The Meursault Investigation

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KAMEL DAOUD

Kamel Daoud was born in the northwest Algerian port city of Mostaganem, the oldest of six children in an Algerian Muslim family. Daoud spoke Arabic as a child but eventually studied French literature at the University of Oran. He currently lives in Oran, where he edits and contributes to the French-language daily newspaper *Le quotidien d'Oran*. Daoud is divorced and has two children. *The Meursault Investigation* is his first novel.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After a violent French invasion, Algeria became a French colony in 1830; due to "scorched earth" tactics used to eliminate local power structures and resistance to French rule, between 500,000 and one million Algerians (out of an initial population of three million) died in the first three decades of French rule. Between 1954 and 1962, the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) fought a guerilla war against the French regime; although both sides committed atrocities during the war, French use of torture and violent tactics harmed its reputation abroad and generated international support for Algerian independence, which was eventually guaranteed by the Évian Accords in 1962. After the war ended, the FLN quickly proved hostile to political opposition and eventually banned other parties in order to consolidate its own power. Algeria remained a stable country until the 1990s, when a civil war broke out between the government and various Islamist factions. Journalist and historians have noted that these rebel groups mimicked the ruthless and brutal tactics originally developed by the FLN to defeat the French.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Meursault Investigation is a response to Albert Camus's 1942 novel *The Stranger*. Many of the novel's key elements—such as Harun's ambivalent relationship with his mother and his confrontation with an imam at the end of the novel—mirror similar elements in *The Stranger*. Daoud explores and sometimes agrees with Camus' preoccupation with "the Absurd," which is the fundamental conflict between human desire to find meaning in life and the ultimate inability to find such meaning in a random universe. Absurdism developed from the European existentialist movement, of which Camus was an important member. Camus explores the philosophical ideas which play a large part in both novels in his philosophical treatise, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. At the same time, Daoud protests Camus's indifference to the racist colonial structures that form the foundation of his novel. For an in-depth discussion of the ways in which Western colonial regimes have promoted narratives of political and cultural superiority to Middle-Eastern and North African societies, readers should consult Edward Said's path-breaking book *Orientalism*, one of the foundational works of postcolonial scholarship.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Meursault Investigation*
- **When Written:** 2010s
- **Where Written:** Algeria
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Postcolonial
- **Genre:** Contemporary fiction
- **Setting:** Algiers between the 1940s and 1960s
- **Climax:** Harun murders Joseph, a Frenchman, to avenge the death of his brother, Musa.
- **Antagonist:** Meursault
- **Point of View:** First-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Dangerous Work. Daoud has received death threats due to his public criticism of Islamic fundamentalism through his journalism and novel. As a result, he rarely makes public appearances.

Popularity. In the year after its publication, *The Meursault Investigation* won three literary awards in France, including the prestigious Goncourt Prize.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel is narrated as a stream-of-consciousness monologue from the perspective of Harun, an elderly Algerian man. Harun's older brother, Musa, was murdered by a Frenchman in 1942, while Algeria was a French colony. The murderer, Meursault, evaded punishment and eventually wrote a novel about his experiences in Algeria, in which he **names** Musa briefly and dismissively as "the Arab." Meursault corresponds to the protagonist of Albert Camus' 1942 novel *The Stranger*, and Harun's narrative is a response to that book.

Harun is telling his story to a young interlocutor he meets at his favorite bar over the course of several nights. Little information is given about the interlocutor, but he seems to be a student of some sort, interviewing Harun as part of his research.

Harun tells the interlocutor that he and Musa grew up in a poor neighborhood of Algiers. Their father had abandoned the family years before, and Musa supported Mama and his younger brother by working as a handyman at the port. As he was only seven when Musa died, Harun has few memories of his older brother, but he remembers riding on his shoulders at the end of the work day, and looking up to Musa as a father figure.

One day when Harun is seven, Musa doesn't come home from work. At first Harun is unaware that anything has happened, but eventually news reaches the neighborhood that an Arab has been killed by a Frenchman at the beach, and Mama finally realizes that it's her son who has died. In his book, Meursault attributes the fatal altercation to a fight over Musa's sister, who was a prostitute; however, as Musa doesn't actually have a sister, Harun suspects he was trying to avenge the honor of a woman with whom he was having a secret relationship. Finally, amid the clamor of neighbors coming to give their condolences and Mama's collapse into incoherent wailing, Harun realizes that his brother is dead. He's distraught, but no one pays attention to him.

Soon after Musa's death, Mama and Harun decide to leave Algiers and its bad associations. They stay with an uncle who treats them poorly and then move to the rural town of Hadjout, where they work on a large-scale farm. The work is hard and there is little food, but eventually Mama improves their situation by getting a job as a housekeeper to a family of French settlers. Eventually, when the Larquais family flees after Independence, Mama is able to claim their house for herself.

However, in the months before they leave, Mama conducts a relentless investigation into the circumstances of Musa's death. She's anguished because the authorities have provided no explanations and haven't even returned Musa's body. All she has are a handful of newspaper clippings, which she's unable to read. For his part, Harun is confused by his mother's mental decline and feels that she resents him for outliving his older and more beloved brother.

Harun tells the interlocutor a bit about his own life. Although he's very old, he doesn't have a wife or family, and he lives alone in his apartment in Oran. From his balcony he can look out on the mosque across the street. He deplores Algeria's increasing religious conservatism and he mocks his neighbors' devotion to religious dogma, saying it contrasts with the sordid hypocrisy of their actual lives. Harun's rejection of religion has made him an outcast in the neighborhood, but it allows him to feel personally free.

When Harun is a teenager in Hadjout, he gains admission to a local school, where he is one of two Arab students. Harun does well in school and quickly learns French, motivated by the desire to investigate Harun's murder in the language of the people who control his country. As soon as he can read French well, Mama forces him to translate her newspaper clippings over and over again. Harun knows she will be upset with the paucity of information they actually contain, so he makes up elaborate stories in which Musa is a hero and martyr.

During Harun's twenties, Algeria rebels against French rule and ultimately secures its independence. It's during this time that Mama's employers flee the country and she and Harun settle in their house. One night, one of the previous occupants' friends, a Frenchman named Joseph, flees some conflict in the street and takes refuge in the courtyard. Harun and Mama wake up to the noise of his entrance. Guided by Mama, Harun takes an old gun down to the courtyard and shoots Joseph several times, after which he and Mama bury the body and obscure all traces of the crime. Mama feels that, with the Frenchman's death, Musa's murder has been avenged. From this point onward she's much more tranquil and affectionate towards Musa.

Although the Algerian army, now in control of Hadjout, quickly figures out that Harun murdered Joseph, they summon him to the town hall and arrest him not for committing a crime but for doing so outside the auspices of the "official" fight for liberation. Harun spends a few days in jail, after which a young officer berates him for refusing to join the resistance army, as almost all the young men have, and for killing a Frenchman after the end of the war. After this, he is released. Harun is somewhat disappointed because he wanted to be judged and sentenced for his crimes.

The next year, a young woman named Meriem arrives in Hadjout; she's doing research on Meursault's novel and wants to talk to "the Arab's family." Harun and Mama were unaware that Musa's death has been recorded in a book, and they are astonished by this information; reading the novel for the first time, Harun is both overwhelmed by Meursault's literary genius and incensed that he has treated Musa's death as part of his personal philosophical explorations, rather than as a serious crime.

Moreover, Harun immediately falls in love with the beautiful, educated, and independent Meriem. Throughout the summer she visits Harun, explaining to him the context surrounding Meursault's novel and introducing him to French literature. At the end of the summer Musa asks Meriem to marry him; however, she soon stops visiting Hadjout, and their correspondence dwindles away. Harun has not had a meaningful relationship with a woman since then.

Harun ends his monologue in the present day, musing on his pariah status in his neighborhood. He feels that he's already like a ghost moving among his fellow inhabitants, but because he has rejected the absolute dictums of religion he feels that he has access to a sphere of truth that they do not. He once gets in a violent fight with an imam who tries to convert him, shouting that his certainties are worth nothing. Harun often fantasizes about climbing the mosque's minaret and shouting blasphemies through the speakers; he wishes that he could do so and then be executed by a swarm of his neighbors, who would be "savage

in their hate" as they watched him die.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Harun – The novel's protagonist, an elderly Algerian man. Harun narrates the novel to the young interlocutor; he revisits his entire life, from his days as a young boy traumatized by his older brother Musa's murder and Mama's emotional decline, to his current life as a solitary and garrulous old man, desperate for someone to listen to his story. Although it occurred several decades ago, Harun is still obsessed with his brother's murder at the hands of Meursault, a French settler who evaded punishment for his crime and even wrote a bestselling novel about it (in fact, Meursault is the protagonist of Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger*, and Harun's narrative is a reimagining of its events from an Algerian standpoint). In his personality, Harun is remarkably similar to Meursault, whom he considers his nemesis: both men remain detached from the events occurring around them, even when doing so makes them objects of suspicion of dislike (for example, despite strong social pressure, Harun refuses to fight for Algerian independence, and both men reject religion as a means of making sense of the world). However, Harun also loathes Meursault's use of his brother's death to jumpstart his own literary career; frequently returning to Meursault's dismissive description of Musa as "the Arab," he transforms Meursault's narrative into a critique of colonialist exploitation and racism. Harun has a troubled relationship with Mama, who seems to resent him for outliving his elder brother; she only becomes affectionate towards him after he kills a French settler, Joseph, in an act of retribution about which Harun feels unsettled for the rest of his life. Harun always feels as though he's living in the shadow of his brother's martyrdom, unable to extricate himself from his memory. The conflict between brotherly love and resentment is embodied in the two brothers' names: Musa means "Moses," who was a biblical hero just as Musa's murder makes him a hero to his family, but Harun means "Aaron," Moses's younger brother who acted as his spokesman just as Harun now tells his brother's story, deriving a certain power he could never have during Musa's life.

Musa – Harun's older brother, murdered during Harun's childhood by Meursault, a French settler. During his lifetime, Musa is the head of the family, providing for Mama and Harun after his father abandons them; thus, Mama is both economically and emotionally dependent on Musa and never fully recovers from the trauma of his death. As an adult, Harun surmises that Musa's altercation with Meursault resulted from an insult to Musa's girlfriend's honor; this possibility upsets him because it reveals how little he, as a child, knew about his brother's adult life. Shortly after the War of Liberation through which Algeria gains independence from France, Harun (and by extension, Mama) avenges Musa's death by murdering a French settler named Joseph. Eventually, Meriem visits Harun and informs him that Musa's killer eventually returned to France and wrote a novel in which he frames the murder as part of his own existential crisis, dismissively and **namelessly** referring to Musa as "the Arab" (Meursault is actually the protagonist of Albert Camus's 1942 novel *The Stranger*, to which this novel is a response). Meursault's novel provides information about Musa's death that Harun and Mama have been seeking for years, but they are dismayed to see the indifference and lack of compassion with which Meursault treats the man he kills. Since Musa dies when Harun is very young, Harun has few memories of him, and Musa's personality remains vague. This vagueness mimics the indifference with which Camus treats "the Arab" in his own novel, but here it makes Musa into an "Everyman" figure, representing all Arab Algerians adversely affected by the colonial regime, and it places his loss at the center of the narrative.

Mama – Harun's and Musa's mother. A poor and uneducated woman, Mama conceives of herself primarily in relation to her sons and the boys' father. In the wake of her husband's abandonment and Musa's death, Mama suffers an emotional breakdown from which she never recovers. After the French authorities refuse to punish the murderer (Meursault) or even return Musa's body to his family, Mama becomes obsessed with retribution for Musa's death, and she seems to resent Harun for outliving his older brother and for being unable, due to his youth, to avenge Musa's death. Mama harbors this desire until, as an adult, Harun kills a Frenchman named Joseph, a friend of the French family for whom Mama works; after this second murder, Mama takes on a more tranquil temperament and becomes affectionate towards Harun for the first time. Her feelings seem to proceed from deep love and cognizance of her powerlessness within her own society. However, they prevent her from being a supportive mother to Harun. As an adult, Harun deeply resents his mother for his emotionally unstable childhood and blames her (perhaps unfairly) for his inability to form stable relationships with others. At the same time, he can never bring himself to disown her completely, and continues to visit her, although by this time she's almost entirely ceased talking.

Meursault – The antagonist of the novel, a French settler who murders Musa and evades punishment, eventually returning to France. Eventually, Meriem introduces Harun to a famous novel Meursault has written about his life in Algeria, in which he frames the murder as the culmination of an existential crisis during which he becomes convinced in the lack of value in his or anyone else's life. In the novel, Meursault dismissively refers to Musa as "the Arab," denying him a **name** in order to soothe his conscience and avoid responsibility for his death. In fact, Meursault's novel corresponds to Albert Camus' 1942 novel *The Stranger*, whose protagonist murders a nameless "Arab" in Algeria (this novel is a response to *The Stranger*, showing that it

reinforces colonial power structures). For Harun, Meursault represents the colonial regime's tendency to denigrate and ignore Arab narratives and experiences, a practice that allows Musa's death to go unpunished even when its perpetrator openly identifies himself. At the same time, Harun admires Meursault's brilliance as a writer, and often agrees with his refutations of religion and assertions that the world is essentially meaningless. As the novel progresses and Harun becomes more and more distanced from those around him and eventually murders a Frenchman named Joseph without cause, his character and the course of his life come to resemble Meursault's. Ultimately, Meursault forces Harun to address the aspects of his own character which he doesn't like.

