

Page 65 – “He thought for a moment.....and I couldn’t be bothered”.

The passage is an extract from Albert Camus – “The Outsider”. The novel is set in the French colony of Algiers. The protagonist of the plot is Meursault, who works as a clerk. The novel begins with the words – “*Mother died today, or was it yesterday; I can’t be sure*” (Camus, 1). This line embodies the apparent indifference with which Meursault views everything in his life. His failure to express his emotions is represented by the pauses and silences which frequent the dialogue (O’Brien, 14). As the plot develops one sees that his behavior is an extreme diversion from what is expected of him. The reader is introduced to a character called Raymond. He asks for Meursault’s advice on a personal matter. He tells him about his mistress who had let him down. He plans to teach her a lesson and asks Meursault to help him write a letter for him. Meursault agrees to do so and as a result the following weekend, Raymond invites him to spend the day with him at a friend’s beach-house. At the beach they are confronted by the mistresses’ brother. A fight breaks out during which Raymond is injured. After the fight Raymond has his revolver and he and Meursault discuss whether to shoot the man. Raymond goes back and Meursault who is holding the gun continues his walk on the beach. He finds the brother who is an Arab and he starts to walk towards him. The Arab draws his knife at which point Meursault shoots the man. After killing the man, he is arrested. This brings us to the passage.

The dialogue in the passage is between Meursault and his lawyer. The lawyer tells him that if Meursault does exactly as he says, then he is sure of success. He tells Meursault that on investigating his private life he had found that Meursault had shown no signs of grief on the day of his mother’s funeral. On being questioned, Meursault tells him that his physical needs often don’t allow him to be fully aware of the things around him. It is not that he did not love his mother; it’s just that, the day she was buried he was tired and sleepy. The lawyer asks him if he could say that he had controlled his “natural” feelings that day. Meursault says-“*No, because it is not true*” (Camus, 65) A significant theme in the novel is that of truth. Truth in the novel relates to the neo classical correspondence theories of the concept. In this case it is nothing but an agreement with fact (Glanzberg).

Truth has a special relationship with Meursault's character. His "truthfulness" is what defines his role and relates it to the overall plot of the novel. Critics such as Girard and Meobe have often looked upon Meursault as a martyr for the truth. He is projected as a hero who is unwilling to lie at any cost. Camus himself in reflection has commented on Meursault saying that –"*Far from it being true that he lacks all sensibility, a deep tenacious passion animates him, a passion for the absolute and the truth*" (Camus, 119). It is this quality which separates him from society. He does not wish to simplify life. By refusing to hide his feelings and thoughts under the mask of societal acceptance, he condemns himself to death for the sake of what is "natural", what is true.

However, critic O'Brien says that despite Camus's attempts to portray Meursault as an image of truth, the Meursault he created does lie. According to him Meursault "concocts" a letter for Raymond which he uses to deceive his mistress. Not only this, but he also agrees to act as witness for Raymond saying that his mistress had been cheating on him. According to O'Brien it is simply not true that Meursault has a passion for the "absolute truth". These instances prove that "*he is as indifferent to truth as he is cruelty*" (O'Brien, 21)

Unlike O'Brien, I do not see these episodes to be acts of lies or deception. He is in fact extraordinarily honest. In the courtroom he says "*the witness is right. It's true, I did offer him a cigarette*" (Camus, 90). No ordinary man would be so truthful if it was eventually going to condemn him to death. The nature of Meursault's truth is such that it does not allow him to think beyond the present. "*I'd never really been able to regret anything. I was always preoccupied by what was about to happen, today or tomorrow*" (Camus, 97). In the case of the letter, Meursault was too focused on the act of writing the letter than to think about what he was leading the girl into. The act of writing took away his ability to think of a future possibility. By allowing himself to be swayed by a possibility he would be succumbing not to the truth but to an extension of it. An extension is a possibility not a reality. Hence from an absolutist perspective it would be false. According to Meobe - "*Meursault always lives in the present, hence his lack of remorse. This beast-like quality is one that gets him into trouble in the courtroom, for people misconstrue his nature to be that of a cold-blooded, calculating murderer.*"

In the second episode, it cannot be said that Meursault is lying as he only confirms what Raymond tells him. Meursault puts his blind faith in Raymond's explanation and this then becomes his reality. Critic Micheline Tisson-Braun expresses a similar thought when she says that –“*Meursault registers facts, but not their meanings; ... is purely instantaneous*” (Tisson-Braun). Though actually the girl might not have been cheating on him at all, but because Meursault only hears of the incident from Raymond, he believes the story to be true and hence in that sense he is being truthful. As he is being truthful, he assumes that others are speaking the truth as well and hence he does not stop to think whether Raymond is being honest with him or not.

His extreme truthfulness is also reflective of a kind of childlike innocence. “*He left, looking angry. I'd have liked have kept him back and explained to him that I wanted to be friends with him, not so that he would defend me better, but, so to speak, in a natural way*”(Camus, 65). This supports the idea of his absolute truthfulness. His refusal to mask his true emotions gives the reader the impression of a crude being. But greater understanding of his character reveals an almost child-like purity untouched by societal ideas regarding right versus wrong, lawful versus unlawful. The Romantics believed in the divinity of innocence. Childhood represents this innocence which is uncorrupted by the ideas of men and hence children are said to be closest to God. Though Meursault openly rejects the idea of God, his innocence lends his character a divine aspect that is born out of the purity of his “natural” truthfulness. This purity has led Camus to refer to Meursault as the “*only Christ we deserve*” (Camus, 119). In the passage we see the repetitive use of the word “natural”. The word natural is of special significance to both the themes and character traits highlighted in the passage. “Natural” is connotative of a sense of purity and hence divinity. This idea of the “natural” complements the concepts of truth and innocence seen in the passage. The lawyer's insistence on distorting the “natural” or the truth acts a symbol for modern societal behavior. Modern societies are willing to manipulate the natural to find an easier path of acceptance. Meursault's inability to digress from the truth and hence what is natural is what results in him becoming a stranger, an outsider to modern society. The word “natural” has also been interpreted as being reflective of his animalistic nature. Meursault's “natural” quality has

a bestial side which takes over his thought process. Critic Meobe has used this theory to reason with Meursault's disbelief in God. *"Animals don't spend any time worshipping a god or dreaming of an afterlife; their attentions have to be focused on living..... Thus Meursault is not able, because of his very nature, to believe in a hereafter"*

(Meobe)

This passage is of importance as it creates an interaction between the naturally (Meursault) and the socially acceptable (lawyer) elements. The dialogue between the characters is effectively used to bring out theme and character traits. This passage cements the idea of Meursault's passion for the "absolute truth" while relating to other specific qualities such as his innocence. By introducing the lawyer, Camus also successfully creates a distinct, visible divide between French Algerian society and its outsider, Meursault.

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