
Symbolism and Characterization in *The Stranger* and *First Confession*

In Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and Montserrat Fontes's *First Confession*, symbols and characterization play a major role in outlining each novel's primary message. Both authors' use of these literary elements contribute to the reader's understanding of their respective themes, from the meaninglessness of human life to alienation and loss of innocence.

Much of Camus's novel revolves around a single symbol – the courtroom, where the second half of the book takes place. Embodying society as a whole, in that it includes the reappearance of nearly every minor character in the first half, the court functions as the will of the people in determining Meursault's place in civilized culture. No matter what his own thoughts are regarding his homicide, Meursault is judged by others who attempt to impose meaning and order upon his actions. He is watched by the court, with reporters "examining [him] closely without betraying any definable emotion" (85). To them, Meursault is a strange creature to be read and deciphered; whether or not he has a say in this process is irrelevant. Unable to accept the irrationality and absurdity of his murder, the members of the court attempt to connect the pieces that they can see, linking Meursault's lack of emotion at his mother's death to his inexplicable killing of the Arab. In imposing reason and order, the prosecutor even goes so far to accuse Meursault of "burying his mother with crime in his heart" (96). With this statement, the clear reason for Meursault's execution is clear: his philosophy makes him a menace to society. Because of his lack of remorse toward the murder he commits and his lack of grief at his mother's death, he is sentenced to death. The fact that he killed someone is not important. Unable to find a rational explanation for Meursault's irrational actions, the court determines him to be an outcast, a monster. In this way, the court symbolizes humanity's larger struggle to find an answer to the universe's irrational questions, a struggle that is as futile and absurd as Meursault's actions and the court's judgment of those actions.

Like Camus's work, Fontes's novel also draws much of its meaning from symbols, the most important of which is the money that Andrea and Victor steal from Armida. The stockings stuffed full of money represent the two children's loss of innocence, and virtually everything that happens throughout the novel happens because of the theft. Epitomizing the difficulties of the adult world, the dirty money embodies the sin that sits heavily upon the hearts and minds of both Andrea and Victor. The children's loss of innocence is not at all a gradual affair; rather, the difficulties brought on by the money engulf them immediately like sin engulfs a sinner. The reality of adult life crashes upon them faster than they can adjust to it. Even as they try to give away the money, first to the river children and then to beggars, their "arms full of gifts, [their] hearts eager to do good," they cannot escape the curse that the stolen money contains (81). The cash is a part of the adult world; once Andrea and Victor enter, they cannot turn back, no matter how hard they try. Giving the money to Smelly Hands only makes the situation worse, and Andrea's attempted retribution backfires, leading to a sin that will never leave her soul, a sin that she begs "forgiveness from no one [her] terrorized parents could see," a sin that consumes her that nobody else knows about (282). It is not after this sin shatters her initial spirit that the money's painful consequences begin to subside. However, even after Andrea gives all that is left of the money to Rancho Grande, its impact is permanent. Innocence, once lost, cannot be restored, and the door back to childhood remains closed forever to Andrea.

Symbolism aside, characterization plays by far the most significant role in highlighting each novel's themes. In *The Stranger*, Meursault's interesting and different personality is what makes the book. His lack of emotion and psychological detachment from the world around him are key to Camus's presentation of existentialism. Because Meursault simply cannot and does not care on a sentimental level, he is neither moral or immoral; rather, he is amoral in that he makes no distinction between good and bad in his mind. He cares for nothing outside the physical realm – no emotion, no religion, no societal standards. After attending his mother's funeral, he notes that "one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that [he] was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed" (24). Meursault is so detached from the social and emotional aspects of life that he does not even realize he is supposed to grieve, that society is holding him accountable for not showing sorrow. When it comes to love and marriage, Meursault dismisses both, enjoying the sexual aspects of his relationship with Marie but completely apathetic toward getting married. This indifference also presents itself in his killing of the Arab, in which "the curtain of tears and salt" in his eyes, "the cymbals of sunlight crashing on [his] forehead," and "the dazzling spear flying up from the knife in front of [him]" drove him to murder (59). While in this first half of the novel Meursault applies his philosophy only toward his own actions, his thinking broadens after he is sentenced to death. Following his final encounter with the chaplain, he realizes that the universe is completely indifferent and that people's lives have no meaning, no effect on the grander scheme of events. As he puts it, "nothing mattered" because "everybody was privileged...the others would all be condemned one day" (121). It simply did not make a difference when someone died, because he would have to die sometime, and nothing he did could really impact the world. This epiphany, representative of Meursault's philosophy regarding life, is the crux of Camus's novel and its primary theme.

When it comes to *First Confession*, characterization plays just as central a role in developing the theme as it does in *The Stranger*. It is the unique traits of both Andrea and Victor that create the primary themes. Both characters lose their innocence over the course of the summer due to one major misstep, which leads to severe and unforeseen consequences that stay with them for years. In Andrea's case, her final mistake that leads to Armida's suicide haunts her forever, an indelible mark upon her conscience that cannot be forgiven and thus cannot be erased. For both of them, however, it is their innocence and naivety that proves to be their undoing. In stealing Armida's money, the children are convinced that if they use it "to buy toys for the river kids, [they] would just be turning bad money into good money" (56). Spoiled and undisciplined, Andrea and Victor indulge their pleasures and take the money, only to find out later how changed their lives would be. Ironically enough, it is their very innocence that eventually shatters their remaining illusions of childhood. The tragic chain of events emanating from their theft forces them into the adult reality far earlier than they are ready for, and it is this money, naively stolen, that destroys their innocence. Characterization is particularly important in revealing the theme of alienation that Andrea depicts. After the *First Confession*, the "special secrets that bind people's souls were never exchanged between [Andrea and Victor] again," isolating Andrea from the last person who knows what had happened over the summer (260). Because only she knows the real truth – the fact that she incited Don Pancho and was directly responsible for Armida's death – only she suffers the full weight of that burden. As such, her careful guarding of her secrets and her refusal to let anyone else into the dark chambers of her heart ensure that Armida's suicide will haunt her forever.

Throughout *The Stranger* and *First Confession*, Camus and Fontes build upon their themes by using symbols and characterization to highlight their messages. In each case, symbols within

the novel play a major role in explaining the author's ideas. The court that judges Meursault represents the larger society that attempts to impose meaning on the meaningless, and the bag of money Andrea and Victor steal marks their first step toward sin and the adult world. Most important, however, is the unique portrayal of different characters specifically suited to each author's themes. In depicting Meursault as psychologically detached and indifferent toward everything except the here and now, Camus creates a character who is especially effective in conveying his existentialist message regarding the irrationality of the universe. Fontes, on the other hand, crafts two main characters who are so empathetic and naive that it is their very innocence that destroys them. In this way, the two authors' differing themes, emphasized similarly through symbols and characterization, share a similar level of impact on the reader.

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