Meriem – A young teacher who seeks out Harun and Mama in order to learn more about Musa's murder, which she has read about in Meursault's novel. Educated, sophisticated, and independent, Meriem introduces Harun to the world of French literature, in particular the book which demeans his brother and which he will spend his life protesting; Mama dislikes Meriem, fearing that her allure may draw Harun away from her. Her fears are somewhat justified, as Harun quickly falls in love with Meriem, experiencing passion with her for the first time. Harun's feelings for Meriem never develop beyond a summer flirtation—she stops visiting him after he asks her to marry him—but he treasures them for the rest of his life. For him, these tender feelings attest to the value of lived experience, whether or not it is underpinned by religious or philosophical meaning. Harun's earnest feelings for Meriem contrast with Meursault's apathy towards his own love interest in *The Stranger*.

The Interlocutor – A young student who has sought out Harun and wants to hear his story about Musa. The two frequently meet at Harun's favorite bar. Little information is given about the interlocutor, and this purposeful vagueness makes him a stand-in for the reader, allowing Harun to discard the traditional boundaries of storytelling and address the reader directly.

The Bottle Ghost – A man Harun frequently sees at the bar where he spends most of his nights, as well as many of his meetings with the interlocutor. The ghost devotes himself to cutting and arranging various newspaper clippings for no apparent reason. Harun sees him as pathetic and sometimes accuses him of eavesdropping, but eventually he invites the man over to hear his life story, whereupon Harun discovers that the man is deaf and mute, unable to understand anything that he's saying. Their interaction emphasizes the ultimate futility of Harun's quest and the extent to which they are linked by mutual isolation, despite Harun's desire to differentiate himself.

Joseph / The Frenchman – A young Frenchman and friend of the Larquais family, Mama's employers in Hadjout. After the War of Liberation, Joseph sneaks into the Larquais' garden to take refuge, whereupon Mama orders Harun to kill him. That Harun can kill Joseph and go unpunished shows the extent to which colonial politics have been reversed by the war—now it's French people, not Arabs, whose deaths are regarded as indispensable by the regime. Since Musa was killed by a French settler, Meursault, Mama sees this murder as an act of retribution for Musa's death, and she lives much more tranquilly afterward; in contrast, Harun is unable to move past the murder even though he claims to feel no guilt over it.

Zubida – A young woman, whom Harun and Mama notice watching them as they prepare to leave Algiers after Musa's death. Harun comes to believe that she was Musa's clandestine girlfriend, and that she is called Zubida, since he once heard Musa mutter the name in his sleep. It's possible, although not certain, that a dispute over her honor led to the altercation with Meursault in which Musa was murdered. It's also likely that Musa was secretive about his romantic relationships due to Mama's jealousy and dislike of women who threaten her own importance in they eyes of her sons.

The Officer – An Algerian army officer who questions Harun about murdering Joseph but never punishes him. The officer is extremely devoted to the cause of Algerian liberation, and he's both disappointed in and suspicious of Harun's decision not to join the army as most other young men have. He explains that Harun has only been arrested for killing a Frenchman outside the context of the war effort, rather than under the auspices of the army, a distinction which Harun views as specious and absurd.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Larquais Family – A family of French settlers who employ Mama as their housekeeper in Hadjout. When they flee the country after Independence, Mama claims their house for herself and Harun. Joseph, the French settler whom Harun eventually murders in retribution for Musa's death, is a friend of the Larquais family.

Father – Harun and Musa's father and Mama's estranged husband, who abandoned his family when they were very young.

Larbi – One of Musa's friends.

TERMS

Roumi – The Arabic word for "foreigner," which Algerians use to describe all French settlers.

Arab – An ethnic or religious signifier, referring to people of Middle Eastern or North African heritage and/or Muslims. **Harun** complains that European colonists use this term to lump together all the people and societies of the Middle East, rather than understanding or respecting them. Meursault's dismissive

use of the term "Arab" in place of Musa's actual name exemplifies this phenomenon.

Independence – In *The Meursault Investigation*, "Independence" refers to Algerian independence from France, achieved in 1962 at the end of a rebellion known as the War of Liberation.

War of Liberation – A war launched in 1954 by the Algerian National Liberation front (FLN) against the French colonial regime. After eight years of fighting, in which both sides resorted to brutal tactics and committed atrocities against civilians, the war ended in the 1962 Évian Accords, through which Algeria gained independence. Most French settlers left the country in the years after the war.

Minaret – A tower attached to a mosque, from the top of which a man intones the daily call to prayer and sometimes delivers sermons.

Imam – A Muslim prayer leader in a mosque and a spiritual leader in the wider Muslim community.

Koran – The fundamental sacred scripture of Islam, also known as the Quran or Qur'an.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

COLONIALISM AND ITS AFTERMATH

Set in Algeria before and after the transition from colonial rule to independence, *The Meursault Investigation* reimagines Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* from an Algerian Arab perspective. Meursault, the protagonist of *The Stranger*, murders an Algerian man who is known simply as "The Arab;" this crime is flashpoint for Meursault's existential anxieties, and Camus never discusses "The Arab's" character or his unjust death. In contrast, Daoud gives the murdered man a **name**—Musa—and narrates his story from the perspective of his brother, Harun. Focusing on the people disregarded by the original novel, Daoud uses Musa's death to show how colonial rule exploits and disadvantages Algerians for the benefit of the French, and that European literature tends to discount and ignore the narratives of colonial peoples deemed "peripheral." At the same time, the transition to self-rule fails to provide any closure or compensation for Musa's death; Daoud uses this circumstance to argue that the postcolonial regime, inefficient and quickly descending into corrupt bureaucracy, is not capable of solving the problems created by colonialism.

By rewriting *The Stranger* to focus on the lives of Musa and Harun, Daoud demonstrates that colonial regimes not only materially disadvantage territorial citizens but consigns their narratives to permanently second-class status. In *The Stranger*, Algiers is simply a setting for Meursault's existential dilemmas, and the death of another human being is important only in that it clarifies Meursault's nihilistic views; "the Arab" himself is totally dispensable, and Meursault never displays any interest in the man's life or remorse that he has needlessly ended it.

Daoud uses some indirect tactics to combat this pernicious indifference to Algerian lives; while Camus rarely describes Algiers except to emphasize the extreme heat that impairs Meursault's judgment, Daoud provides vivid description of the city streets, the crowded tenement in which Harun and Musa grow up, and the wary aversion with which Mama teaches her sons to treat the French roumis—foreigners—who control the country. By providing these tactile and sociopolitical details, Daoud primes the reader to consider Musa's death a human tragedy, rather than a detail in Meursault's philosophical crises.

Moreover, the novel rests on the premise that Meursault evaded execution for his crimes and returned to France, where he wrote *The Stranger* about his experiences in Algeria, ultimately using Musa's death to soar to literary fame. Conversely, as Musa supported Mama and Harun by working at the docks, his death plunges them into destitution and forces them to move to another city for work. The opposite fortunes of Meursault and Musa show that material benefits colonialism brings to "central" countries depends on the exploitation and impoverishment of "peripheral" territories.

As an adult, Harun reads *The Stranger* to gain more knowledge about the murder that has shaped his life, but he is most outraged by the novel's complete disregard for his brother—especially by its refusal to give him a name. In Harun's words, the novel portrays Musa as "a poor illiterate God created apparently for the sole purpose of taking a bullet." His insistence on telling Musa's story and poignantly evoking the effects of his death on the family are an explicit attempt to challenge Camus's Eurocentric viewpoint, insisting that future generations approach Musa on his own terms, rather than Camus's. The constant contrast Daoud evokes between Meursault's indifference towards and Harun's preoccupation with Musa shows that European literature, which supposedly cultivates enlightened moral values, actually reflects and helps perpetuate colonialist exploitation.

However, as outraged as he is by the colonial regime that killed his brother and buried his narrative, Harun quickly becomes disillusioned with the postcolonial regime, which he believes is ill-equipped to solve the problems caused by colonialism or help Algeria move forward. Harun comes of age during the fight for independence, but he's very alienated from the liberation effort. He has no faith that the new regime will be able to fulfill its extravagant promises, so he refuses to join the resistance army; his attitude makes fellow townspeople very suspicious of

him. Despite being painfully cognizant of the evils of colonialism, Harun refuses to embrace the incoherent nationalist ideology that replaces it, or the groupthink mentality that leads those around him to ostracize him.

Harun also dwells on the new regime's inability to resolve and refusal to acknowledge Musa's death. No investigation takes place after Independence, and when Mama tries to have Musa formally classified as a "martyr" so that she can receive a small pension, she's unsuccessful because, due to obfuscation by the colonial police, she has so little information about the circumstances of his murder. Musa's death emblematizes the injustice of the colonial regime, but the new regime's response to it shows how ill-equipped it is to seriously address these injustices, and that instead of attempting to do so it will form a rigid bureaucracy that further oppresses the people it claims to liberate.

Ultimately, *The Meursault Investigation* is an indictment not just of colonial exploitation but the failures of post-colonial regimes. However, even when criticizing Algeria's government, Daoud provides the country and its people a dignity denied them by *The Stranger*. The very existence of his critique establishes Algerian society as worthy of exploration and examination in its own right, rather than as an outpost of a colonial regime.

LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING

A retelling of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* from an Algerian perspective, *The Meursault Investigation* is structured around two different and often contradictory stories: the book Meursault writes in France, and the continuous monologue through which Harun gives his own account of his brother Musa's death. As a young man, Harun has several significant encounters with language and storytelling—from the newspaper articles that obscure the circumstances of Musa's murder, to the famous novel that frames it in terms of Meursault's existential crisis, to the books through which Meriem introduces Harun to education and intellectual freedom. These experiences show him how powerful and critical language is in shaping lived experience, determining whose version of a particular story is believed, and whose thoughts and whose deaths are considered valuable. Accordingly, Harun becomes obsessed with mastering French and becoming educated, both in order to achieve personal freedom and to avenge Musa's death by communicating it clearly to the rest of the world. The compelling monologue he delivers to his young interlocutor in the bar is the product of Harun's belief in the power of language; however, through its cyclical structure and inability to provide closure or explanation of the events that have haunted Harun through his whole life, the novel concedes the ultimate impotence of speech and even the literature that communicates it.

Despite his initial lack of formal education, Harun recognizes and admires language as a powerful tool. Harun openly acknowledges that Meursault (representing Camus) is a brilliant writer; he points out that it's his ability control language, and especially the language of a dominant European power, that allows him to deny Musa a **name** and a narrative, flaunting his murder to the world while also escaping punishment. Less artistic forms of language are also integral in mediating Harun's experience of Musa's death. For example, the newspaper clippings describing the murder to which Mama clings become almost a stand-in for her lost son, as they are the only documents that prove he once existed. At the same time, they obscure the actual circumstances of his death and exculpate Meursault; they are at once emblems of truth and falsity. Even the names Daoud give his characters emphasize the importance of communicating through language. Musa is the Arabic equivalent to "Moses," while Harun is "Aaron." In the biblical story of exodus from Egypt, Moses is the leader and hero, but he's shy and unable to speak for himself; Aaron's ability to wield language makes him, if only temporarily, the more powerful brother. Similarly, while Musa is a hero and martyr to Harun, Harun's control of their shared narrative means that he has power over his venerated elder brother.

Harun's mastery of French gives him a measure of personal liberation and the limited ability to reclaim Musa's narrative for himself. Eventually, Harun is able to enroll in school, where he learns to read French and then can read the newspaper clippings out loud to Mama. Although they contain only the most basic information, to satisfy her he pretends that they include long stories about Musa. His ability to interpret and explain language makes him more powerful than Mama and allows him to push back against what he perceives as the overweening control she wields over him.

Harun's real education arrives through Meriem, a graduate student studying Meursault's book who has tracked down his victim's family. She introduces Harun to *The Stranger* and many other works, and as their friendship deepens he falls in love with her. Falling in love is Harun's first step away from his mother and the first time he's able to forget Musa's death. By mixing the experiences of education, love, and freedom, the novel endows language with an almost sensual force and argues for its ability to expand Harun's inner life, even after his affair with Meriem abruptly ends. Ultimately, it's Harun's mastery of French and knowledge of literature that allows him to push back against Meursault's narrative, transforming Musa from a nameless victim to a man with his own story. Since the novel is narrated as Harun's monologue (originally in French), it gives the sense that he's only able to refute *The Stranger* by wielding language and literature against it.

However, while the novel is in some ways an ode to language, it's also conscious of the limits of storytelling. As a young man, Harun frequently expects revelations about Musa's death to occur as his grasp of French improves, but this never actually

occurs. When he's able to read the newspaper articles for the first time, he also loses faith in their potency as he realizes how little information they contain. Similarly, while he's initially excited to hear that Meursault has written a book that might provide more information about Musa, on first reading the novel and seeing how dismissively it portrays his brother he feels like an "idiot." Here, language reminds him of his own powerlessness, rather than freeing him. Despite his education and his abilities as a storyteller, at the end of the novel Harun is a solitary and garrulous drunk, desperately wanting someone to listen to him and thrilled when a young student expresses interest in his story. His ability to tell Musa's story hasn't really freed him from the legacy of his brother's death or allowed him to gain closure.

At the end of the novel, Harun invites another bar-goer, to whom he refers as "the ghost," to join him and his interlocutor. He accuses the ghost of trying to eavesdrop on his story, but the man turns out to be both deaf and mute. His inability to hear or understand the story, even if he wanted to, argues that no matter how much and how well Harun speaks, many people will still be unwilling or unable to interact with his story. The act of crafting a story—both Harun's construction of his monologue and Daoud's construction of a novel—reflects a faith in the inherent value and power of language. However, by ultimately emphasizing the fundamental difficulty of communication, the novel meditates uneasily on the very craft it represents.

