

PART 1: CHAPTER 1

Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday.

The old people's home is at Marengo, fifty miles from Algiers. I'll catch the two o'clock bus and get there in the afternoon. Then I can keep the vigil and I'll come back tomorrow night. I asked my boss for two days off and he couldn't refuse under the circumstances. But he didn't seem pleased. I even said, 'It's not my fault.' He didn't answer. Then I thought maybe I shouldn't have said that. After all, it wasn't for me to apologize. It was more up to him to offer me his condolences. But he probably will do the day after tomorrow, when he sees me in mourning. For the moment, it's almost as if mother were still alive. After the funeral though, the death will be a classified fact and the whole thing would have assumed a more official aura.

I caught the two o'clock bus. It was very hot. I ate at Celeste's restaurant, as usual. They all felt very sorry for me and Celeste told me, 'There's no one like a mother.' When I left, they came to the door with me. I was in a bit of daze because I had to go up to Emmanuel's place to borrow a black tie and armband. He lost his uncle, a few months ago.

I had to run for the bus. It was probably all this dashing about and then the jolting and the smell of petrol and the glare of the sky reflecting off the road that made me doze off. I slept almost all the way. And when I woke up, I found myself cramped up against a soldier who smiled at me and asked me if I'd come far. I said, 'Yes' so as not to have to talk any more.

The home is just over a mile from the village. I walked in. I wanted to see mother straight away. But the caretaker waited a bit. The caretaker talked the whole time and then he showed me into the warden's office. He was a small, elderly man with the Legion of Honour. He looked at me with his bright eyes. Then he shook my hand and held it for so long that I didn't quite know how to take it back again. He consulted a file and told me, 'Mrs Meursault came here three years ago. You were her only means of support.' I felt as if he was reproaching me for something and I started to explain. But he interrupted me. 'You've no need to justify yourself, my dear boy. I've read your mother's file. You weren't able to look after her properly. She needed a nurse. You only have a modest income. And all things considered, she was happier here.' I said, 'Yes, sir.' He added, 'You see, she had friends here, people of her own age. She could share her interests with them. You're a young man, a different generation, and she must have been bored living with you.'

It was true. When she was at home, mother used to spend all her time just watching me in silence. She cried a lot the first few days at the old people's home. But that was only because she wasn't used to it. After a month or two she'd have cried if she'd been taken out of the home. Because by then she was used to it. That's partly why during this last year I hardly ever went to see her any more. And also because it

Commented [1]:
This is repeated in the novel. What is the significance?

Commented [2]:
What is the significance of this opening paragraph?
Consider the syntax & the effect?
Consider the narrative perspective and tone.

Commented [3]:
Note the thought processes of Meursault.

Commented [4]:
Meursault's attitude

Commented [5]:
What is the role of the weather?

Commented [6]:
'I had to'. What does that indicate?
Nirmala Silverajan

Commented [7]:
Why is Meursault affected by the glare throughout the novel?

Commented [8]:
Note his reply.
Is his characterisation consistent? Pick other examples from other parts of the novel.

Commented [9]:
Why? Did he miss mother?

Commented [10]:
What does this indicate?

Commented [11]:
The idea of 'getting used to' is repeated several times in the novel. What is the significance?
Nirmala Silverajan

meant giving up my Sunday – let alone making the effort of going to the bus stop, buying tickets and spending two hours travelling.

Commented [12]:
Do you think that Meursault is unfilial?

The warden spoke to me again. But I wasn't really listening any more. Then he said, 'I expect you'd like to see your mother.' I stood up without saying anything and he led the way to the door. On our way downstairs he explained, 'We've transferred her to our little mortuary. So as not to upset the others. Every time one of the inmates dies the others feel uneasy for two or three days. And that makes it difficult for the staff.' We crossed a courtyard where there were lots of old people, chatting in little groups. They'd stop talking as we went by then behind us the conversations would start up again. It was like the muted budgerigars. At the door of a small building the warden stopped. 'I'll leave you now, Mr Meursault. If you need me for anything, I'll be in my office. We've arranged the funeral as usual for ten o' clock in the morning. We thought that that would enable you to watch over the departed tonight. One other thing: your mother apparently often mentioned to her friends that she wished to have a religious funeral. I've taken it upon myself to make the necessary arrangements. But I thought I should let you know.' I thanked him. Though she wasn't an atheist, mother had never given a thought to religion in her life.

Commented [13]:
Societal expectations. How is that featured in this novel?

Commented [14]:
Contrast how they react.

