

THE LANDSCAPE AS VOICE IN ALBERT CAMUS'S *THE OUTSIDER*

GRACE SZUCS

Albert Camus's *The Outsider* is both a founding existentialist manifesto and a work of fiction set in mid-century colonial Algeria. The temptation is to read the novel as one or the other; the challenge is to read it as both. In "The Landscape as Voice in Albert Camus's *The Outsider*," Grace Szucs admirably takes up this challenge and argues persuasively that the most powerful presence in the novel—the blazing Algerian sun—is not just a force of nature but of culture, and more specifically, of anti-colonialism. The sun drives Meursault to murder the nameless Arab man on the beach, which leads to Meursault's execution, but also to the war of independence that eventually drives the French out of Algeria.

Dr. Alice Brittan

Albert Camus's *The Outsider* is steeped in environmental imagery that he puts to various uses in this multidimensional, multilayered text, with the image of the sun playing a particularly vital part. While other scholars have argued for the sun's symbolic and metaphorical role in *The Outsider*, I will

further this discussion by arguing that the sun takes on the additional role of a character in the novel; Camus resists a simply figurative use of the sun in his writing by positioning it as a character in addition to being a structural device. While the sun does function on a figurative level, as a character it acts as the voice of the colonized Algerian in Algiers. Meursault's relationship to the sun presents some of the complicated feelings arising between colonizer and colonized, while simultaneously retaining the Arab's glaringly absent humanity in order to keep cosmic and philosophical questions at the fore of the novel. In this way, Camus makes a subtle commentary on the contemporary issue of Algerian decolonization.

Camus makes the sun one of the most prominent recurring environmental images of Algiers; its overbearing presence defines the landscape physically as well as socio-politically. It is also the most affective entity on Meursault, who comments on its effects frequently. As an ancient literary symbol the sun has often been written about in terms of its figurative use. For Richard Lehan, Camus's use of setting works to objectify the subjective state of Meursault: "The emotions and feelings of

[his] characters often become only an extension of their surroundings" (40). In this way, the sun characterizes Meursault and is useful to the reader as a gauge of his emotional state. Lehan suggests that the style and setting of *The Outsider* help Camus "translate philosophical motives into dramatic terms" (47). However, Peter Schofer argues that despite a relatively minimal use of metaphor in *The Outsider*, the sun itself serves a metaphorical purpose: "Meursault clearly establishes a metaphorical relationship between the scene of the murder and the funeral when he says that it was the 'même soleil'" (147). For Schofer, "the metaphor of the sun can provide a way out of the impasse created by the movement of repressed grief to the violence of murder" (148). In other words, the sun is a rhetorical device used to move the story along and explain the Arab's murder in psychological terms. For both of these scholars the physical setting in general, and the sun more specifically, serve as a structuring element of *The Outsider*. However, I argue that the setting - particularly the sun - does more than this. Ena C. Vulor observes that

[t]he only pleasures [Meursault] acknowledges are purely sensual, derived from such simple things as the color of the bay, the embrace of the cool air as a relief from the burning sun, or the sweep of the sea waves over his body. (77)

If we take this observation beyond simply the feeling of pleasure, we can see that any feelings that Meursault acknowledges are rooted in the sensual. He is indifferent to the people around him, his future, and tragedy in his and others' lives, yet the physical landscape affects him both physically and psychologically.

Considering that the sun causes mental and physical reactions in Meursault, it becomes more than a mere symbol or metaphor; the indifference Meursault displays in regard to all other aspects of – and people in – his life is disrupted by it alone. Camus anthropomorphizes the sun by couching it in active language. Meursault tells the reader, “the bright morning sunshine hit me like a slap in the face” (Camus 49). He describes the sun “peeling away the last few layers of water” from his skin (52), and the feeling of being “pinned to the ground beneath the sun” (55). Crucially, Meursault explains that leading up to the murder, the sun was “clashing against my forehead,” “gnawing at my eyelashes,”

“gouging out my stinging eyes” (59), and “pressing against me from behind” (59). The verbs Camus chooses to characterize the sun are violent, oppressive, and coercive; they show that the sun not only has agency, but it also exercises power over Meursault. In this way, the sun is a kind of tyrant. Stephen Ohayon alludes to this idea of characterization when he writes, “[i]n the writings of Camus, the sun is the symbol of that authority which reminds the characters of their subjugation” (193). While he explicitly names the sun a symbol, he also argues that it is a patriarchal figure against which Meursault must “duel” (196). It is significant here that Ohayon uses active language to describe Meursault’s relationship with the sun, and he notes Meursault’s hierarchical struggle with it. Meursault treats and thinks about the sun in terms of an individual. Yet, the sun is not a flat, tyrannical character. Rather, Camus rounds out its character. On the beach Meursault feels “the sun doing me good” (Camus 52). At sunrise on the day of his mother’s funeral, he feels refreshed by the air, and the sun is friendly; “it was beginning to warm my feet up” (17). This twist complicates the relationship between

Meursault and the sun, and further challenges its merely figurative function.