RELIGION AND NIHILISM

A retelling of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, *The Meursault Investigation* is a philosophical novel taking place within an increasingly religious society. Harun often criticizes religion, which makes him a pariah in his conservative Muslim community. Ironically, his aversion to religion links him to Meursault, his enemy, who refuses efforts to convert him to Christianity throughout his own narrative. However, while Meursault's rejection of religion seems to spring from extreme nihilism (the belief that nothing in life has inherent value) and a philosophy developed by Camus called absurdism (the idea that existential conflict springs from the desire to find meaning in a meaningless world), Harun's stems from a more optimistic belief that religion prevents people from embracing their own lives and being truly free.

Harun's criticism of religion in an increasingly religious country makes him an outcast. He refers to the Koran as "their book," distancing himself both from Islam and the people around him who practice the religion; he describes the contents of the holy book as "redundancies, repetitions, lamentations, threats, and daydreams." In another passage, he says that he "loathes" the mosque he can see from his window, with its "big finger pointed at the sky." Rather than something reflecting a natural or divine order, Harun sees religion as an obstacle to that order.

While Harun doesn't give many details about his adult life, the reader can infer that this unconventionality is one of the reasons he's growing old alone, rather than with a wife and family. At one point he mentions an imam who exhorted him to "at least pray like the others," emphasizing the extent to which disavowal of Islam has led to his solitary life, perhaps as much as the traumatic circumstances of his youth or the murder he eventually commits in order to avenge Musa's death.

Harun's disgust with religion is one of his strongest links to Meursault, Musa's murderer and the novelistic hero he despises. Meursault is also notable for his rejection of Christianity, and this makes him an aberration in the eyes of society, just like Harun. For example, he doesn't cry or pray at his mother's funeral, and this fact is levied against him at his trial as evidence of his antisocial and immoral nature. At the end of the novel, Harun recalls an earlier episode in which he exploded in anger against the visiting imam, railing against religion and telling him that "none of his certainties was worth one hair on the head of the woman I loved," in other words that religious dogma is less worthwhile than meaningful lived experience, which for Harun is represented by his brief affair with Meriem. His statement here is an overt reiteration of Meursault's monologue when a priest visits him in jail and he says that all Christian doctrine is worth "no more than the hair on a woman's head." By pushing away imam and priest, both men reject conventional worldviews and the possibility of conventional redemption for their crimes; although Harun is never punished for his crimes, he imagines himself breaking into the mosque in order to shout blasphemies from the minaret, and subsequently being executed. Here, he's putting himself in Meursault's exact situation at the end of his own narrative.

However, while Meursault's rejection of religion represents the culmination of his nihilism, Harun rejects religion in order to emphasize the value and glory inherent in everyday life, regardless of the presence or absence of a divine plan. Meursault's comment that religion is worth "no more than one hair on a woman's head" is impersonal and bleak, denigrating the church without offering anything to replace its centrality in human society. Harun transforms this comment by talking instead of the "the woman I loved." Instead of replacing religion with nihilism, he's comparing it to the most meaningful experience of his life, his love for Meriem. Even though Harun is an extremely cynical character with a grim life story, at the end of the novel he draws strongly on this one positive experience to find faith in the beauty and value of life, thus differentiating himself firmly from Meursault, who remains apathetic towards his own life until the moment of his death.

Harun's skepticism of religion links him to Meursault, reminding the reader that their two stories are inextricably linked, despite Meursault's indifference and Harun's anger and resentment. At the same time, Harun's fundamentally more

optimistic imagination of a human society without religion is perhaps his most meaningful departure from Meursault's worldview. Religion thus illuminates the similarities and differences between these two central characters.

JUSTICE AND RETRIBUTION

A reimagining of Albert Camus's absurdist novel *The Stranger*, *The Meursault Investigation* centers around two parallel crimes—the murder of a young Algerian man, Musa, by a Frenchman named Meursault, and the murder of another Frenchman committed by Musa's brother, Harun, years later in retribution. Harun's life is dominated by his desire to avenge Musa's death, but he also feels a deep sense of remorse for his own crime. In both cases, justice is unattainable either through personal retribution or formal governmental retribution. Ultimately, the novel argues that the only meaningful punishment for taking a life comes from the effect on the murderer's existence.

Despite their unceasing efforts, Harun and Mama are unable to achieve justice or closure after Musa's death. Not only does Meursault evade punishment, he uses his murder to jumpstart his literary career; this injustice is a source of lifelong outrage for Harun. Mama's attempts to have the crime formally recognized are fruitless; at the time of the murder, French authorities won't even produce Musa's body for a proper Muslim burial, much less punish his murderer. Similarly, the Algerian regimes that emerges after Independence won't classify Musa as a martyr, denying Mama both the psychological closure she might derive from this classification and the pension which would alleviate the poverty she's suffered since Musa's death. Accordingly, Mama turns to personal retribution. At the end of the war for independence, she induces Harun to shoot Joseph, a Frenchman and friend of her employers. This attempt to punish Meursault by proxy is partially successful, as Mama lives out the rest of her life in comparative tranquility, but it comes at the cost of making her remaining son a murderer.

Even though Harun is rightly angry about his brother's death, he begins to regret and crave justice for his own act of retribution almost as soon as he commits it. Although he buries the body, he doesn't deny the murder and doesn't protest when the authorities jail him shortly afterwards. During his short stint in jail, Harun is not so much worried about punishment as disgusted by the bureaucratic response of the police, who are annoyed that he killed the Frenchman of his own accord, rather than alongside resistance fighters during the war for independence. Harun's interaction with the authorities shows that just as Meursault was only able to conceive of Musa's death within the context of his own existential struggles, the new regime is unconcerned with pursuing justice for Joseph's death and only cares about it in that it contravenes their bureaucratic structures. Harun's anger with the police shows his refusal to slide into this casual indifference to human life.

Although Harun is never punished for shooting Joseph, he says that he has suffered psychologically ever since the murder. He feels that "life is no longer sacred in my eyes," and all his relationships with others are tainted by "the knowledge that life reposes on nothing solid." Harun has paid for his crime in his inability to form meaningful relationships with others and his long solitude. This is the most significant punishment that any of the novel's characters suffer after committing a crime.

Ultimately, the novel argues that neither personal or social retribution can truly compensate for the loss of a human life. Even though the circumstances and the cover-up of Musa's death stem from the social injustices of colonialism, its ramifications are ultimately beyond the power of human social institutions to resolve.

GRIEF AND FAMILY LIFE

A retelling of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, *The Meursault Investigation* depicts an Algerian family irrevocably broken by the callous murder of the older son, Musa, by a Frenchman named Meursault. Although Harun is very young when Musa dies, his life is forever transformed both by grief and by the instability and dysfunction that characterize Mama afterwards. In fact, while Harun and Mama have to support each other economically and emotionally, grief and anger poison their relationship, making it impossible to truly love each other. By unsentimentally portraying Harun's deteriorating relationship with his mother, the novel shows how traumatic events, even within initially loving families, expose fault lines and permanently undermine interpersonal relationships.

His father's abandonment and Musa's murder are the dominant events in Harun's young life. Although Harun doesn't even remember his father, his last name, translating as "son of the watchman," derives from his father's profession, ensuring that he's always cognizant of his father even though he's abdicated any responsibility for the family. After his father's disappearance, Musa becomes both an economic provider and a paternal figure, so his death means that Harun loses not only a brother but, for the second time, his father. His frequent returns, throughout his monologue, to the moment of the murder and its aftermath make clear its centrality to his childhood and his conception of himself as an adult.

The impact of Musa's death is exacerbated by Mama's emotional collapse after the murder. Unable to manage her grief and with no family or friends to support her, she leans on Harun, making him privy to her feelings and to her new economic insecurity to an extent that is unhealthy for a young child. Essentially, Harun has to become the "man of the family" before he is remotely ready; this circumstance means that his lost father and brother are always present in his mind, even

while the harsh reality of his life constantly highlights their actual absence.

Mama's grief over Musa's death makes her unable to parent well or to truly love her remaining son. Mama clearly resents Harun for surviving her elder son, even though such a feeling is illogical. Harun says she ignores his physical needs while constantly talking about Musa and behaving as if he might come home at any moment. Mama's uncontrollable grief means that Harun's childhood is not only materially but psychologically precarious. Mama also resents that Harun, as a child, is unable to provide the resentment or the explanations she craves. One of the only moments in which she displays affection is when Harun is finally able to read and translate the newspaper clippings describing Musa's death; similarly, after he shoots Joseph, the Frenchman—avenging Musa's death in Mama's eyes—she softens towards him, promising that when he gets out of jail she will find him a wife.

Mama's behavior means that Harun is torn between the desire to please her and consuming resentment of her inability to truly love him. Even as an adult, Harun is never able to extricate himself from her. During the fight for independence from France, he doesn't join the army, possibly out of reluctance to leave Mama on her own. Killing Joseph at her behest, he links himself to her more closely through their shared participation in a crime. At the same time, Harun is often openly hostile towards Mama. He describes her as "controlling" and ascribes sinister intentions to her behavior that probably don't exist; he even blames her for the demise of his affair with Meriem, even though Meriem clearly decided to leave him. While Harun's grief stems from love for Musa, it ultimately prevents him from having a loving relationship with his mother or loving memories of his brother. At one point, Harun says that "Musa and Mama" have killed him spiritually; he's not imputing malicious intentions to his family but showing the extent to which his and Mama's inability to process their grief has destroyed his life.

While grief draws Harun and Mama closer together, forcing them to depend on each other and keeping them from forming meaningful relationships with other people, it also prevents their relationship from being positive or healthy. In the novel's world, traumatic events like Musa's murder result in emotional paralysis and deterioration of the family members who are left alive.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

NAMES

In *The Meursault Investigation*, names are usually freighted with additional meaning. Most names derive from the Bible, and shed some light on the characters' relationships with one another. For example, Musa and Harun refer respectively to Moses and Aaron, the two famous brothers from the book of Exodus. While Moses is the hero, who saves his people from enslavement, he relies on Aaron to act as his spokesman, mediating his interactions with the world. Their relationship mirrors the power dynamics between Musa and Harun, who sees his brother as a larger-than-life, heroic martyr. Harun adores his brother and resents living in the shadow of his death, so he takes some comfort in the power he derives by being the only person who can speak to Musa. Meriem translates to Miriam, Moses' sister who saves his life as a baby; this represents her emotional kinship to Harun, but also suggests that their relationship is one of guidance and affection, rather than love. Of course, Joseph derives from the biblical character who is betrayed by his brothers; this mirrors his betrayal by Harun and suggests that, despite differences in race and class, the men are more like brothers than strangers. Meursault's name translates to "the messenger" in Arabic. This reflects Harun's admiration for his literary genius, but it's also ironic—Harun has devoted his life to refuting the narrative Meursault has put forth about his brother.

Moreover, granting or withholding a name is always a sign of power. Throughout the novel, Harun is incensed that in his novel Meursault refers to Musa exclusively as "the Arab." Denying Musa a name deprives him of his essential humanity in Meursault's narrative. It's this detail that makes it possible for Meursault to murder Musa without guilt, shame, or punishment. One of the novel's major concerns is language's ability to define and give value to narratives; Meursault's literary treatment of Musa lies at the center of this problem, since it reflects the ability of abstract language to cause tangible harm.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Other Press edition of *The Meursault Investigation* published in 2015.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Well, the original guy was such a good storyteller, he managed to make people forget his crime, whereas the other one was a poor illiterate God created apparently for the sole purpose of taking a bullet and returning to dust – an anonymous person who didn't even have the time to be given a name.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Musa, Meursault

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In one of the novel's first passages, Harun tries to explain Musa's narrative the way Meursault has portrayed it in his own book (which is analogous to Albert Camus's *The Stranger*). His evident use of sarcasm—referring bitterly to his beloved brother as an "illiterate"—shows his distaste for this narrative. At the same time, he does sum up Meursault's book aptly. The key issue here is that, based on his education, talent, and race, Meursault deems himself more worthy of respect and examination than a man who is poor, uneducated, and part of an oppressed and marginalized group. Throughout the rest of the novel, Harun will attempt to reverse this imbalance, imbuing Musa's narrative with value and pathos, while questioning the worth of a revered author. At the same time, Harun's grudging admiration for Meursault will become increasingly apparent as the novel unfolds, especially as he realizes how many characteristics he shares with his nemesis.

> Therefore I'm going to do what was done in this country after Independence: I'm going to take the stones from the old houses the colonists left behind, remove them one by one, and build my own house, my own language. The murderer's words and expressions are my *unclaimed goods*. Besides, the country's littered with words that don't belong to anyone anymore.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

In this beautiful metaphor, Harun compares his own narrative endeavor to the process of reconstructing Algeria after Independence. This analogy highlights the connection between the course of Harun's life (and Musa's death) and the downfall of colonialism in Algeria. It's important to note that Harun considers language essentially mobile—it's less a static entity than a collection of materials which anyone can use for his own purpose. Implicitly, Harun is arguing that language should not just be a tool of the elite—like Meursault—to reinforce their own narratives but something that encourages marginalized people like him to put forth their own. At the same time, by emphasizing the fluidity of language Harun suggests that it's not inherently trustworthy or indicative of truth.

> And that's where you go wrong, you and all your predecessors. The absurd is what my brother and I carry on our backs or in the bowels of our land, not what the other was or did.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), The Interlocutor, Meursault, Musa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In this aside, Harun addresses the interlocutor, the young student who is interested in hearing his story. However, because the interlocutor is so vaguely characterized, and because Harun uses the second person, it feels like he's addressing the reader directly; the novel frequently uses this technique to make the reader feel both connected to the narrative and unsettled by it. It's important that Harun references the "absurd"—Albert Camus developed a philosophy called Absurdism, which argues that life is essentially meaningless, and the human desire to find meaning is inherently futile and senseless. In his novel *The Stranger*, Meursault defends his murder of "the Arab" through this philosophy. Here, Harun turns Meursault's justification on its head—he argues that the real "absurdity" stems not from his existential cogitations but from the unjust colonial regime that has warped his family life and the fabric of his country. In *The Stranger*, Absurdism permits the oppression of Arab Algerians; in Daoud's novel, it allows Harun to speak out against that oppression.