I went in. It was a very bright room, with white-washed walls and a glass roof. The furniture consisted of some chairs and some cross-shaped trestles. Two of these, in the centre of the room, were supporting a coffin. The lid was on, but a row of shiny screws, which hadn't yet been tightened down, stood out against the walnut-stained wood. Near the coffin there was an Arab nurse in a white overall, with a brightly coloured scarf on her head.

Commented [15]:
Note the importance of religion in this society. How has Camus presented religion in this novel. (Note that Camus is an atheist.)

Commented [16]:
Why did mother wish to have a religious funeral? Why didn't Meursault know this about his mother? Note what he says about his mother wanting to live again in the final chapter.

Commented [17]:
Why do details fascinate Meursault?

Commented [18]:
What is the significance of brightness/light in the novel?

Commented [19]:
The first Arab character. What do you understand about the Algerian society.

At that point the caretaker came in behind me. He must have been running. He stuttered a bit. 'We covered her up. But I was to unscrew the coffin to let you see her' He was just going up to the coffin when I stopped him. He said, 'Don't you want to?' I answered, 'No.' He didn't say anything and I was embarrassed because I felt I shouldn't have said that. After a moment he looked at me and asked, 'Why not?' but not reproachfully, just as if he wanted to know. I said, 'I don't know.' He began twiddling his white moustache and then, without looking at me, he announced, 'I understand.' He had beautiful bright blue eyes and a reddish complexion. He offered me a chair and then he sat down just behind me. The nurse stood up and went towards the door. At that point the caretaker said to me, 'It's a chancre she'd got.' I didn't understand, so I looked at the nurse and saw that she had a bandage round her head just below the eyes. Where her nose should have been, the bandage was flat. Her face seemed to be nothing but a white bandage.

Commented [20]:
Why was Meursault embarrassed?

When she'd gone, the caretaker said, 'I'll leave you to yourself.' I must have made some sort of gesture because he stayed where he was, standing right behind me. It made me feel uncomfortable having someone standing over me like that. The room was bathed in beautiful, late-afternoon sunshine. A couple of hornets were buzzing against the glass roof. And I was beginning to feel sleepy. Without turning round, I

Commented [21]:
Is Meursault anti-social?

Commented [22]:
Note the contrast between life and lifelessness.

said to the caretaker, 'Have you been here long?' Straight away he answered, 'Five years' – as if he'd been waiting for me to ask all the time.

After that he chatted a lot. He'd have been very surprised if anyone had told him he'd end up as the caretaker of the Marengo home. He was sixty-four and he came from Paris. At that point I interrupted, 'Oh, you're not from here?' Then I remembered that before taking me to see the warden he'd talked to me about mother. He'd told me that they had to get her buried quickly, because of the heat down in the plains, especially in the country. That was when he'd told me that he used to live in Paris and wouldn't easily forget. In Paris they watch over the body for three or four days sometimes. But here, you haven't even got time to get used to the idea before you have to start running after the hearse. Just then his wife had said to him, 'That's enough, that's not the sort of thing to be telling the gentleman.' The old man had blushed and apologized. I'd intervened to say, 'No. No.' He was right and I found what he was telling me interesting.

In the little mortuary he told me that he'd come to the home because he was a destitute. He was in good health, so he'd offered to take on the job of caretaker. I pointed out to him that even so he was still an inmate. He said no. I'd already been struck by the way he referred to the inmates as 'they' or 'the others' or occasionally the 'old people', when some of them were no older than he was. He was the caretaker, and to a certain extent he had the authority over them

The nurse came in at that point. Night had fallen suddenly. The sky had darkened rapidly above the glass roof. The caretaker turned the light-switch and I was blinded by the sudden blaze of light. He asked me if I wanted to go to the canteen to have some dinner. But I wasn't hungry. He then offered to bring me a cup of white coffee. I'm very fond of white coffee, so I accepted and he came back a few minutes later with a tray. I drank. I then wanted a cigarette. But I hesitated because I didn't know if I could smoke in front of mother. I thought it over, it really didn't matter. I offered the caretaker a cigarette and we smoked.

After a while, he said, 'You know, your mother's friends will be coming to watch over her too. It's the customary thing. I'll have to go and get some chairs and some black coffee.' I asked him if he could possibly turn off one of the lights. The glare from the white walls was tiring my eyes. He said he couldn't. That was how they'd been installed: it was all or nothing. I didn't pay much attention to him after that. He went in and out, arranging chairs. On one of them he stacked some cups round a coffee-pot. Then he sat down opposite me, on the other side of mother. The nurse was also on the far side of the room, with her back to me. I couldn't see what she was doing. But from the way her arms were moving, I assumed that she was knitting. It was nice, the coffee had warmed me up and through the open door I could smell flowers in the night air. I think I dozed off for a while.

