

The Stranger LAP

Topic #6

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The trolley problem has posed us a debate of morality for decades. A train is on track to hit five people. You're standing on a footbridge next to a large man directly over the track. If you push the man off the bridge, he would stop the train and the five people would live. The question as to whether or not you should push this man has been a dilemma for half a century. However, interestingly enough the people who have the least issue with this question are buddhist monks and psychopaths. This clearly shows the flawed thinking we are forced into by society. We abide by arbitrary senses of right and wrong, cultural traditions, and social constructs, all of which are dictated by our predecessors. Because we bound ourselves to these laws, we perpetually run into moral dilemmas and contradictions in life which we will never be able to solve. Rather than acting upon emotions we have been indoctrinated to adhere to by society, many of these questions become easier to solve through a rational and objective mind. Both the buddhist monk and the psychopath are inclined to choose the five people to live over the large man, but for different reasons. Whereas the monk understands what would be for the greater good in this situation, the psychopath simply cannot feel empathy for others. This distinction is clearly shown between the two books *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, and *Stranger* by Albert Camus. Parallel to this trolley problem, both *Stranger's* Meursault and *Siddhartha* have almost identical outlooks on life. However, they vastly stray from each other in how they react to this outlook and overall objectives. This difference in ambitions ultimately leads these characters into very different paths in life.

Meursault's life clearly enforces a state of pointlessness to absolutely everything. Throughout his daily interactions, Camus makes Meursault perpetually indifferent to all aspects of his life. This attitude asserts the extremely relative and arbitrary nature of human ambition,

which was created by past precedence. Henceforth, the existentialist philosophy that Meursault adopts is paramount to the novel. "Maman died today. Or Yesterday maybe, I don't know." (Camus 3) This callous and frank tone is pervasive throughout the whole of the novel. It is as if the only two colors Meursault had known was black and white. He consistently attacks human desire as a social construction that is set in place by our ancestors. All senses of right and wrong, cultural norms, and social tradition are arbitrary by its nature and have no actual reason to be followed. Unfortunately, anyone who adopts this objective view becomes an immediate outcast to society. The world expected Meursault to follow its definition of what it means to be human, which in turn took away from his own individuality. The latter is also very much the case with Siddhartha. In Hesse's book, Siddhartha felt the extreme indifference of everything he did when he was in everyday life. "He kept fleeing-fleeing into a new game of chance, fleeing into a daze of lust, of wine, and from there back to the drive to acquire and accumulate more. In this senseless cycle, he ran himself weary, ran himself old, ran himself ill" (Hesse 71). This worldly life had such a significant impact on him, he called it "samsara", a dangerous game that can send someone adrift into blind complacency. Although both Meursault and Siddhartha found the world to be pointless, they polarized in ambition.

Desire, in effect, sows all pain and suffering in the world. Even the desire to be alive brings grief at every death we must face. The world is in essence, a sky of billions of stars, and all of us face pain and suffering when one more light goes out. Thus, the easiest solution when living in this world is to destroy desire. When speaking in regards to moving to Paris for work, Meursault uses an uncaring tone. "I said yes but that really it was all the same to me... I said that people never changed their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and and

that I wasn't dissatisfied with mine here at all."(Camus 41) Accordingly, Meursault achieves an extremely complacent state, and he reaped the benefits of it. Regardless of his situation, Meursault could always be cognizant of this world's ultimate indifference and be content with what he has. "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."(Camus 122) The explicit use of irony in this sentence is essential in order to juxtapose two seemingly polarizing ideas. Living in the darkness may be terrifying to many, but Meursault's blind state leaves him content with not having to go anywhere. Unlike before, this reaction was polar to Siddhartha and his ambition. "His goal draws him, for he lets nothing into his soul that could go against his goal, That is what Siddhartha learned among the samanas."(Hesse 56) Ironically, this laser focused resolve for searching for the meaning of life also attempted to destroy human desire. He had hoped to destroy his physical self in order to become closer to the self residing within. This iron will, coupled with an utter pointless view of life had tormented Siddhartha. He could have the foresight to know everyday life is ultimately meaningless, but at the same time feel deep envy for average people who can go about passionately in their trivial means. This chasm of ambition had subsequently thrust both Siddhartha and Meursault into entirely different directions.

In Camus's *Stranger*, Meursault ultimately is executed in the public square for committing murder. "I could see that the trouble with the guillotine was that you had no chance at all... the condemned man was forced into a kind of moral collaboration."(Camus 111) This manner of death is only fitting for Meursault. The execution reinforces the idea that the only thing certain in our fleeting lives is the loss of it. As such, Meursault's execution served the dual

purpose of both the metaphor of the absolute truth of death, and a symbol as the outcast he inevitably became. Moreover, Meursault died as a human being before he was executed as a criminal. "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"(Camus 123). The paradox lies where Meursault finds comfort being an outcast to society. The idea of him being hated by the everyday world actually brought him comfort. He stayed in the darkness for so long, attempting to transcend the social definition of what it means to be human, but ultimately became one with the inhumanity that was close to his heart. This is the only reason why he wished for a large audience to be present for his death. He came to love life as an outcast and could no longer feel any empathy for his human brethren. This conclusion very much exposes the slightly flawed thinking that Meursault had adopted. Looking at Siddhartha, we see him ultimately finding peace within himself, and being one with the whole world. Siddhartha had also wished to remove desire, but he was so earnest in this endeavor that he subsequently found meaning within the indifference of the world. He viewed death as inevitable as well, but he also understood that there is life born at the same time that someone passes away. "They all merged into the flow, they all flowed as a river toward the goal, ardent, desiring, suffering...He could no longer distinguish between the many voices:they all belonged together"(Hesse 118). As such, he came to love this world and ironically, love became essential in order to find his inner peace. He now was able to sympathize with everyone and all of their struggles, understanding that these struggles are simply parts to the perfect whole of the universe.

We go on living our lives everyday with complete passion and love all for naught. If we aren't aware of our insignificance, then we can't open ourselves up to the limitless possibilities

of the world. More than anything, both books annihilate the social constructions so pervasive in our modern world. These same social constructions included slavery, tyranny and mass discrimination not so long ago. However, rather than losing hope in the world it is our human nature to love and improve our surroundings. Accordingly, we should learn from these books and break down the barriers that keep us from being our own individuals. Meursault very much found happiness in his belief of no meaning to life. He unfortunately only came to this conclusion after seeing the perpetual follies of the current societal norms. A society where the past defines what it means to be human simply takes away from the innovation and progress of the future. Society should be structured to augment and pertain to the people that are currently living in it. In this manner, everyone has room for acceptance and everyone plays their part in the overall whole of the world. Although this perfect world wasn't created for Siddhartha, he remained aware of the already perfect whole that all of us as individuals reside within. This harmony could never be broken by any social tradition or culture, because such constructions are man-made and finite. To be immersed into the unity of the world and to find peace with its harmony is where true importance lies. In this state, even the smallest part knows its vitality for the parts around it and the subsequent whole.