> For centuries, the settler increases his fortune, giving names to whatever he appropriates and taking them away from whatever makes him feel uncomfortable. If he calls my brother "the Arab," it's so he can kill him the way one kills time, by strolling around aimlessly.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Musa, Meursault

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harun discusses both the effects of colonialism on Algerian society and the extent to which language enables colonialism. As Harun points out, the "increase" in the settler's prosperity is directly dependent on the exploitation of Algerian Arabs such as Mama, who must do grueling work as a maid to a family of French settlers. Moreover, settlers rationalize colonialism and excuse themselves from perpetuating injustice using language to exalt things they value (like their own interests) and erase the unsavory things they'd rather forget about (like the people who they've disenfranchised). While it's easy to regard language as an entirely abstract concept, Harun shows here that it has tangible effects on the political landscape.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Who, me? Nostalgic for French Algeria? No! You haven't understood a word I've said. I was just trying to tell you that back then, we Arabs gave the impression that we were waiting, not going around in circles like today.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), The Interlocutor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harun expresses his ambivalence about Algeria's progress after Independence. Harun has never been gripped by the patriotic fervor or optimism that gripped the country as colonial rule collapsed. He even avoided joining the liberation army, which was practically mandatory for young men—a decision that rendered him extremely unpopular in his community. Now, he feels that the fact of Independence is insufficient to erase the damage wrought by centuries of colonial rule, and that the government is given to stagnancy and circular thinking—a tendency he begins observe during his brief arrest for Joseph's murder. His dissatisfaction with Algerian society is linked to his anxiety over the rise of fundamentalist Islam, which is becoming more and more central to society and which he views as detrimental. However, as Harun reminds the interlocutor here, his criticisms aren't a sign of longing for the old days. If anything, he criticizes Algeria in order to highlight the extent to which colonialism can fracture a society, decades after its official end.

❝ People in the neighborhood showed my mother his picture in the newspaper, but for us he was the spitting image of all the colonists who'd grown fat on so many stolen harvests. There was nothing special about him [...] and his features were instantly forgettable, easy to confuse with those of all his kind.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Meursault, Mama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Reflecting on Musa's death (the predominant event of his childhood), Harun especially remembers the difficulty in acquiring any information about the murderer. While Mama can look at Meursault's picture in the newspaper, she doesn't even know what the article says because she can't read French; this frustration will inspire Harun's later determination to learn French, and it suggests that Harun's eventual mastery of the Western language will enable him to learn more about the murder, both through newspaper articles and Meursault's own novel. One of the things that renders Algerians helpless against colonialism is the inaccessibility of the language in which the settlers operate, so learning French will be a major moment of empowerment for Harun.

Moreover, it's important that Harun and Mama come to view Meursault in much the way that he describes Musa in his own novel—a caricature of a feared and hated group, without a name or a character. This inability to perceive humanity not only permits Musa's murder, but leads to Harun's own shooting of Joseph later in the novel, an act that links him to Meursault even as it's an act of revenge against him.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Consequently, my mother imposed on me a strict duty of reincarnation. For instance, as soon as I grew a little, she made me wear my dead brother's clothes, even though they were still too big for me [...] I was forbidden to wander away from her, to walk by myself, to sleep in unknown places, and, while we were still in Algiers, to venture anywhere near the beach.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Musa, Mama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harun describes his blighted childhood in the wake of Musa's death. While life for the family was never easy—Harun's father has long abandoned them, and Musa must support his brother and mother by grueling labor at the port—Mama's steep emotional decline after the murder means that Harun's life is marked by confusion and loneliness. Rather than valuing Harun for his own sake, Mama uses him as an instrument to remind herself of Musa and fuel her obsession with her son's death. It's understandable that Mama suffers mental trauma after losing the son who was both her economic and emotional support. However, her behavior during these years, and her obliviousness to Harun's many attempts to please her, makes Harun feel overshadowed by Musa and worthless compared to him. Moreover, he develops feelings of resentment towards Mama that will never fade, even during adulthood. Through Harun and Mama's ever-worsening relationship, Daoud shows how traumatic episodes can fracture even initially loving families.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Well, yes! I remember that, I remember feeling a strange jubilation at seeing her really suffering for once. To prove my existence, I had to disappoint her. It was like fate. That tie bound us together deeper than death.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Mama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

After Musa's death, Mama suffers an emotional breakdown and becomes oblivious to Harun's needs; at times, she even seems to blame Harun for surviving his elder brother. Of course, Harun deeply resents her behavior and acts out in protest, hiding staple foods like flour in order to watch Mama search for them frantically. Episodes like this demonstrate how their relationship is now characterized not by the emotional support they both need but by cruelty, both intentional (Harun's petty misdeeds) and unintentional (Mama's inability to care for her remaining son due to her tenuous mental state). However, in this passage Harun describes this unhealthy relationship not as something caused by Musa's death but as a matter of "fate"—in this sense, he sees the decline of family unity as the inevitable consequence of growing up and "proving" his independence. Here, Harun evokes a deep cynicism about the value of family, in particular th mother-son bond.

❝ *Arab*. I never felt Arab, you know. Arab-ness is like Negro-ness, which only exists in the white man's eyes. In our neighborhood, in our world, we were Muslims, we had given names, faces, and habits. Period. The others were "the strangers," the *roumis* God brought here to put us to the test, but whose days were numbered anyway [...].

Related Characters: Harun (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harun reflects on the labels the French applied to the Algerians, and vice versa. Harun feels that "Arab" is an essentially constructed term, used by white settlers to erase the differences between the various cultures that comprise the Middle East. However, just as the French are unable or unwilling to differentiate between different kinds of Arabs, Harun and his neighbors can't fully conceive of the "roumis" as possessing "habits" and complex inner lives as they do. This passage shows that the detrimental effects of colonialism cut both ways, preventing both colonizers and colonized from recognizing each other's humanity. Elsewhere, Harun protests Meursault's dismissal of Musa as a nameless "Arab," and argues that this indifference is the reason for his murder. By comparing French indifference towards Arabs to Muslim distrust of "roumis," Harun hints that this will be at the root of his later murder of Joseph.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ I realized very young that among all those who nattered on about my condition, whether angels, gods, devils, or books, I was the only one who knew the sorrow and obligation of death, work, and sickness. I alone pay the electric bill, I alone will be eaten by worms in the end. So get lost!

Related Characters: Harun (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harun takes a break from reminiscing on his childhood to express his frustration with the neighbors and priests who urge him to become more religious. In this passage, Harun emphasizes his fundamental isolation—even though experiences like paying bills and fearing death are universal, only he understands their importance relative to his own life—and protests against what he considers the false unity imposed by religion. Even though his worldview seems bleak, and may in fact hinder him from relationships with others, it provides satisfaction and tranquility to Harun. Moreover, by valuing and celebrating individuality above all else (even spiritual comfort), Harun is actually making a spirited defense of the human experience. While Harun's loathing of religion links him to Meursault, this underlying optimism ultimately separates him from his nemesis.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ At the moment when I committed my crime, I felt a door somewhere was definitively closing on me. I concluded that I had been condemned – and for that, I'd needed neither judge nor God nor the charade of a trial. Only myself.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Joseph / The Frenchman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After he kills Joseph in the middle of the night, Harun mechanically buries the body and goes to sleep; however, in the morning he starts to think about the moral repercussions of his crime. Because the War of Independence has disempowered French settlers and stoked hostility against them, Harun knows he won't be punished for his crime, just as political circumstances ensured that Meursault could sidestep jail after murdering Musa. However, Harun reflects that he doesn't need to undergo trial or fear God's judgment in order to understand the magnitude of his action and punish himself for it.

This passage emphasizes Harun and Mama's differing concepts of justice and retribution. After Musa's death, Mama agitates unsuccessfully for a police investigation, and eventually compels Harun to kill Joseph, avenging Musa's murder with the death of another Frenchman. Even though he participates in Mama's scheme, Harun has no faith in formal or vigilante methods of justice. The only meaningful atonement for a crime comes through private reflection and self-punishment of the sort that he will impose on himself in the years after this murder.

❝ I killed a man, and since then, life is no longer sacred in my eyes. After what I did, the body of every woman I met quickly lost its sensuality, its possibility of giving me an illusion of the absolute. Every surge of desire was accompanied by the knowledge that life reposes on nothing solid.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Joseph / The Frenchman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Just as Meursault is never punished for killing Musa, Harun is never seriously called to account for murdering Joseph. However, despite his legal impunity, and despite often asserting that he doesn't feel particularly guilty over Joseph's death, Harun's life is blighted by the act of becoming a murderer. Harun's true punishment is his inability to venerate human life and, consequently, his inability to form meaningful relationships with others. While Harun takes his action seriously, his lack of concern for Joseph as an individual is troubling. Harun frequently argues that Meursault should feel guilty not just because he committed a murder but because Musa was inherently valuable as an individual; however, he doesn't hold himself to the same standard in respecting Joseph's humanity, possibly because doing so would be too much for his conscience to bear.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ He started stammering, declaring that killing and making war were not the same thing, that we weren't murderers but liberators, that nobody had given me orders to kill that Frenchman, and that I should have done it *before*.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Joseph / The Frenchman , The Officer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Some days after he murders Joseph, Harun is ordered to report to the town hall and is then thrown in jail. However, as he finds out when he speaks with the army officer in charge, he's in trouble not for murdering a Frenchman but for doing so outside the official auspices of the war effort. In this passage, the officer blusters passionately about the conventional distinctions that pardon murders committed during war and condemn those that occur in peacetime. The sarcastic tone in which Daoud renders this speech argues that such distinctions are hazy—after all, a murder is a murder, and Harun would face the same moral qualms about taking a life no matter when he committed it. The officer's indifference to these moral concerns and obsession with bureaucratic rules reinforces Harun's belief that the formal justice system isn't a valid arbiter of crime and can't deliver any meaningful retribution for misdeeds. For Harun, the guilt and despair he feels as a result of becoming a murderer is more lasting than any punishment the army does or doesn't deliver.

They were going to set me free without explanation, whereas I wanted to be sentenced. I wanted to be relieved of the heavy shadow that was turning my life into darkness.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Joseph / The Frenchman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

After Harun kills Joseph he is jailed briefly by the new Algerian army, which has just fought for independence from French rule; however, he knows that they won't seriously punish him for murdering one of their own enemies. After observing the absurd bureaucracy of the officer in charge and other soldiers, Harun has become completely disillusioned with the army's ability to resolve moral concerns. At the same time, he longs for some external body to make judgment and even impose a punishment for his misdeed, so that he can stop grappling with it inwardly. The futility of this desire in Harun's specific case reflects the larger futility of expecting formal systems of justice to answer moral questions that can only be approached through individual reflection.

The gratuitousness of Musa's death was unconscionable. And now my revenge had just been struck down to the same level of insignificance!

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Joseph / The Frenchman , Musa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harun continues to reflect on response of the army—the only ruling body in the fragile political period after Independence—to his admission that he has killed Joseph, a Frenchman. The army is unwilling to prosecute or punish the crime because the victim is a member of a group it despises and has been fighting for years. In fact, it's response is extremely similar to the French colonial government's indifference to Musa's death, because he was a member of the marginalized Algerian population. It's important to note that Harun isn't objecting to the government because he feels Joseph deserves some sort of justice; rather, he seems to feel that Musa's death will be truly avenged only if the government takes his retribution seriously. As the novel progresses, Harun will become less concerned with public recognition of Musa's tragedy, coming to believe that true retribution is impossible to achieve through any means, and true remorse can only be felt individually, not imposed by the justice system.

Chapter 12 Quotes

I know that if Musa hadn't killed me – actually, it was Musa, Mama, and your hero, those are my three murderers – I would have had a better life, at peace with my language on a little patch of land somewhere in this country, but that wasn't my destiny.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Meursault, Mama, Musa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harun reflects on the course of his life after the end of his brief affair with Meriem. Harun saw Meriem as a possible escape from the tangle of duty, resentment, and grief that has bound him to Mama and Musa's memory; when Meriem cuts off their correspondence, Harun becomes even more cognizant of these burdens. Harun's linkage of Meursault ("your hero") to his own family members shows how immediately Meursault's murder caused the breakdown of Harun's family, causing it to become a source of stress for him, rather than support. Moreover, by describing himself as having been murdered, Harun evokes a sense of his own powerlessness (just as Musa was powerless before his killer). As the only one capable of telling their shared story, Harun exerts a kind of power over his dead brother; however, Musa's memory seems to exercise a reverse power over Harun, preventing him from moving on with his life.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ I learned to read, not because I wanted to talk like the others but because I wanted to find a murderer, though I didn't admit that to myself in the beginning.

Related Characters: Musa (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is part of Harun's description of his childhood in Hadjout. Despite his poverty, Harun eventually gains admission to a French school, where he receives a Western education. Mama views his education as having one purpose: enabling him to acquire more information about Musa's death, both by reading the newspaper articles that have been heretofore illegible, and by interacting with the colonial authorities in their own language. At first, Harun sees the French language as a tool to explore and preserve Musa's memory; however, it proves to be just as much a tool of personal empowerment. Learning French allows Harun to eventually pursue a professional career in land administration, liberating him from the poverty of his youth and providing some much-needed distance from Mama. Moreover, while his mastery of French doesn't allow him to punish Meursault, it shows him the power of language and allows him to put forth his own narrative; in a novel where storytelling is so important, this is just as meaningful an action as physically punishing his enemy.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ "Everything was written!" Mama blurted out, and I was surprised by the involuntary aptness of her words. *Written*, yes, but in the form of a book, and not by some God. Did we feel ashamed of our stupidity? Did we contain and irrepressible urge to laugh like foods, us, the ridiculous pair stationed in the wings of a masterpiece we didn't even know existed?

