

Déjà Vu: I, the Stranger, Know You Well,
Mr Prufrock

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The title of my paper says “Déjà vu”. I assume that some time, somehow, you have all felt that you were going through for a second time a certain experience that you have already had. I myself experienced déjà vu when I read Albert Camus’s novel *The Stranger* years after reading T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The two heroes in the novel and the poem looked very much alike in character and behaviour and the reason was that Eliot’s poem reflected at the very beginning of the 20th century, almost all the features of Camus’s philosophy of alienation and the absurd that became popular only towards the middle of the century. Alienation as a concept might not have been new for Eliot at the turn of the 20th century but the surprising thing was that his approach to the issue was strikingly like that of Camus’s. It was as though Eliot predicted almost precisely what Camus was going to say decades later.

Similarly, ‘the absurd’ as a concept can be traced back to the 19th century Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard but it was given the form of a philosophical belief by Camus, when he published his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* much later, in 1942, followed by his novel *The Stranger* the next year. It might be worthwhile, then, to take Camus’s *The Stranger* and T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in order to look closely at the two heroes, Meursault and Prufrock and see how they happen to ‘know’ each other so well. But first, a few words about Camus’s philosophical views concerning ‘the absurd’ and alienation:

Camus wonders about the meaning of life. His main question is what life could possibly mean if there is death awaiting us at the end? How can people enjoy happiness when they know that they are doomed? And is everything in vain under such circumstances, and therefore, meaningless and even absurd? Camus is positivistic about the problem. His love for life leads him into thinking that first you must live your life. Only afterwards should you try to attach any meaning to it. He holds the idea that you should live with what you have instead of mourning for what you do not have, and that it is such an approach to life that makes you wise and prevents you from falling into absurdity. What he means by absurdity is the paradoxical relationship of man to the world. It is paradoxical because although the world is consistent in itself and so is man, the two fall into a conflict when they come together for the very reason that the world fails to comply with man’s will and thus, a contradiction occurs.

Camus has no religious beliefs and accordingly, he thinks that when someone dies, it is the end of everything. It is absurd to hope for an afterworld or to try to make your life ‘meaningful’ in reference to God. He holds the idea that faith or hope does not help because there is nothing that they can ever ‘promise’ in the real sense of the word. Life leads to nothingness and the only solution which saves you from despair lies in coming to an agreement with ‘the absurd’.

In his novel *The Stranger*, Camus handles the issue through the character of Meursault, the hero. Meursault is a young man who displays behaviour contrary to the expectations of the society he lives in and, therefore, remains outside the set rules and norms that he is supposed to comply with. He is disinterested in life as a whole. He always prefers to remain detached and watch life and people go by. It is, as it were, life parades before him and he gazes at it without interest. Surprisingly though, he is satisfied with his way of life. He is a stranger both to the society and himself but he becomes aware of it only towards the end of the novel and all the while he follows his lonely path.

At the other end of this lonely path, we meet J. Alfred Prufrock in Eliot's famous poem. What makes Prufrock especially significant is that he foreshadows Meursault in character and behaviour. Prufrock is a middle-aged man and a bit of an introvert. His dull and colourless life and his alienation are reflected very successfully in the background picture of the poem. The atmosphere in the poem is dark and gloomy. We see Prufrock walking along desolate streets and passing by cheap hotels. The weather is foggy and the fog, as it were, slides through windows and leaps onto balconies and reaches everywhere quietly but surely, just like a cat. It blurs things, intensifying the feeling of alienation. The poem begins with Prufrock's address to a companion,

"Let us go then, you and I,"

Here we do not know who his companion is. It could be the reader or someone of the opposite sex, as we soon see that women are prominent figures in the poem or yet, it could be Prufrock speaking to himself. Indeed, the identity of the companion does not matter much because Prufrock, in his alienation, might not care who it is. It is simply someone he is speaking to in order to express how he is feeling so Eliot sets the reader's imagination free. Perhaps it is just an imaginary companion because in the poem, which is a dramatic monologue, what matters for Prufrock is to disclose his emotions. This is one point that Prufrock has in common with Meursault. Both reveal their thoughts and feelings but Prufrock does it all through the poem while Meursault becomes more frank after committing a murder that brings about his end.

But the main feature they share is that they both question the meaning of life. Is life totally absurd or is there any meaning to it? If so, can anyone find it out? Prufrock speaks to his companion about it:

"Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit."