It was a rustling sound that woke me. After having my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even more dazzling than before. There wasn't a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to

Commented [23]:
Note the significance of heat in the novel.

Commented [24]:
Why did Meursault find this interesting?

Commented [25]:
Note that this is a translated text. Why 'inmate?'

Commented [26]:
The idea of the self and the others is introduced very early in the text. Why is this significant in terms of (1) The Arabs and the French Algerians & (2) Meursault and the rest of the society?

Commented [27]:
How is authority presented?

Commented [28]:
Why the hesitation?

Commented [29]:
Repeated many times in the novel. What is his ideology?

Commented [30]:
Significance of this word?

Commented [31]:
Significance of the glare

Commented [32]:
How is this significant, considering Meursault versus the rest of the society.

Commented [33]:
Note the diction

the eyes. It was at that point that mother's friends came in. There were about ten of them in all, and they came gliding silently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I've ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet I couldn't hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I'd never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. Then men were almost all very thin and carrying walking-sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn't see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. When they sat down, most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, with their lips all sucked into their toothless mouths, and I couldn't tell whether they were greeting me or whether they just had a twitch. I think in fact they were all greeting me. It was at that point that I realized they were all sitting opposite me round the caretaker, nodding their heads. For a moment I had the ridiculous impression that they were there to judge me.

Commented [34]:
Meursault's fascination with details

Soon after that, one of the women started crying. She was in the second row, hidden behind one of her companions, and I couldn't see her very well. She was crying regularly, in little sobs: I thought she was never going to stop. The others didn't seem to notice. They sat slumped in their chairs, gloomy and silent, staring at the coffin or at their walking-sticks or at anything else, but without taking their eyes off it. The woman went on crying. I was very surprised because I didn't know who she was. I'd rather not have had to listen to her any more. But I didn't dare tell her. The caretaker leant over and spoke to her, but she shook her head, mumbled something and went on sobbing with the same regularity as before. The caretaker then moved round to my side and sat down next to me. He was silent for quite a long time. Then, without looking at me, he explained, 'She and your mother were very close. She says your mother was the only friend she had here and now she hasn't got anyone.'

Commented [35]:
Note the foreshadowing. Pick out the scene in Part two of the novel.

Commented [36]:
Note Meursault's interest with regularity and routines.

Commented [37]:
His attitude?

Commented [38]:
repeated

We sat like this for quite some time. The woman began to sigh and sob less often. She sniffled for a while. Then at last she stopped. I didn't feel sleepy any more, but I was tired and my back was aching. Now it was all these people sitting in silence that was getting on my nerves. Except that every now and then I heard a strange noise and I couldn't understand what it was. In the end I realized that some of the old people were sucking at the insides of their mouths and letting out these peculiar clicking noises. They were so absorbed in their thoughts that they weren't aware they were doing it. I even had the impression that this dead body, lying there among them, didn't mean anything to them. But looking back I think it was the wrong impression.

Commented [39]:
Note that the narration focuses more on the physical discomforts. Where are the emotions? Refer to what he says in part 2 about his physical needs.

Commented [40]:
Why? How do you feel about the tone of this vigil?

The caretaker served us all some coffee. After that I don't know what happened. The night passed. I remember opening my eyes at one point and seeing all the old people slumped forward in sleep, except for one old man who had his chin resting on the back of his hands, which were clasped to his walking-stick, and who was staring at me intently as if he were just waiting for me to wake up. Then I slept some more. I woke up because the pain in my back was getting worse. The dawn was creeping up

over the glass roof. Soon after that, one of the old men woke up and had a fit of coughing. He kept spitting into a large checked handkerchief and every time he did it it sounded as if his insides were being torn out. He woke up the others and the caretaker told them that they ought to be going. They stood up. **This uncomfortable vigil** had left them with ashen faces. On their way out, and to my great surprise, they all shook hands with **me** – as though a night spent in silence together had put us on intimate **terms**.

Commented [41]:
Why?