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Meriem, Mama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

For years, Harun and Mama have been unsuccessfully trying to find out details and discover some meaning in Musa's death—so when they discover that his murderer wrote a novel about it, they are astonished. The revelation of the book shows Meursault's demeaning control over Musa's death—not only has he evaded punishment, he's been able to craft a sympathetic public image, while Mama and Harun haven't been able to achieve any public recognition of their grief. It also shows the extent to which language gives Meursault this power – he's able to promote his own narrative both because he's a brilliant writer and because he works in French, the language of a dominant Western power. At the same time, Harun's reaction questions the power of storytelling—he acknowledges that Meursault's narrative isn't going to provide all the answers they want—as the work of man and not a "god," it's far from objective. At the same time that Harun begins to realize the power that language can have, he emphasizes the fragility and ambiguity inherent in all stories.

❝ At one and the same time, I felt insulted and revealed to myself. I spent the whole night reading that book. My heart was pounding, I was about to suffocate, it was like reading a book written by God himself. A veritable shock, that's what it was. Everything was there except the essential thing: Musa's name.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Meursault, Musa

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

After Meriem alerts Harun to the existence of Meursault's book, he stays up all night reading her copy. This is one of the most profound aesthetic experiences in Harun's life, as he contemplates language deployed by a masterful writer. It also speaks to him because, as the novel makes more and more clear, Harun and Meursault are uncannily similar—both men are grappling with having committed murders and with feeling apathetic and distanced from their societies. At the same time, Meursault's dismissal of Musa (shown by his refusal to use his name) is more upsetting to Harun than deliberate cruelty. He immediately understands that Meursault's narrative doesn't provide the recognition he and Mama have been craving, but obscures Musa's death further.

❝ I was looking for traces of my brother in the book, and what I found there instead was my own reflection, I discovered I was practically the murderer's double. I finally came to the last lines in the book: "...had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me cries of hate."

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Musa, Meursault

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Ever since Musa's death, Harun has been treated, and has considered himself, a remnant of his brother. Most of his major experiences, from Mama's insistence that he wear Musa's clothes to his strong sense of duty in avenging Musa's death, reinforces this idea. However, when reading the story of Musa's murder, he feels much greater kinship with the murderer than his own brother. Even though Harun spends the rest of his life trying to oppose Meursault's book, in a way it helps him come into his own identity for the first time.

Also important is Harun's fascination with the last passage, in which Meursault wishes for many people to watch his execution. This corresponds to Harun's desire to be punished for his own murder, and the final lines of his own book, where he wishes for "spectators full of hate" at his own execution. These lines convey not only Harun's complete indifference to the society in which he lives, but his strange emotional connection to his enemy, Meursault.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ It shocks me, this disproportion between my insignificance and the vastness of the cosmos. I often think there must be something all the same, something in the middle between my triviality and the universe!

Related Characters: Harun (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

In the last chapter, Harun returns to his earlier reflections on religion, and wonders about the existence of a divine entity. On the one hand, Harun rejects all religious dogma as a trite and hypocritical attempt to gloss over the problems of the real world, rather than confronting them. Rather than feeling connected to God through Islam, he feels extremely conscious as his position as an "insignificant" individual in a random universe. While this worldview seems bleak, Harun derives satisfaction from it – contemplating his place in the immensity of the universe, he feels not fear but a rare sense of wonder. In fact, it's when thinking about himself outside the parameters of religion that he feels it's possible for "something in the middle," in other words some divine entity, to exist. Harun's dislike of religion is not a rejection of spirituality but an insistence on individual contemplation rather than formal dogma.

❝ I often look out at it from my window, and I loathe its architecture, the big finger pointed at the sky, the concrete still gaping. I also loathe the imam, who looks at his flock as if he's the steward of the kingdom.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harun rails against the mosque that he can see from his balcony. Rather than seeing it as an emblem of spirituality and purity, he emphasizes its ugliness and lack of congruity with the natural world. He also describes the imam as self-important, more concerned with his role in the world than in helping people connect to God. This is a shocking passage because Harun speaks extremely disrespectfully about an institution beloved by the rest of his society. His thoughts link him to Meursault, who also despises religion and who alienates those around him by publicly railing against it. However, it's important to keep in mind that Meursault dislikes religion because it glosses over what he thinks is the ultimate meaninglessness of life. On the contrary, Harun believes that religion blinds people to spiritual meaning that would be accessible to them if they concentrated on the value of lived experience, rather and becoming preoccupied with the theoretical afterlife.

❝ The Arab's the Arab, God's God. No name, no initials. Blue overalls and blue sky. Two unknown persons on an endless beach. Which is truer? An intimate question. It's up to you to decide.

Related Characters: Harun (speaker), Musa

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Harun concludes his narrative with this oblique passage, bringing the focus back to the beach where Musa's death occurred and the course of Harun's life was altered forever. After insisting on the importance of Musa's name throughout the novel, he refers to him here as "the Arab," just as Meursault does. However, while Meursault uses the phrase as a dismissive gesture, Harun uses it to suggest that Musa's story isn't just of individual importance; rather, Musa is a sort of Arab "Everyman," whose fate represents the lives of all Algerians under colonial occupation.

As the novel progresses, Harun has described the inability of various governments to provide justice or retribution for Musa's death. Now, he says that, whether or not "God" exists, he won't do so either. Saying that "it's up to you," he leaves the reader with the ultimate power of judgment. This is a final reminder that, in all serious moral questions, objective conclusions are impossible; one must approach them through personal reflection while remaining conscious of one's essential subjectivity, as Harun is now.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Harun opens his story by saying that "Mama's still alive today." She could tell many stories, but she chose not to. On the other hand, Harun has "rehashed this story" so much that sometimes he can't remember it.

Harun begins his narrative by meditating on the concept of storytelling. Although he will spend the rest of the book trying to construct his own narrative, his assertion that Mama chooses not to talk suggests the ultimate futility of storytelling.

Harun says that the story in question is more than fifty years old. People still talk about it, but they only care about one of the men involved, although there were two. The second man is left out because first is such a good writer he managed to make everyone like him and forget his flaws, "whereas the other one was a poor illiterate God created apparently for the sole purpose of taking a bullet and returning to dust."

Here, Harun articulates one of his central grievances: the fact that Meursault's novel valorizes his own philosophical crisis while demonstrating complete indifference to the man he murders. Harun is especially angry that this narrative has gained so much traction with the reading public—he's not just criticizing Meursault but everyone who has consumed his work.

The forgotten man was Harun's brother (Musa). Nothing is left of him except Harun, who speaks in his place and waits in this bar for "condolences no one's ever going to offer." He's even learned to speak French in order to speak in place of his brother.

Here, Harun evinces a sense of strong connection to his brother. At the same time, he implicitly hints at the power he holds over Musa, in that as the surviving brother he is the only one who can speak for them both.

Harun knows that he can't "imitate" the murderer because Meursault is a brilliant writer with a masterful command of his own language. Instead, Harun will do "what was done in this country after Independence": he will recycle the stones from the colonists' houses to build "my own house" and his own language. Since the murderer has left Algeria behind, Harun can claim his words for himself. In any case, Algeria is filled with "words that don't belong to anyone anymore," on old store signs and books.

As the novel progresses, Harun's grudging admiration for, and even personal similarity to, Meursault will become increasingly evident. However, he insists that Algerians like him must develop their own narrative abilities to combat the ideas that Meursault has brilliantly put forth, just as they have changed the country's infrastructure and language since Independence.

Harun says he knows his interlocutor has questions, but asks him to pay attention to his story first. This is not an ordinary story but one that begins at the end and eventually arrives at the beginning. Harun knows the interlocutor has already read Meursault's novel, whose words are like "precious stones." The novel's world is "clean, clear, exact," marked by precise language. The only incongruous element is the Arabs who occasionally appear, seeming like "blurred incongruous objects."

Here, Harun reveals for the first time that he's addressing a specific person. The presence of the interlocutor, combined with his vague and undefined character, makes it seem as if Harun is addressing the reader directly, drawing the reader more closely into the narrative and making Harun's narrative seem immediate and spontaneous, rather than a previously concocted speech.

It seems to Harun that the murderer, Meursault, must have been tired of living in "a country that wanted nothing to do with him." In this context, his murder is more like "the act of a disappointed lover."

In this aside, Harun ties Meursault's act directly to the colonial rule in place over Algeria at the time.

Harun has also read the novel and absorbed its meaning. The protagonist has "a man's **name**," while Harun's brother (Musa) had "the name of an incident." The author could have named him "Two P.M." or any other meaningless phrase. In Arabic, the word for two is Zujj. Actually, this seems like a good name for Harun, since it suggests a pair of brothers, "him and me."

Names are of paramount importance throughout the novel—Harun argues that giving or denying names is a way to valorize or devalue different people, places, and concepts. In this way, abstract language helps the French effect tangible domination over colonial territories like Algeria and dehumanize its people.


Harun's brother, Musa, is "a brief Arab," who lived only for two hours one afternoon and "has died incessantly for seventy years." In a way, the existence of the novel means that he's "kept under glass," replaying his death again and again many decades later.

Although Harun will later discuss Musa's life in detail, here he renders his brother as he appears in Meursault's narrative—only important during his brief appearance prior to his murder, and lacking any concrete character.


Whenever Harun thinks about the novel, he gets angry. Its author, Meursault, gets to discuss everything he lost, from his mother to his body to his girlfriend's body to his belief in God. He's been able to write about Musa's murder without paying any attention to him as a person.

One of Harun's primary concerns is that Meursault treats Musa's murder as one more milestone in his own existential crisis. Instead, Harun will reveal Musa's relationship with his own mother, brother, and even girlfriend, arguing that his death should be discussed on those terms, rather than in relation to Meursault.


Harun finds it stunning that even after Independence, no one tried to figure out the story behind Meursault's victim or locate his family. Everyone was too busy admiring Meursault's brilliant writing and sympathizing with his existential crisis. In fact, no one knows anything about Musa.

The fact that Harun has been unable to achieve justice for Musa's death even after Independence reflects Harun's point that ending colonial rule isn't a cure-all for all the problems the French settlers have created in Algeria.


Harun wants to tell the story of his brother, Musa. He tells his interlocutor that by coming into the bar, he has "opened a bag." He asks the interlocutor to take out his copy of Meursault's book and read the first page out loud.

Meursault's book is analogous to the French author Albert Camus's novel The Stranger, in which the protagonist, Meursault, murders an unnamed Algerian man. Making Meursault into a character in his own story, Daoud examines this classic novel through a postcolonial lens.


After the interlocutor has finished reading, Harun explains the passage. After Meursault's mother died, he "falls into idleness and absurdity," which he thinks he can cure by killing someone at random. From the beginning, Meursault is "looking" for Musa; he seeks him out "not so much as to meet him as to never have to." Harun thinks that Meursault has killed Musa not as much by shooting him but by writing about his death in such a dismissive manner and eliminating his **name** from the story.

In Harun's opinion, Meursault has "used" Musa twice—he kills him as part of his philosophical crisis, and he later writes about him in order to achieve literary success and fame. It's important that Meursault's linguistic erasure of Musa's name coincides with his actual act of murder—this shows that language is not just an abstract concept but has tangible effects on human life.

Harun sketches out Meursault's story for the interlocutor. Meursault kills an Arab who, in his novel, apparently lacks a **name**. Then he explains that his murder is "the fault of a God who doesn't exist," and he committed it as part of an existential crisis, and also because he had gotten sunstroke on the hot beach. Through these reasons, he's able to escape the crime unpunished; the entire world has conspired with him to hush up the crime and forget about the victim. Meanwhile, Musa had no say in his death or its subsequent portrayal.

Even though Meursault openly murdered Musa, he's able to get away with it due to the colonial government, which protects French settlers while exploiting the Algerian population. Here, Harun indicts not only Meursault but the entire system of colonial rule which, in Harun's eyes, the murderer has come to represent.

For Harun, "the absurd" isn't a philosophy developed by Meursault but the burden that "my brother and I carry on our backs or in the bowels of our land." Harun wants justice, even though he knows that such a desire is absurd at his old age, so long after the crime occurred. He's not referring to the justice provided by courts, but the justice that happens when "the scales are balanced." Moreover, he wants to die without feeling haunted by Musa's ghost.

Harun's phrase "the absurd" refers to Camus's philosophy of Absurdism, in which he explains that all human actions (including Meursault's murder) are ultimately meaninglessness. For Harun, the true absurdity lies not in Meursault's act of murder but the entire colonial system, which allows him to evade punishment for his crimes.

Harun exhorts the interlocutor to finish his drink. He's been waiting for someone to listen to him for years. If he can't write a book himself, at least someone else might be capable of telling his story.

Harun sees the interlocutor as a last chance to publicize his version of Musa's narrative. However, the interlocutor's motives, or the extent to which he's willing to help Harun, are unclear—this uncertainly ultimately undermines Harun's faith in the efficacy of storytelling.

Harun believes the story should be written "from right to left," starting from when "the Arab" (Musa) was still alive and continuing until his death. Harun's only reason for learning this language was to tell the story. He had to find a response to Meursault's narrative that no one else could give him.

Harun is telling his story in French, a language he has learned in order to combat the colonial government that has permitted Musa's death. At the same time, in saying the story should be written "right to left," Harun refers to Arabic script, suggesting that some aspects of his life cannot be translated out of his native language.

For Harun, learning another language eventually means letting it "own" him. Sometimes he feels that the French language thinks for him and even speaks for him. Once, Harun knew a man whose father received a French telegram no one could understand. When someone finally translated it, weeks later, he found that his mother had died and he missed the funeral. The son later learned French so that such a thing would never happen to him, and Harun acted from similar motives. Every night, it seems that Musa has risen from the grave to ask Harun why he "let this happen" to him.

