

Hamlet and Meursault

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[In this highly interesting and creative comparison of Shakespeare's Hamlet and Camus' Meursault, Rosanna points out some striking resemblances as well as differences between the two famous protagonists. The essay links this chapter with the chapter on the novel.]

Shakespeare's Hamlet and Camus' Meursault are both existential heroes in certain respects. Both men are thrust into circumstances beyond their control and with tragic consequences. They both try, with the best of intentions, to control the situation which leads to the opposite of what is intended and their responses to the situation are dictated by their insistence on honesty even when it is to their tragic ends. But although these men are similar in many ways the intent of the authors is different and therefore each man's end rings with a different significance.

The wheels of some outside force are already being set in motion when we meet both Hamlet and Meursault. Hamlet is caught up in the drama of his father's death and mother's remarriage and Meursault, to a much subtler extent, with the death and burial of his mother. The strange circumstances of Hamlet's life are thrust upon him and cause a crisis of grief and disgust which carry the seeds of tragedy. The funeral of Meursault's mother, on the other hand, seems to be nothing outside of the ordinary cycle of life and death and only shows its significance later.

Each seemingly usual and unimportant occurrence in the life of Meursault has a cumulative effect on both the pivotal action of the shooting and later the trial. But at the

beginning of both stories Hamlet and Meursault face the situation with complete honesty. When Gertrude asks Hamlet why he seems to be sorrowful over his father's death he answers, "Seems madam? Nay it is, I know not seems" (I, ii, 76). He enumerates the outward signs of mourning saying that any man may pretend to mourn by these shows of grief but that in him these outward signs come from the truth of his feelings. Almost paradoxically, Meursault's lack of outward grief at his mother's funeral also comes from his genuine feelings or genuine lack thereof. Later, when Hamlet is playing the madman, and it would behoove him to keep up the ruse, he can't help but show his true feelings to his enemies. His sense of honesty is such that he can neither feign madness nor remain indifferent to his father's death. Meursault also chooses to show his true feelings when it would benefit him more to lie. In the interrogation room when the magistrate asks him one last time if he has any remorse for what he has done, Meursault answers that "more than sorry I felt kind of annoyed." It is obvious that the magistrate, being a devout Christian, was looking for repentance from Meursault –anything to suggest a conscience and soul but Meursault does not give him this consolation and thus alienates the magistrate.

In both cases Hamlet and Meursault have the best of intentions from the beginning. For these men the road to hell is indeed paved with good intentions. Hamlet thinks and re-thinks his revenge on Claudius to avoid any unnecessary bloodshed. Meursault does the same when he takes the gun from Raymond to keep him from losing his temper and using it in a moment of passion. Both men fail miserably in their intended goals. In waiting to take revenge on Claudius Hamlet directly and indirectly causes the deaths of six innocent bystanders resulting in more bloodshed than if he had simply killed

Claudius outright. Meursault also, had he not taken the gun from Raymond, would not have had it later when the flashing knife of the Arab caused the trigger in his hand to give. Both men conscientiously try to be as humane and reasonable as possible, but their actions have the opposite effect.

There seems to be an inevitability of tragedy built both by the circumstances that present themselves and by the nature of the heroes themselves. In Hamlet naturally the situation thrust upon him holds the seeds of tragedy, but if the hero had been a Laertes or a Fortinbras the outcome would most likely have been much different. The tragedy stems from the intersection of the required vengeance and the elements of Hamlet's character. Without his endless analysis and intellectual musings, or his inability to play the role of madman consistently, he might have succeeded at killing only Claudius. He can't help but be true to his nature as a philosophical and compassionate man who nonetheless understands his responsibility. Meursault as well cannot help but be a man of few passions who refuses to pretend to have feelings of love or remorse when he truly doesn't possess them. When his lover Marie asks him if he loves her, he responds by saying "I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so." He knows she will be hurt by the truth so he prefaces it with "it didn't mean anything" but he tells her the truth nonetheless. When he lacks feeling he doesn't manufacture it either to manipulate anyone or put them at ease. This lack of decorum is so outside of the societal norm that he eventually pays with his life. The accumulation of his natural reactions to everyday situations adds up to an inevitable path that can be considered fate. The chance of each situation coupled with the only reaction each man is capable of within the scope of his nature creates a destiny of sorts and the inevitable demise of both heroes.

The difference, however, is that in Shakespeare's play the author's intent was to tell a classic tale of tragedy in which a man's character, though ideal in every other respect, can hold a critical flaw that will ensure his downfall, whereas in Camus' book the author wanted to show that once a man becomes conscious of the inevitability of his downfall he is then freed, by this realization, to embrace his fate. According to A.C. Bradley in Shakespeare there exists a higher power that moves events and it seeks to create and bring forth perfection. Hamlet is an incarnation of this constant striving for perfection but regardless of how many admirable qualities he is endowed with they cannot make up for, and are perhaps responsible for, his one fatal flaw of over intellectualizing. In this model the higher power must expel its failed attempt at perfection. But with Camus there is no higher power, at least not one that is active. Events seem to happen at random, without real significance. Meursault's fate is man-made by his own hand and his realization of this truth is the point of all that comes before. Hamlet is never really fully aware that he has been the author of his own end and never gains the same epiphany as Meursault. In his jail cell he gains consciousness of the inevitability of his execution. When the chaplain finally gains access to him and tries to convince him to repent and give himself over to God he snaps and goes on a tirade. The essence of it is that in accepting the inevitability of his choices like "a dark wind rising toward . . . [him] me from deep in . . . [his] future" he could rest assured that this death sentence was what was meant to be and he need no longer torture himself with false hope of another life. In both stories a path was set out for each man but Meursault came to his end with the peace of a man without hope.