I was tired. The caretaker took me to his room and I was able to have a quick wash. I had some more white coffee which was very good. When I went outside, it was broad daylight. Above the hills which separate Marengo from the sea, the sky was full of red streaks. And the breeze coming up over the hills had a salty tang to it. It was going to be a beautiful day. It was a long time since I'd been out in the country and **I knew how much I'd have enjoyed going for a walk if it hadn't been for** **mother**.

Commented [42]:
Why does Meursault find this uncomfortable?

But I waited in the courtyard, under a plane tree. I breathed in the fresh smells of the earth and I no longer felt sleepy. I thought of my colleagues at the office. At about this time they'd be getting up to go to work: for me it was always the most difficult time. I went on thinking like this for a bit, but I was distracted by the sound of a bell ringing inside the building. There was some commotion behind the windows, then everything calmed down again. The sun had risen a little higher in the sky: it was beginning to warm my feet up. The caretaker came across the courtyard and told me that the warden wanted to see me. I went to his office. He made me sign a number of documents. I noticed that he was dressed in black and wearing pin-striped trousers. He picked up the telephone and addressed me. 'The undertaker's men have just arrived. I'm going to ask them to close up the coffin. Before I do, would you like to see your mother one last time?' I said no. He gave the order into the telephone, lowering his voice, 'Figeac, tell the men they can go ahead.'

Commented [43]:
His attitude?

After that he told me that he would be attending the funeral and I thanked him. He sat down behind his desk and crossed his short legs. He informed me that he and I would be the only ones there, apart from the duty nurse. Usually the inmates weren't allowed to attend funerals. He only let them keep the vigil. 'It's kinder that way,' he remarked. But on this occasion he'd given an old friend of mother's, Thomas **Perez**, permission to join the funeral procession. Here the warden smiled. He said, 'I know it's rather childish. But he and your mother were almost inseparable. Here at the home they used to tease them and tell Perez, 'She's your fiancée.' He used to laugh. They enjoyed it. And the fact is that Mrs Meursault's death has affected him very **badly**. I didn't think I could refuse him permission. But on the advice of our visiting doctor, I forbade him to keep the vigil last night.'

Commented [44]:
What is the significance of this minor character? Note the juxtaposition and the contrast.

We sat in silence for quite a long time. Then the warden got up and looked out of the office window. After a while, he remarked, 'Here comes the priest from Marengo. He's early.' He warned me that it would take at least three-quarters of an hour to walk to the church which is in the village itself. We went downstairs. In front of the little building stood the priest and the two altar boys. One of them was holding

Commented [45]:
What about Meursault?

a censer and the priest was bending over him to adjust the length of its silver chain. As we approached, the priest straightened up. He said a few words to me, addressing me as 'my son.' He went inside; I followed him.

I noticed at once that the screws on the coffin had been tightened down and that there were four men in black in the room. At the same time I heard the warden telling me that the hearse was waiting in the road and the priest beginning his prayers. From that point on everything happened very quickly. The men moved towards the coffin with a pall. The priest, his followers, the warden and myself all went outside. By the door there was a woman I hadn't seen before. 'This is Mr Meursault' the warden said. I didn't hear the woman's name, I just understood that she was the duty nurse. She bowed her head, without a trace of a smile on her long, bony face. We stood aside to make way for the body. Then we followed the pall bearers out of the home. Outside the gate stood the hearse. Bright, shiny and oblong, it looked like a pencil box. Next to it stood the funeral director, a little man in a ridiculous outfit, and an old man who looked rather uncomfortable. I realized that this was Mr Perez. He was wearing a soft felt hat with a round crown and a wide brim (he took it off when the coffin came through the gate), a suit with trousers that corkscrewed down onto his shoes and a black tie with a knot that was too small for the large white collar on his shirt. His lips were trembling beneath a nose pitted with blackheads. His thinnish white hair revealed curiously droopy, ragged ears whose blood-red colour made a striking contrast with the pallor of his face. The funeral director showed us to our places. The priest was to walk in front, followed by the hearse. On either side of the hearse, the four men. Behind it, the warden and myself and, bringing up the rear, the duty nurse and Mr Perez.

The sun was already high in the sky. It was beginning to weigh down heavily on the earth and it was rapidly getting hotter. For some reason we waited quite a long time before setting off. I was hot under my dark clothes. The little old man, who'd put his hat back on, took it off again. I'd turned round slightly and was watching him when the warden started telling me about him. He told me that my mother and Mr Perez often used to walk down to the village together in the evenings, accompanied by a nurse. I was looking at the countryside around me. Seeing the lines of cypresses leading away to the hills against the sky and the houses standing out here and there against the red and green earth, I understood mother. The evenings here must come as a kind of melancholy truce. But today, with the whole landscape flooded in sunshine and shimmering in the heat, it was inhospitable and depressing.