Due to colonial rule, Harun grows up in a country whose official language he doesn't understand. This isn't just a matter of inconvenience but of serious disempowerment, as the anecdote of the French telegram demonstrates. It's important to understand that Harun doesn't learn French in order to advance or prosper within the colonial framework, but to defend himself and Mama from its power.

Harun tells the interlocutor that he only had one brother and no sister. Musa was older than him, and although he was thin from hunger, he was also very strong. He had "hard eyes because our ancestors lost their land." Harun has few memories of Musa, because Harun was so young when his brother died.

Harun's description of Musa suggests that he sees his brother as a metaphor for the effects of colonial rule on Algeria. However, as Musa never seemed preoccupied with colonialism during his life, this description seems more indicative of Harun's preoccupations than his brother's actual character.

Two memories are as follows: One day, Musa comes home from the port where he works as a porter and puts young Harun on his shoulders, making sounds like a motor and letting the boy pull on his ears to "steer." Another time, Musa beats Harun for some small misdeed. The next day is Eid, a day of forgiveness, so Musa is supposed to apologize to Harun, but Harun is embarrassed because he doesn't want Musa to "lower himself" by doing so, even to please God.

From these reflections, it's clear that as a child—and even now—Harun feels both affection and respect for Musa. His tenderness towards his brother contrasts with his resentment and sharp criticism of Mama. For Harun, one of the largest consequences of Musa's death is the degradation of his family life that follows.

Harun's father abandoned the family years before. Rumors often circulate as to where their father is, and when Musa hears news, he has long, furtive conversations with Mama from which Harun is excluded. He gathers that, for some reason, Musa has "a grudge" against Mama. When Musa and Mama fight, Harun worries that his older brother will disappear as well. Sometimes Musa even leaves the house at night to go drinking, but he always returns sleepy at dawn, "and so my mother would get him under her control again."

Harun believes that during his life, Musa had a strained relationship with Mama, just as Harun does now. In part, this may reflect a desire to think of his brother as similar to him; however, it also reflects Mama's desire to control her sons, which has frustrated Harun ever since his adolescence, and which he blames (perhaps unfairly) for his fraught relationship with her.

Harun's family life is centered around Musa, and Musa "revolved around our father," whom Harun has never even seen. The only thing Harun has left of his father is his surname, *Uled el-assas* or "sons of the guardian"—this is derived from their father's profession as a factory watchman.

It's clear that Musa as taken on a paternal role for both Harun and Mama, as he is the family's economic and emotional support. In this sense, his death is especially devastating because it recalls the original trauma of the father's abandonment.

To young Harun, Musa is a "simple god." When Harun first hears of his brother's death, he feels not angry but offended. It seems impossible that his all-powerful brother could die in such an ignominious way and be gone forever.

During childhood, Harun is comforted by the idea of Musa as all-powerful. However, as an adult dominated by his brother's memory, Harun will desire to extricate himself from what he perceives as his brother's posthumous power over him—even if this means complying with Mama's drastic plans for revenge.

Harun never weeps for Musa, but he stops looking up at the sky. Years later, he declines to fight in the War of Liberation, even though he's sure the Algerians will win. As soon as he learned to read and write, he realizes that while Meursault killed, his deed was "really a way of committing suicide." However, Harun came to those conclusions "before the scenery got shifted" and he "realized how alike" he is to Meursault.

Musa's death robs Harun of an essential sense of optimism and hope—he can't even become enthusiastic at the idea of liberation from the colonial system that enabled Musa's murder. Harun's reference here to the "shifting" of scenery foreshadows the murder he will eventually commit, which forms a link between him and his nemesis, Meursault.

In Harun's view, the story of the murder doesn't begin with Meursault's famous opening lines but by Musa's last comment to Mama that he'll be home earlier than usual. Harun remembers it was a calm day, without any rumors. He realizes now that just as Musa replaced their father as head of the family, Harun replaced Musa as a child requiring sustenance.

Here, Harun recalibrates Meursault's narrative, imagining it as centered around Musa. By prioritizing his own family life, he provides a powerful refutation to Meursault's dismissal of the "Arab" he kills as nameless and characterless.

In the next moment, Harun retracts this comment, saying it's a lie. In fact, "Independence only pushed people on both sides to switch roles." Before, Arabs were "ghosts" in their own country, which was occupied by the French. Now, the French only return as anxious or nostalgic tourists.

Again, Harun evinces his disillusionment with Algerian independence from colonial rule. In his mind, this transition hasn't provided a meaningful solution to the broken system of governance but just changed who is in charge.

Harun warns the interlocutor to make a note of Musa's **name**, otherwise he will stop telling the story. He says his genealogy is "pretty pathetic": he's the son of the watchman, and the brother of the Arab. In Oran, origins are very important: everyone wants to prove that their family is one of the oldest in the city, and that in comparison others are "foreigners."

Even though he says that his ancestry is unimpressive in any conventional sense, Harun still insists on his family's value by making sure Musa's name is noted down.

Oran is a city "with its legs spread open toward the sea." Harun tells the interlocutor to walk through the old neighborhoods and look at the port, which is "like an old whore, nostalgic and chatty." He says that the city was "conceived" by one of the generals who invaded during the French conquest. People want to have famous ancestors in order to "escape from the evidence."

Harun insists on dwelling—even through these grotesque metaphors—on the ways in which Algeria was shaped by French governance. In this way, he subtly emphasizes the lasting effects of colonialism, rather than pretending that they have been eradicated by the advent of Independence.

Harun's brother is named Musa, but he will always be known as "the Arab." For centuries, the settler has achieved his conquest by "giving **names** to whatever he appropriates and taking them away from whatever makes him feel uncomfortable." Once Meursault named Musa "the Arab," he could kill him without even thinking about it.

In this important passage, Harun connects Musa's individual life directly to the effects of colonialism on Algerian society. While Harun insists Musa's value as an individual, he's also cognizant that Musa's life is wrapped up with that of his country.

After Independence, Mama tried for years to have Musa classified as a martyr, in order to be awarded a small pension by the new government. She never succeeded, because it was impossible to prove the barest facts about Musa, even his existence, despite the fact that he died in a public place. It's impossible for Mama to tell the world her son's story when she can't read or write a book.

After Musa dies, Mama suffers an emotional breakdown, in part due to the police's unwillingness to provide any information or even acknowledge Musa's death. Here, it's clear that the government that succeeds the French is similarly callous and impersonal when it comes to providing closure for this trauma.

Harun often repeats Musa's **name** so it doesn't vanish. He wants the interlocutor to write in down in large letters. As they prepare to leave, Harun insists on paying the bill, and asks to know the interlocutor's name.

Harun's desire to know the interlocutor's name demonstrates that he values him as a person, not just as a listener. However, given that the name is never revealed, it seems the interlocutor doesn't play a very individualized role in Harun's narrative.

CHAPTER 2

During Harun's childhood, Mama only told him one type of story—that of Musa. Depending on Mama's mood, the stories took a different course each time. She only tells stories when the night is cold or they are short on food. In fact, she's a very good storyteller, and she can conjure up fantastic tales of combat between Musa and the foreigner, "the obese thief of sweat and land." Each time, Musa defeats him to avenge a different insult or crime.

Mama's facility as a storyteller is one thing that links him to Harun—preserving Musa's death as an embellished oral history, she's basically doing the same thing as Harun is now. Perhaps attempting to distance himself from Mama, Harun differentiates his own effort as trying to find truth, while Mama is just trying to comfort himself.

However, most of Mama's stories are devoted to remembering Musa's last day on earth. She remembers almost every detail of that day, and her storytelling transforms "a simple young man from the poorer quarters of Algiers into an invincible, long-awaited hero." Sometimes she describes prophetic dreams foretelling Musa's death, sometimes a fight with other men in the neighborhood. Harun has no idea which story is true, and at his young age he doesn't care; the only thing that matters is his "almost sensual closeness to Mama." By the next morning, each one has returned to their own separate world.

Harun's relationship with Mama is quickly breaking down after Musa's death, but language—in the process of storytelling—is the one thing that holds them together, even if Harun describes their bond as uneasily "sensual." However, Harun is also eager to characterize Mama's storytelling as essentially false and based on fantasies, while his is a clear-minded search for truth—a claim in which his frequent digressions and vacillations sometimes belie.

In fact, Harun knows nothing of what happened between Musa's departure from home in the morning and his death in the afternoon. There was no police investigation, and Harun can't even remember what he did that day.

The quotidian nature of this important day in Harun's memory contrasts with its elaborate description in Meursault's book—hinting that language doesn't always mimic or accurately reflect reality.

Harun remembers this much: in the morning, everyone in the neighborhood is going about their business. Down the street, one neighbor urinates on a wall, as is his custom. On the corner lives a Moroccan café-owner whose sons are thieves. There's also childless woman, who looks at the local boys in a "voracious" manner. The city is like a "huge geological animal," and its inhabitants are "a little collection of lice on its back." Even Mama, who is superstitious, feels nothing out of the ordinary that day. The women call to each other from their windows and do laundry. The murder happens far away, at the beach downtown.

While the daily rituals of Harun's neighbors are petty and sometimes unpleasant, they provide a realistic and concrete context for Musa's death—the thing that is missing from scanty police records and Meursault's own narrative. In a sense, Harun is attempting to rationalize Musa's death through this storytelling technique.

Thinking back on the event later, Harun believes that he detected "the smell of female rivalry" in the air, an unspoken comment between Mama and the secret girlfriend she believes that Musa has. Most of the women in the neighborhood are "sisters," who "offered the prospect of practically incestuous and not particularly passionate marriages" to men like Musa. There are a few women who dress like Europeans and move between Arab and foreign spheres; boys like Harun harass them and call them whores, but they are also intrigued by the prospect of women who can "promise the pleasures of love without the inevitability of marriage."

Given that Harun was a small child and remembers almost nothing about that day, his belief that Mama was jealous may reflect his resentment with her for interfering with his own romantic affairs as a young man. The Western-influenced women he describes here are similar to Meriem, Harun's later love interest. He sometimes blames the collapse of their affair on Mama's jealousy, even though it seems pretty clear that Meriem ended it on her own accord.

Women of this sort often cause "violent passions and hateful rivalries" such as the one Meursault describes in his book. However, his version is necessarily false; Musa could not have been fighting over his sister's honor, because he didn't even have a sister. Harun thinks that perhaps Musa had a girlfriend and wanted to save *her* honor by "teaching your hero a lesson," and thus started the altercation that led to his death. It's certainly true that working-class men had "an exaggerated, grotesque sense of honor"; after losing their land and dignity to colonization, women were the last thing left to protect.

Harun is obliquely referring to Meursault's claim (in The Stranger) that the man he kills had started an altercation over the honor of his sister, a prostitute who was involved with Meursault's friend. While firmly asserting that this claim is false, Harun is also defending Musa from the accusation, contextualizing and explaining Algerian concepts of honor rather than exoticizing them, as Meursault does in his own novel.


Mama never discussed the possibility of a girlfriend, but after Musa's murder, Harun was often treated in the neighborhood as "the heir of some recovered honor," even though he had no idea why. Moreover, Harun remembers that Musa often went out with friends and smiled proudly for no reason. He liked to show Harun his three tattoos, which read, "God is my support," "March or die," and "Be quiet." His tattoos were "the only book Musa wrote." Harun remembers them clearly, as other children remember picture books.

Harun dwells on the way each of his family members interacts with language, from Mama's storytelling as a coping mechanism to Musa's use of tattoos to express his feelings, even as their text reveals his belief that men should be tough, silent, and unwavering. In doing this, Harun gives value not just to language as used by the elite, like Meursault, but by ordinary and uneducated people like Mama and Musa.

Harun knows nothing about the woman Musa was involved with, but Harun heard Musa whisper "Zubida" in his sleep the night before his death, so Harun assumes that's her name. After Musa's death, when Mama finally decides to depart Algiers, Harun remembers a woman in a short skirt staring at them from a distance as they leave the apartment. Harun desperately wants this to be Musa's girlfriend—he can't yet read but he has already "rejected the absurdity of his death" and he needs "a story to give him a shroud." Noticing the woman, Mama makes a face and shouts a profane insult.

Even as a child, Harun is already starting to look for reasons for Musa's death—he's willing to accept the idea that his brother was fighting over a girlfriend if it spares him the thought that Meursault killed him for no reason. Coming to terms with the meaninglessness of Musa's death is something Harun will be unable to accomplish until he commits a murder himself.

After this, Harun and Mama leave Algiers for good, heading towards the agricultural town of Hadjout. The bus makes Harun nauseous, but he also feels comforted by the noise of the engine, as if it's a "father" who is leading him and Mama away from the danger and confusion of Algiers. For him and Mama, the city will always be a reminder of Musa's murder and "a place where something pure and ancient was lost."

Harun's desire to see the bus as a father is a reminder that he has lost not just a brother but a paternal figure. The thing that he has "lost" in Algiers is the relatively untroubled and secure family life he enjoyed during Musa's lifetime.

Harun wonders aloud why he has ended up in Oran, another large city. People treat the city as if "they've come here to trash and plunder it, like a foreign country"; however, no one wants to leave it because it's close to the sea and far away from the desert. He's lived here for many decades, but he always stays far away from the sea.

Harun describes Algerians in Oran as if they themselves are colonial settlers. His unspoken assertion that people always have bad intentions towards places they consider "foreign" signifies a deep cynicism about the possibility of different ethnic and national groups to interact peacefully.

In Algiers, there's a custom of calling all unknown men "Mohammed"; Harun does the same thing but substitutes his brother's **name**, Musa. It's also the name of the bartender in this bar.