It is quite probable that the question is overwhelming because the meaning of life is hard to discover. It is a difficult question particularly in Prufrock's case because his life is dull and monotonous just like Meursault's—the stranger's—life and no day is any different from the one before or after it. So he does not seem to have an answer to the question concerning the meaning of life. Neither does he take any initiative to make his life better. He is afraid to take chances because he is timid and indecisive:

"Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse."

If we consider Meursault's case, we see that he takes everything for granted. He lacks ambition and lives without a plan or a purpose. He does almost nothing to enliven his monotonous life. His sole interest seems to be in physical pleasures, including a variety of them, but strangely enough, he takes them all to be the same. For example, the sensations he gets from swimming is for him almost equal to the sensual feelings he enjoys when he has sex with his girlfriend. Naturally, his girlfriend cannot understand him and thinks he is bizarre.

As for Prufrock, sensuality is important for him, too, but he finds it difficult to have a relationship with a woman. He is concerned that women will not consider him attractive enough so he does not know how to take the step to approach women although he is deeply interested in them.

"And I have known the arms already, known them all—
...
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?"

Prufrock, like Meursault, suffers from being misunderstood by women because when he holds a conversation with a woman, the sentence he often hears from her is "That's not what I meant at all". In such a case, he cannot help but feel absurd and alienated and he becomes dissatisfied with life.

Meursault, on the other hand, looks satisfied with his life until he is imprisoned for a rather silly murder he commits and he retains this indifferent attitude until almost the very end of the novel. Towards the end, however, he is sentenced to death for his crime and such an unexpected verdict changes his attitude. He now begins thinking about the meaning of life and develops a new approach to the situation he is in. Like Camus himself, Meursault has no religious faith to hold on to so he comes up with a different consolation. He thinks life is worth living in any case, so it is wise to accept death as a matter of fact and, instead of wasting time thinking about it or about an afterlife, it is better to enjoy life on earth—even if one is in prison.

Prufrock is well aware of the futility of life, too and just like Meursault, he does not give in to absurdity but tries to make the best out of it. He joins social gatherings and spends time with people.

"Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;"

Yet, he can't help but wonder all the while if all this triviality is worth the trouble.

"And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
...
Would it have been worth while,
...
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question..."

As can be seen, the theme of 'an overwhelming question' is recurrent. Nevertheless, Prufrock stands against the feeling of absurdity and the pointless craving for the meaning of life by dressing up and going to parties. Even then, Eliot makes the reader feel that Prufrock is shabby and self-conscious.

"Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"

Similarly, Meursault, experiences self-consciousness in *The Stranger*, before the looks of other people and he has to endure it. The first instance is when his mother dies. He goes to the old people's home where she used to live, to attend her funeral and meets the curious looks of the people living there and the second one is during his trial, when the jury members keep staring at him. He is so alienated from the society that we do not find it strange when he thinks the jury members are like passengers on a bus, who sit and gaze at those who get on the bus after themselves. In the case of either hero, self-consciousness is the result of failure to become integrated in the society.

In fact, they do not remain disintegrated forever but their integration is ironically accompanied by death at the end. In the case of Meursault, the court gets rid of this absurd man by sentencing him to death in the name of the society. And it is after this verdict that Meursault feels more and more attached to life and begins to get involved in it more and more deeply. Unfortunately for him, when his attitude to life changes in the direction the society demands of him, the time comes for his execution. As for Prufrock, he lives in a kind of dream world, and transfigures women into mermaids in his dreams. The poem ends with his figurative drowning:

"We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown."

Both Meursault and Prufrock turn to be defenseless at the end. Human voices wake them up from a sleep they have been in until then. In other words, they wake up from a sleep of alienation and start looking at life from a new viewpoint. Unfortunately, there is no escape for Meursault from the execution. However, it is possible to handle Prufrock's drowning in two different ways. It could be regarded as a hope for a fresh start or as surrender to the absurdity of life. If Meursault and Prufrock are examined in view of Camus's existentialist philosophy, it is observed that they both want to remain invisible to the society so that they might lead the lives that they want. Death may bring them the liberty that they otherwise fail to achieve. Therefore, death is not a dreadful thing but an agent that will set them free—for Meursault, free of the social norms that he is supposed to comply with and for Prufrock, free of the curious or disdainful looks of the others.

Considering Camus's interpretation of the absurd, it can be stated that neither Meursault nor Prufrock would have been an absurd hero if they could have ever existed by themselves. What makes them absurd is their conflict with the society they live in and the inconformity of their personal norms to those of the society. And this is what brings together the two heroes disregarding the decades that separate them in time.

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