Furthermore, Camus portrays the sun as influencing and controlling Meursault. Almost always, when Meursault encounters the sun it has a soporific effect on him, causing him to “doze off” (10, 53), and “feel sleepy” (13, 54). It often sends him into a state of confusion, if not outright hallucination, such as leading up to the murder, when Meursault complains of the “drunken haze it was pouring into me” (58). In the heat of the sun, Meursault describes feeling “a bit lost” (20); he can “hardly see or think straight” (20) and he cannot follow what the magistrate says to him because he is too hot (68). He also avoids going outside until evening falls; the presence of the sun literally keeps him from leaving his home (28). As well as hypnotizing Meursault, the sun causes pain in his eyes and head, consequently blinding him (15, 58, 60). Thus, the sun influences Meursault’s actions whether it be to immobilize or provoke him. By contrast, the Arab men are described as wearing boiler suits while lying on the beach under the mid-day sun (54). These suits are worn to protect one’s clothes and are often of heavier material, indicating that the men are seemingly immune

to the sun's effects despite their suits "steaming in the heat" (59). The difference in the sun's effect here suggests belonging. Meursault can barely stand the sun whereas the Arabs rest easy beneath it. In this way, the sun accepts the Arabs and rejects Meursault.

I have now established my argument that the sun – by virtue of its nuanced, affective qualities on Meursault, as well as Camus's literary representation – can be viewed as a character in the novel. I will now argue that, as a character, the sun's voice lends itself to the Algerian characters thereby addressing tensions within the colonial Algiers. By voice I mean an agency that is necessarily absent from the colonized individual. Rather than giving voice to the crucially silent, nameless, and faceless Algerians in the novel, Camus embeds this voice in the figure of the sun. The Arabs are deeply connected to the sun through their ability to tolerate and enjoy its heat as opposed to Meursault's suffering beneath its rays. In this way, Camus explores the idea of the colonizers' fear that "what was done to the native and the slave, the estrangement that has been central to the production of empire, might easily rebound upon the colonizer" (Reid-Pharr 96). The sun – and thus the Arabs –

estrangle Meursault from the Algerian landscape, which at its most extreme outcome culminates in his death, the estrangement from life itself. Terry Otten notes that Meursault “can no more control his actions at the beach than he could at the funeral. As critics have noted, ‘the trigger gave way’; it was not pulled” (108). Under pressure from the sun, Meursault was compelled to act, securing his fate. This coercive act gestures toward the fear Reid-Pharr writes about above. The colonizer is betrayed in much the same way as colonized people are betrayed by their colonizers. As Ohayan suggests,

[t]he sun is an ambivalent symbol in the works of Camus, who as a Mediterranean wished to merge in the luminosity which permeated his Algerian motherland. (198)

That is to say, Camus wanted to belong to the landscape of Algiers, but Meursault, a Frenchman whom we know Camus identified with (Ohayan 191), was essentially put to death in part because of his love of the land. Although it is Meursault who is the actor because he technically pulled the trigger and did not cry at his mother’s funeral, it is the system that sentences him. The same system

that produced colonialism has turned on the colonialist. Meursault is expected to conform to that system in much the same way as the colonized individual is. If he does not conform, he is rejected and eliminated. The sun, which is now understood to be a voice of the colonized, first rejects Meursault, thus fulfilling the fear of the colonizer.

Camus was perceived as a supporter of French colonialism in Algiers;

[h]e remained opposed to Algerian Independence because he simply refused to acknowledge the existence of two irreconcilable 'personalities' in Algeria and he believed that France (and the French) belonged there. (Le Sueur 87)

Yet according to his biographer, Olivier Todd, "this man from beginning to end was full of doubts [. . .] not only full of doubts about his talent but also about his political views [. . .] he certainly was not a colonialist" and furthermore, "he's always questioning himself" ("on Camus"). Without making drastic assumptions about authorial intent, from these two biographers it can be inferred that Camus's political views were complex and conflicting. In *The Outsider*, he subtly explores

differences in power dynamics between the French and Algerians by way of the sun while expertly maintaining other philosophical layers of the novel. Much like Lehan's assessment, Camus dramatizes the philosophy of the absurd, and simultaneously, the philosophical and political concerns at a time of great tension in Algiers.

In his multidimensional novel *The Outsider*, Albert Camus manages to explore complex issues of philosophy and colonial tensions in an astoundingly short novel. By manipulating traditional literary tropes and devices, he manages to imbue the image of the sun with multiple purposes and meaning. Specifically, through his writing he gives the sun the role of a character, which in turn gives voice to the colonized Algerian as a way of exploring conflicting concerns and fears during a time of tense colonial and anti-colonial action.

Works Cited

- Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*. Trans. Joseph Laredo. London: Penguin, 2000. Print.
- Le Sueur, James D. "The Unbearable Solitude of Being: The Question of Albert Camus." *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001. 87-127. Print.
- Lehan, Richard. "Camus and Hemingway." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 1.2 (1960): 37-48. Web. 1 December 2013.
- Ohayon, Stephen. "Camus' *The Stranger*: The Sun-Metaphor and Patricidal Conflict." *American Imago: Studies in Psychoanalysis and Culture* 40.2 (1983), 189-205. Web. 1 December 2013.
- Otten, Terry. "'Mamam' in Camus' 'The Stranger.'" *College Literature* 2.2 (1975): 105-111. Web. 1 December 2013.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert F. "The Stranger's Work." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*. 28 Mar. 2009: 90-97. Web. 1 December 2013.

- Schofer, Peter. "The Rhetoric of the Text: Causality, Metaphor, and Irony." *Camus's L'Etranger: Fifty Years on*. Ed. Adele King. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. 139-151. Print.
- Todd, Olivier. "Olivier Todd on Camus." *Writers and Company with Eleanor Wachtel*. CBC, 2013. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.
- Vulor, Ena C. "Camus, Mammeri, Feraoun and *L'Etranger*: Landscapes of the Absurd and Colonial Landscapes." *Colonial and Anti-Colonial Discourses: Albert Camus and Algeria*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2000. 69-119. Print.