Harun's desire to see Musa's name everywhere reflects his desire to see his brother alive again—in his mind, possessing a name is almost synonymous to being alive. In this sense, Meursault killed Musa even before he shot him, by taking away his name.

Harun cannot remember the street he lived on in Algiers; he is frightened of the city, which "remembers neither me nor my family." Shortly after Independence, he returned to Algiers alone, wanting to conduct his own investigation of Musa's death. As soon as he leaves the train station, he feels hot and "ridiculous," a villager lost in the large city. He immediately turns back, feeling that if he ever locates his old house, death will catch up to him and Mama again.

This extremely superstitious moment is out of character for Harun—usually he lambasts Mama and even religious people for succumbing to irrational beliefs. His feeling of waiting for punishment reflects a sense of guilt and responsibility for Musa's death, although he couldn't have done anything to prevent it.

Harun doesn't even remember the exact moment he learned of Musa's death. He only remembers grown-ups yelling and gesturing, and a long period of uncertainty before Mama herself realizes what happened. When she finally knows her son has died, she gives a loud moan that swells into "a huge mass of sound that destroyed our furniture and blew our walls apart [...] and left me all alone."

The fact that news of Musa's death reaches Mama through the neighborhood rumor mill rather than the police reflects the colonial government's indifference to the fate of Algerian citizens, and foreshadows its unwillingness to prosecute Meursault, the obvious murderer.

After he realizes what has happened, Harun starts crying, but no one pays attention to him. Mama is nowhere to be found, and the apartment is full of strangers trying to comfort her. People call him "the hero's brother," but he's hungry and confused.

The neighbors' acknowledgment of Musa's martyrdom doesn't compensate for his presence or Mama's affection—which makes Harun's current campaign for public recognition of the tragedy seem somewhat futile.

Harun has **named** not only the barman but another patron Musa as well. He says that the second Musa, an old man, was once an inspector of French education. Harun doesn't like to look at him because he's likely to come over and start telling his life story. Harun doesn't like to be around "sad people," but the bar is filled with people who are depressed and want to escape the rest of their lives. In any case, the new regime is gradually closing down all the bars in Algeria—Harun imagines jostling among other desperate customers when they're down to the last bar. He calls it "the Last Judgment."

In complaining about the "sad" people at the bar, Harun is basically describing himself—depressed older men who drink to escape their sorrows and are eager to share their woes. His diatribe here reflects a deeper self-criticism that he's unwilling to express openly. In joking about the "Last Judgment," Harun reveals his irreverence towards religion, a characteristic that will come to the foreground later in the novel.

Harun loves the city of Oran, even though he always insults it. Everyone comes here looking for something—"money, or the sea, or a heart." He's amazed that the young interlocutor has come here looking for him. He sees another customer he knows and warns the interlocutor not to turn around. This man is the "bottle ghost," and he and Harun always nod to each other but never speak.

Although the "bottle ghost" only appears at the periphery of the narrative, he's still important. Like Harun, he's another regular and solitary patron. Harun feels both contempt and pity for him—similar to the way he conceives of himself.

CHAPTER 3

Mama is so old that she looks like her own grandmother. She's living in "a kind of institution"—in other words, her own tiny house, where she's hunkered down like a piece of luggage. When Harun sees her, he imagines that she embodies "an assembly of ancestors" judging him or wanting to know if she's found a wife. Neither Harun nor his mother know how old they are—before Independence, people relied on landmark events rather than calendars to tell time.

Saying that Mama lives in an "institution," Harun compares her to Meursault's mother, who dies in a nursing home at the beginning of The Stranger. Harun's uneasy relationship with Mama is one of his closest links to Meursault, who is unable to feel sincere love for his own mother.

Harun rarely visits Mama. She spends all her time sweeping every corner of her house in Hadjout in order to erase "the secret" through which Harun made "the definitive leap into manhood." Harun spent the second half of his childhood in Hadjout before he went to Algiers to learn land administration. Both he and Mama wanted to be far away from the ocean.

Harun's reference to "the secret" is his first allusion to the murder he has committed to avenge his brother's death. He views this murder both as the event leading him to grow up and something that keeps him bound closely to Mama, just as he was in childhood.

When they leave Algiers after Musa's death, Harun and Mama stay with an uncle who treats them badly, consigning them to a shack and then eventually kicking them out. From there they move to a commercial French farm where Mama works as a maid and Harun is a chore boy.

The terrible behavior of Mama's uncle contextualizes her own despair and breakdown within her own loneliness and vulnerability. When criticizing his mother's parenting, Harun rarely acknowledges the many problems Mama grapples with.

It is a troubled time, but their problems are from "hunger," not "injustice." Epidemics and famines are frequent, and if one of Harun's playmates doesn't appear in the morning, Harun knows that he is dead. Harun is often afraid, especially of the men who come around the house at night, knowing Mama has no man to take care of her. He tries to watch over her.

Under French rule, poor Algerians are literally starving, especially on farms like this one, where they are subject to French bosses. Harun's bleak childhood in Hadjout puts the ravages of colonialism in stark relief.

After years of strategizing, Mama finds a way to improve their life in Hadjout. She finds a job as a housekeeper and "waited, with me perched on her back, for Independence." Her employers are a French family, Monsieur and Madame Larquais, who flee quickly after the war, and Mama and Harun are able to appropriate the house for themselves. The house has three rooms, some sheds, and a courtyard.

Harun treats the advent of Independence not with enthusiasm but fatalism—he often says that he knew it would come, but never seems to have looked forward to it. While Independence gives the family a house to live in, it can't bring Musa back or improve Harun's relationship with his mother.

However, in the years while Mama works for the settlers, things are very hard. Harun has to walk miles each day to find work as a farm laborer, competing with other workers to get there first—one day he's so hungry he punctures another worker's bicycle tires so that he can show up first.

Eventually, Harun escapes a life of hard labor through education—for him, the languages he learns at school are not just an means of intellectual empowerment, but of economic mobility.

Now, Mama keeps the house very dark. Harun visits every few months, drinks some coffee, and leaves without saying much to his mother. Almost nothing has changed in Hadjout except for the construction of a few new buildings, and the fact that everyone seems completely idle.

Although the government claims that Independence has transformed the country, it hasn't brought much prosperity or improvement to the impoverished places where Harun spent his childhood.

In response to an unheard question, Harun says fiercely that he's not nostalgic for French Algeria. However, before Independence, "we Arabs gave the impression that we were waiting, not going around in circles like today." The village has grown larger but has become less orderly.

Harun often claims that stagnancy, rather than progress, has gripped the country after Independence. Later, he will explain his belief that the growing religiosity of society and the government is the cause of the trend.

Harun doesn't like Hadjout, and he dreads returning there to bury Mama. It's also puzzling for another reason—Meursault's mother is also supposedly buried in Hadjout, but no one knows where, and no one has been able to find the gravestone or the old people's home he mentions in his book. It's possible that her grave was uprooted in the chaos after Independence, but it's also possible that Meursault lied about his origins in order to make himself more sympathetic to his readers.

This coincidence forms yet another link between Harun and Meursault. At the same time, Harun's almost childish obsession with the facts of Meursault's mother's whereabouts reflects a futile belief that he can move past Musa's death through logical detective work, rather than the more difficult labor of personal reflection.

Harun says that he could reveal the "secret" he and Mama have—the fact that one night in Hadjout, "the moon obliged me to finish the job your hero began in the sun." However, he decides to leave the revelation for another day; he's not sure if the interlocutor is trustworthy.

In this oblique description of his murder of Joseph, Harun describes himself as "obliged" to kill rather than doing so of his own accord. Although he claims not to feel guilty, his language suggests a desire to evade responsibility.

While Harun and Mama are still living in Algiers, Mama "convert[s] her anger" into a prolonged period of mourning that wins her sympathy and respect in the neighborhood. Because of her grief, she is allowed to go out and work without arousing suspicious of immodesty. Harun rarely sees her, since she spends most of her time wandering the city trying to investigate Musa's death.

Harun sees Mama's mourning as essentially false, something she uses in order to improve her own circumstances. His feelings seem somewhat harsh, especially in light of the fact that he's still obsessed with the murder, decades after its occurrence.

Musa's funeral doesn't take place for forty days, because the police refuse to return his body or even admit to possessing it. Not only is Musa dead, he has "vanished." Mama sees the picture of his murderer, Meursault, in the paper, but she doesn't understand anything about him personally—he's just "the spitting image of all the colonists who'd grown fat on so many stolen harvests."

Just as Meursault is unable to perceive Musa except as an "Arab" with no individual character, when Mama looks at Meursault's picture she sees the French settlers as a feared and despised entity, rather than the actual man who has killed her son. Colonialism prevents the recognition of shared humanity between different groups.

As she questions the neighbors, the police, and Musa's friends, Mama's mourning becomes "a surprising comedy, a marvelous act she put on and refined until it became a masterpiece." She wants the neighbors to sympathize with Harun, but she herself is rarely affectionate towards him. Harun feels that he is "the dead brother," while Mama is always ready for Musa to come home and claim his daily coffee. Harun feels "guilty for being alive" but also responsible for watching over his mother.

Although Harun often longs for closeness with Musa, he resents Mama's weird desire for him to actively become his brother. Mama's behavior creates an uneasy blurring between Harun and Musa's characters which, in part, prevents Harun from moving past his brother's death fully.

After forty days, the imam declares Musa drowned and carries out the proper rituals for a funeral when nobody is present. Afterwards, Harun huddles in bed while the neighbor women comfort Mama. Eventually, Mama wraps her arms around Harun, but he knows "it's Musa she wants to find there, not me."

Even in Mama's rare moments of affection, Harun is conscious of something essentially contrived in her behavior—this makes him feel lonely and worthless compared to his brother.

Mama develops strange rituals, like visiting the hammam (public bath) and the mosque as often as possible. In fact, Mama has had a hard life—she grew up outside of Algiers but had to leave her tribe to marry a man who abandoned her. Now she's "twice widowed" and reduced to working for foreigners. Harun loves her, but he's "never forgiven her" for the way she behaved towards him in his youth. At the time, he felt like she was punishing him for refusing to die like Musa.

Harun's brief explanation of Mama's difficult life—unusual for him—contrasts with his sweeping assertion that he will never forgive her. Throughout his life, Harun is torn between the desire to understand his mother and his resentment of the way she's behaved towards him.

Periodically, Mama becomes convinced that she's found Musa's body or heard his footsteps outside. Harun hates Mama's fantasies, and it's this that pushes him to learn French, a language that "could serve as a barrier" between them. Mama expresses her grief in "rich" and volatile language, but as soon as Harun is able to obtain some books and education, he learns to speak in a different way. French allows him to "organize the world with my own words."

It might seem that Harun takes to French in order to succeed within the colonial paradigm, but he actually sees it as something that gives him personal independence. Although French rule disenfranchises Harun and his family, the French language empowers him.

Harun orders the interlocutor to get another round of drinks. Returning to his tale, he explains that he eventually gained admission to a school in Hadjout, which helped him distance himself from Mama's overbearing grief. He feels fine at school or on the farms where he works, but when he returns home he feels like he's "stepping into a grave." It seems that Mama and Musa are both waiting for him and wondering why he hasn't spent the day "sharpening the knife of our family's vengeance."

This is one of Harun's first references to Mama's obsession with retribution. Harun prefers to think that this preoccupation is hers alone; however, by longing for recognition of Musa's story, Harun is also looking for a kind of justice. While retribution becomes Mama's reason for living, it makes Harun feel like he is dead.

Now, Harun is "indifferent" to the fact that his mother is still alive. She rarely speaks anymore, perhaps because there's nothing left of Musa to mourn. All Harun can remember is "the way she would crawl inside my skin" and her frequent bursts of angry passion. He offers to take the interlocutor to her funeral.

Harun's creepy offer demonstrates the dysfunction of his relationship with Mama but also his contempt of the rituals with which society attempts to cope with tragedies—especially when those rituals have religious underpinnings.

Harun remarks that it's getting dark. He hates the silence of night, because it awakens his memory. He encourages the interlocutor to have another drink, and points out the "bottle ghost," who is here again. He always sits at the other end of the bar. Harun warns the interlocutor not to turn around, lest the bottle ghost "vanish."

Again, the bottle ghost appears as an ephemeral presence at the edge of the narrative. At this point, the reasons for Harun's preoccupation with him are unclear, but the novel builds anticipation about what a possible encounter between the two might reveal.

CHAPTER 4

Since Musa's body never appeared, Mama "imposed [...] a strict duty of reincarnation" on Harun. She makes him wear Musa's old clothes even though they are too big; she forbids him to wander away from her or to go to the beach, teaching him to fear even the smallest waves. It's as if Mama wants to believe that Musa actually drowned, instead of being murdered.

Just as Harun wanted to believe that Musa died in a fight, Mama would rather think that he drowned than that someone murdered him for no reason. Both fantasies are ways to avoid recognizing how much injustice the colonial regime allows.

Mama wants Harun to be the "visible trace" of Musa, and Harun complies. Since he's forbidden to do so many things, he develops a fierce but "ambitionless" intelligence. He's often sick, and Mama takes care of him with "a practically sinful attention," chiding him for hurting himself as if he'd harmed Musa.

Harun frequently criticizes Mama for her lack of affection. When she does care for him, though, Harun suggests that she has ulterior motives for doing so, without ever elaborating on them.

In this way, Harun misses out on the fun of being young and the sexual awakening enjoyed by most adolescents. He's ashamed of his body and avoids going the public baths where people might see it. To this day he feels a constant stiffness and awkwardness that he traces to his "guilt about being alive."

Harun blames his relationship with Mama for a lack of sexual development. This foreshadows his later feeling that Mama has prevented him from having a serious relationship with Meriem.