We set off. It was at that point that I noticed that Perez had a slight limp. The hearse was gradually picking up speed and the old man was losing ground. One of the men round the hearse had also dropped back and was now walking level with me. I was surprised how rapidly the sun was climbing in the sky. I noticed that for quite some time now the countryside had been alive with the humming of insects and the crackling of grass. The sweat was running down my cheeks. I wasn't wearing a hat, so I fanned myself with my handkerchief. The man from the undertaker's then said something to me which I didn't hear. At the same time he was lifting the edge of his

Commented [46]:
Why? How has time been presented in this scene?

Commented [47]:
What is the effect of this description to the reader?

Commented [48]:
Why did Meursault focus on the physical details?

Commented [49]:
Note the similarity between this and the weather just before he shoots the Arab.

cap with his right hand and wiping his head with a handkerchief with his left. I said, 'Pardon?' he pointed up at the sky and repeated, 'Pretty hot.' I said, 'Yes.' A bit later, he asked, 'Is that your mother in there?' Again I said, 'Yes.' 'Was she old?' I answered, 'Fairly,' because I didn't know **exactly**. After that he didn't say any more. I turned round and saw old Perez about fifty yards behind us. He was going as fast as he could, swinging his felt at arm's length. I also looked at the warden. He was walking in a very dignified way, without a single pointless movement. A few beads of sweat were forming on his brow, but he didn't wipe them off.

Commented [50]:

Is this important? What do you think? This becomes one of the points raised in the case later on in the novel.

The procession seemed to be moving slightly faster. All around me there was still the same luminous, sun drenched countryside. The **glare** from the sky was unbearable. At one point, we went over a section of road that had recently been resurfaced. **The sun had burst open the tar**. Our feet sank into it, leaving its shiny pulp exposed. Sticking up above the hearse, the coachman's **boiled-leather hat looked as if it had been moulded out of the same black mud**. I felt a bit lost, with the blue and white sky overhead and these monotonous colours all around me - the sticky black tar, the dull black clothes and the shiny black hearse. And what with the sun and the smell of leather and horse-dung from the hearse, and the smell of varnish and incense and the sleepless night I'd had, I was so tired that I could hardly see or think straight any more. I turned round again: Perez seemed to be a long way away, lost in the heat-haze, then he disappeared altogether. I looked around and saw that he'd left the road and set off across the country. I also noticed that there was a bend in the road ahead. I realized that Perez, who knew the area, was taking a short cut in order to catch us up. By the time we were round the bend he was with us again. Then we lost him again. He cut across country once more and so it went on. **All I could feel was the blood pounding in my temples**.

Commented [51]:

Intensity of the heat

After that everything happened so quickly and seemed so inevitable and **natural** that I don't remember any of it any more. Except for one thing: as we entered the village, the duty nurse spoke to me. She had a remarkable voice which didn't go with her face at all, a melodious, quavering voice. She said, **'If you go slowly, you risk getting sun-stroke. But if you go too fast, you perspire and then in the church you catch a chill.'** She was right. **There was no way out**. I remember a few other scenes from that day as well: for instance, Perez's face when he caught us up for the last time just outside the village. Great tears of frustration and anguish were streaming down his cheeks. But because of all the wrinkles they didn't run off. They just spread out and ran together again, forming a watery glaze over his battered old face. Then there was the church and the villagers in the street, the red geraniums on the tombs in the cemetery, Perez fainting (like a dislocated **dummy**), the blood-red earth tumbling onto mother's coffin, the white flesh of the roots mixed in with it, more people, voices, the village, the wait outside a café, the incessant drone of the engine, and **my joy** when the bus entered the next of lights which was Algiers and I knew I was going to go to bed and sleep for a whole twelve **hours**.

Commented [52]:

Similar to how he feels before shooting the Arab.

Commented [53]:

Note the use of 'natural' in the novel. What is the significance of the word?

Commented [54]:

Meursault remembers this later in his cell in Part 2. 'There is no way out.' What is the significance?

Commented [55]:

Why?

Commented [56]:

What about grief?

Commented [57]:

POINTS TO NOTE
WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHAPTER 1.
WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND ABOUT MEURSAULT AS THE (1) CHARACTER & (2) THE FIRST PERSON NARRATOR
PAY ATTENTION TO THE OPPRESSIVE HEAT AND ITS ROLE.