

Dissertation Proposal

Working title:

Fleeting, Feeling, Freedom: Women in *The Outsider* by Albert Camus

i. Introduction

This dissertation will seek to analyse the female figure and maternal nature as exhibited, manipulated and explored with female characters throughout the course of Albert Camus' novel *L'Étranger*, here using the Penguin Modern Classics edition translated by Sandra Smith with the translated title *The Outsider*. While references to the original French will be made during the essay, the English edition will primarily be used as the source text in order to nurture a fluid and succinct discussion. The essay will gradually conclude that Camus' women and his protagonist's encounters with them in *The Outsider* are emblematic, and their often-fleeting presence, with emotion detached, plays a vital role in stitching together the geographical foundations in the author's memory, his identity, and in his narrative.

ii. Structure

Structurally, the dissertation will be broken down thematically into three main bodies of text, each composed primarily of careful and analytical close reading of excerpts taken from different chapters in the novel; after grappling with meaning and interpretation, further paragraphs will also incorporate thorough and acute critical discussion, challenging assertions previously made by critics on this topic.

iii. Textual analysis

The notion of the mother figure will be discussed as a critical component in the inspiration and progression of the novel, acting almost as an undercurrent that can be identified at various points, even when the maternal figure is not overtly being discussed. This interpretation falls in line with critical conversation concerning the autobiographical nature of the fictitious interactions with and depictions of women in Camus' works. *The Outsider's* opening lines are perhaps the most appropriate with which to begin technical analysis in this essay: "My mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know." (Camus 3). A reasonable immediate reaction could be to believe that the indifference of Camus' protagonist, Meursault, concerning the death reflects a lack of sentiment, but later still on the first page, his mother is referred to as "Mama" (Camus 3), which carries a softer and more familial resonance.

With original close reading necessary to any independently researched literature study, the progression of the essay would be clearly and effectively signposted as new themes from the novel are explored with selected complementary excerpts. The later part of the dissertation will be dedicated to the character Marie, Meursault's lover. Throughout the course of the novel Marie is never permitted to be a significant *active* character; her dialogue is limited, and this will be analysed as well as the indifference of Meursault in emotional matters regarding her. Indeed, in the later stages of the novel and during Meursault's imprisonment, we learn that even though he was "tormented by the desire to have a woman," he "never specifically thought about Marie" (Camus 69). Even more striking here is the proximity of Meursault's musing over Marie and mention of his mother in this part of the novel. The significance of Meursault mentioning women, but not specifically Marie, at a point in the novel during which he explicitly philosophises on his own personal freedom

indicates that his interactions with women appear in his memory in a fleeting, sensual manner and can arguably be separated from emotional attachment. It becomes clear that, even if just at that point in Meursault's journey as documented in the novel, women have become a bodily craving; an earthly, fundamental branch of his freedom as a man.

iv. Critical discussion

At this point in the dissertation, it would be effective to incorporate some literary theory: the work of feminist theorist Susan Bordo could be of particular use in this dissertation thanks to the field of her study; Bordo's work has focused on cultural expectations that determine the ability of both men and women to comprehend a female body as something desirable. Bordo explores conceptions and preconceptions of the body in Western culture and writes that she aims "to demonstrate the continuing historical power and pervasiveness of certain cultural images and ideology to which not just men but also women [...] are vulnerable." (Bordo 8). Furthermore, Bordo writes on the systematically sustained positions of power: for instance, here, the pertinent attractiveness of and magnetic attraction to women. Meursault often projects a lack of fault and a lack of blame onto his actions and impulses concerning women, and specifically concerning Marie, and this theoretical discussion could certainly be brought in to interpret a power dynamic from her body. For instance, the *détente* felt by Meursault as the pair go swimming could be argued the opposite of incidental after touching and seeing Marie's body, perhaps inverting his ideas of freedom.

Edward J. Hughes writes that Camus paints a "pained, deeply ambivalent portrait of the mother" and that this "unassuming figure" is actively, in his interpretation, "reflecting faithfully Camus' autobiographical experience." (Hughes 40-41). In his chapter, Hughes writes on two of Camus' essays, and draws his conclusions concerning women from those

with only a brief mention of *L'Étranger*, notably the death of Meursault's mother and his "socially eccentric" (Hughes 43) reaction to it. At this stage of the writing process, it would be insightful to conduct independent research to identify and directly compare any interesting connections between the representations of the mother figure in Camus' prose (letters or essays) and fiction. Not only would this be crucial to ensuring original analytical material in the dissertation, but it would also potentially generate ideas to contend with those of critics including Hughes and thus widen the critical conversation.

v. Draft conclusion

With opportunities for close reading and identified, it will be important to draw the dissertation to a close with heightened attention to critical debate. The dissertation will confidently assert an argument that can be firstly further backed by existing critical material, and present ideas that challenge and transcend the research of other scholars. The essay will pertain that since Meursault's experiences with women exist in his memory only tentatively and appear in the novel in sometimes random, kaleidoscopic moments, he is subject to passive control from both maternal and sexual female characters throughout the course of the novel.

Working Bibliography

Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press, 2004.

Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*. Translated by Sandra Smith. Penguin Modern Classics, 2013.

L'Étranger. Éditions Gallimard, 1942.

Hughes, Edward J. "Autobiographical surroundings in *L'Envers et L'Endroit*." *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 39-49.

Marx-Scouras, Danielle. "Portraits of women, visions of Algeria." *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*. Edited by Edward J. Hughes. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 131-144.