Harun often accompanies Mama to search for clues in Algiers, following in the wake of her long robe. Mama always mixes the actual information she acquires with the events of her dreams, so nothing makes sense. She often cites the **names** of people she has heard about through neighborhood rumor, as if she can track them down to exact revenge.

Mama's fruitless investigations reveal her true powerlessness against the regime that is protecting the murderer. Her over-cautiousness towards Harun at this point reflects her cognizance that she can't effectively protect him from the colonial regime.

After Meursault's book becomes famous and relegates Mama and Harun to "oblivion," Harun often remembers their investigations and the pity with which people regarded them. One day, Mama drags Harun across the city following some "fragile lead"; eventually they arrive at the house of an old Frenchwoman. When she opens the door, Mama curses at her furiously until the old woman faints. Neighbors start shouting for the police. Mama shouts that "the sea will swallow you all!" and then runs away, followed by Harun. Later, Mama tells all the neighbors that she has found Meursault's grandmother and insulted her, but Harun doubts this woman had anything to do with Meursault.

Since Mama can't achieve retribution through formal government channels, she tries to inflict some harm on Meursault's female relatives, in order to compensate for the grief she's suffering. Throughout the novel, Mama believes that retribution can be achieved by responding to a particular crime with an equivalent act—it's this theory that gives her the idea to murder Joseph, and in fact provides her tranquility after the murder is accomplished.

One day, Mama and Harun finally walk down to the sea, "the last witness on Mama's list." She orders Harun to stay away from the water and sits down to rest. Harun looks out at the ocean, thinking about "the immensity of both the crime and the horizon." Eventually, Mama gets up, curses the sea, and leads Harun away.

Even though the sea is just the setting for Musa's murder, Mama and Harun both want to see it as an active agent, because it's the only physical evidence left over from a crime that seems totally obscured.

Besides some happy moments, Harun had "a ghost's childhood." He knows the interlocutor doesn't want to hear about his life, though—he must want to track down Musa's body or some real clues. However, Harun says that Musa's death will always remain a mystery, due to the "shockingly violent" obfuscation of circumstances in Meursault's book.

Referring to himself as a ghost, Harun implicitly makes a comparison between himself and the bottle ghost—a comparison that will bear special relevance when the two finally speak.

Sometimes, when thinking about the murder and the complete lack of information surrounding it, Harun has wild imaginings. He imagines that he is "Cain" and has killed his own brother. In fact, since Musa's death, he's often wanted to kill him again in order to move past the event and win Mama's love again. It's strange that Meursault has done the actual killing while Harun is the one who feels guilty.

Here, Harun refers to the biblical character Cain, who kills his brother Abel in a petty dispute. It's interesting that Harun makes this comparison with himself, as he later says that settlers like Meursault are like "Cain." Once again, this strengthens the sense of linkage between Harun and Meursault.

In Algiers, Mama often takes Harun to the cemetery where there's a gravestone for Musa, despite his missing body. Harun thinks it's ridiculous that she mourns and cries over the empty grave; it's here that he realizes he's entitled to "his presence of the world" despite the "absurdity" of his current life, "which consisted in pushing a corpse to the top of a hill before it rolled back down, endlessly." It's in the cemetery that he stopped praying towards Mecca and started praying towards the world. Now the cemetery is a dirty place overrun by drunks. Every night people steal marble.

With the metaphor of the corpse and the hill, Harun compares himself to Sisyphus, a character of Greek myth who was condemned to push a rock up a hill for eternity. He also references Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus, a philosophical treatise that explains Absurdism, the philosophy that grounds The Stranger (basically, that the quest for meaning in life is as futile as Sisyphus's task). Here, Harun explains that the true victim of absurdity isn't Meursault but himself and Musa, Meursault's victims.

Harun has read Meursault's book many times. Now he summarizes it again: it seems like Meursault's mother never existed, Musa is just a "replaceable" Arab, Musa's family left the city after his murder, and the trial was a "travesty" of bad colonial government. All in all, the murder amounts to nothing.

Not only do the details of the murder seem ephemeral, so do all the aspects of Meursault's life. Harun's obsession with these details reflect a belief that he can still achieve some concrete retributive justice, if only he can get the facts straight.

Once, Harun saw a movie in which a man climbs to an altar where he will be sacrificed to a god. It seems that he is exhausted by the climb, not afraid of dying. Harun was amazed by his "incredible passivity," but he often feels like that man himself.

In this strange metaphor, Harun imagines death not as a moment of religious significance but as a relief from the complexities of living.

CHAPTER 5

The next time Harun meets the interlocutor, he praises the man's patience in staying to hear the story. However, Harun warns that the story won't "suit your quest for purity"—if he wants to lead a better life, he should find a woman and stop chasing Musa.

Here, Harun is being sarcastic—as he will later state, he believes women to be not pure but inherently untrustworthy, certainly not a good substitute for his quest for truth and justice.

Harun orders some wine and remarks that it's becoming harder for wine producers to run their companies because laborers won't work for them anymore. Drinking alcohol is becoming increasingly illicit. Harun wonders why people can't drink wine on earth, when "it's supposed to be flowing profusely in Paradise."

Here, Harun is referring to increasing religious strictness, as conservative Muslims usually abstain from alcohol. Harun doesn't particularly object to religion here, but he doesn't want it to shape his entire society.

Harun also warns the interlocutor that he knows almost nothing about the "geography" of his story. He never returns to Algiers and only remembers it hazily. For him, the story takes place in "three settings of national importance": the city, the mountains where people can take refuge, and the village, which is everyone's "ancestral home." Musa left the city to "speak to God" in the mountains, and Harun and Mama returned to the village. That's all the information Harun had until he was finally able to read Meursault's book.

Harun's insistence that there is no reliable geography for the story is like his earlier lamentation that none of the details of Meursault's life are clear—at every turn, it seems increasingly impossible to untangle or even describe the crime through logical facts. Consequently, it's impossible to pursue justice through formal channels like courts, which claim to proceed on the basis of logic and rationality.

Harun imagines that Musa might have been well-known or famous, if only Meursault had given him a **name**. Mama could have her pension, and Harun could have a brother to take pride in. However, if he had a name, Musa's murder would have troubled Meursault's conscience. It's harder to kill a person with a name and a family.

Again, Harun reiterates that depriving someone of a name isn't just an insult but something that permits tangible, physical harm.

Harun returns to the outline of the story. At two o'clock on a sunny afternoon, Meursault kills an **unnamed** Arab. The murderer is convicted for "having buried his mother badly," and he says that he killed out of "too much sun." Meursault explains that his friend was involved with a prostitute and asked Meursault to write her a threatening letter, which he did; he believes that "the Arab" wanted to "avenge the prostitute," but he's not sure. Besides these unpleasant facts, the rest of the novel is nothing but "embellishment" that the murderer made up after he left prison unscathed.

Here, Harun is basically recapitulating the story as Meursault tells it, including a number of details that appear only in The Stranger, such as the social disapprobation Meursault incurs for insufficiently mourning his mother. Harun's disdainful tone reveals his dislike of Meursault's version—by telling his story to the interlocutor, Harun has finally gained the opportunity to be dismissive of Meursault, just as the other man was towards Musa.

According to Harun, the entire world Meursault creates is false. He describes a world in which "property is useless, marriage practically unnecessary," and people act like robots. Harun remembers that Meursault especially described his love interest as though she is a robot.

In The Stranger, Meursault comes to see that everything—from possessions to relationships like marriage—is meaningless. It's interesting that Harun completely rejects this worldview, given that he's generally unconcerned with material things and has very few important relationships.

The mystery seems "more and more unfathomable" to Harun, since he too has "a mother and murder" to grapple with. In fact, he too has killed, one day when he was idle. He swore never to talk about it again, but the interlocutor has loosened his tongue.

Even though Meursault and Harun are linked by the fact that they have both committed murder, this doesn't provide Harun with much insight into the other's worldview.

Harun returns to thinking about the beach where Musa was killed. When he finally saw it alongside Mama, the scene was very disappointing—it was "trying to squeeze the *Iliad* into a narrow space on the street," while Musa's story deserves to expand over the earth. Ever since, Harun has nursed a secret belief that Musa was killed on another, hidden beach.

It's interesting and very touching that Harun compares his brother's story to one of the most well-regarded Western poems, Homer's Iliad. *In doing so, he's insisting on the right of Algerian narratives to exist along those that are considered "classics," rather than being relegated to peripheral status.*

Harun has been to the beach six times looking for clues. He recounts one such time: one Friday a decade ago, Harun sees Musa's silhouette approaching him on the beach as it's getting dark. Harun has had a lot to drink, and the sun is "overwhelming." When Harun raises his hand, the shadow does the same; it mimics all his movements. Harun knows he is looking at a reflection, but he's not sure what it's a mirror of. Eventually, he finds himself weeping in the sand. In this way, all his attempts to relive the crime led to nothing. He tells the interlocutor there's no point trying to track Musa down in any cemetery or geographical location.

In this somewhat fantastical episode, Harun believes that he is seeing a ghostly representation of his brother, only to find that he's looking at his own shadow. The shadow's mimicry of Harun represents his sense of being inextricably linked to Musa. The ultimate disappointment of the encounter emphasizes Harun's loneliness at being unable to truly connect with the brother who is so central to his own identity.

Harun describes his version of the facts this way: "Cain"—that is, the French—came to Algeria to build cities and "domesticate" its people, while Musa was simply lying around, so lazy it's clear he doesn't own any land or sheep that could inspire envy or lead to murder. Therefore, "Cain" killed Musa for no reason at all.

This metaphor is important, as Harun compared himself to Cain earlier in the novel. It's clear that he feels a sense of personal wrongdoing, just as Meursault should—but he's projecting his guilt onto Musa's death rather than acknowledging that it stems from his own murder of Joseph.

Again, Harun points out the "bottle ghost," "my double," at the other end of the bar. The ghost has the same ritual every night: he reads the newspaper and then cuts out certain articles, usually related to murders. He never speaks, and always holds a cigarette. Harun says that maybe "I'm his Arab," or "maybe he's mine."

After Musa's death, Mama and Harun fruitlessly combed the newspapers for details on his murder. It seems like the ghost is also mining them for information, and perhaps with a similar lack of success.

CHAPTER 6

In order to make Mama pay attention to him, Harun used to hide or eat household supplies like bread or sugar. Young Harun enjoys watching her search for them and eventually collapse, wailing about her lost husband and son and the remaining boy who won't help her.

It's devastating that Harun must resort to petty wrongdoing in order to make Mama pay attention to him—this teaches him that true human connection comes through moments of anger and sadness, not mutual understanding and love.

One day, Mama forces Harun to go to the neighborhood mosque, where a young imam supervises unattended children. They get into a fight on the way, and Harun falls in the dust. When he arrives at the mosque, the imam asks why he is dirty and crying. Harun doesn't know what to say and he's bored, so he accuses another child of beating him. From then on, he starts to grow up and becomes "deceitful." In his first lie, he's like Meursault—he commits a misdeed simply because he has nothing else to do.

It's possible that the habit of resorting to deceit in order to gain Mama's attention inspires Harun to lie in other circumstances as well. Like many of his other flaws, Harun regards this one as something that binds him to Mama and Meursault—two people he constantly criticizes but whose influence he can never escape.

Harun reflects that he never felt "Arab"—this is a classification imposed by white colonists. Growing up, he thought of himself as a Muslim and the French as roumis who would surely be forced out one day. The Algerians aren't hostile toward the foreigners, they just avoid them and wait patiently for them to leave. Therefore, it's impossible that Musa would've been angry enough to try to kill Meursault. The Algerians were so sure of the roumis' departure that kids like Harun wandered through French neighborhoods deciding which houses they would claim after their inhabitants left. They intuited that Independence would come, but didn't anticipate the violence involved.

Here, Harun takes issue with the very term that, in Meursault's narrative, comprises Musa's entire identity. For Harun, "Arab" is a term that glosses over the complexities of all the culture of the Middle East, dehumanizing the people to whom it is applied and allowing colonial rule to be justified. In this light, Meursault's application of this term to Musa is not just a personal insult but an representation of the colonial attitude towards Algerian men like him.

Musa only became "the Arab" once he was viewed through Meursault's eyes. Harun is still bothered by the question of how Musa ended up on the beach with Meursault, since it wasn't one of his usual haunts. He gets dizzy thinking about "how a man could lose his **name**, plus his life, plus his own corpse" in one afternoon.

Meursault's use of the word "Arab" is synonymous with the loss of Musa's character and even his personal agency. It's a linguistic death that prefigures and, to some extent, actively permits his actual death—just as this linguistic concept helps justify colonial governments.

One of the reasons that Musa's story is so gripping is that in some ways it's everyone's story—just going into the French part of the city and interacting with the French can cause immeasurable damage and loss.

Here, Harun states one of the novel's core premises—that Musa's story is a microcosmic enactment of the dangers and injustices colonialism forces on Algerians.

The afternoon of his death, Musa was supposed to meet his friend Larbi. However, after the murder, Larbi never appeared—he fled the neighborhood in order to avoid the police. All that's left is a brief mention of him in Meursault's book.

Due to the lack of physical evidence, Meursault's book becomes the chief authority on Musa's death, the only thing that can bring Harun comfort—even as he strenuously objects to its author.

There's also the problem of the prostitute. Harun doesn't like to talk about this much. It seems unnecessary for Meursault to allege falsely that Musa's sister was a whore—the only reason could be a desire to besmirch his legacy. Harun has concluded that the prostitute is simply an invention of Meursault's troubled psyche.

The idea of the prostitute embodies what Harun sees as Meursault's desire to humiliate Musa before killing him. However, it's also possible that Harun doesn't like discussing it because he too is worried about Musa's honor being in question.

Sometimes, Harun thinks that Algeria as a whole can be understood "in the form of two imaginary women"—Meursault's girlfriend in his own novel, with her "impossible innocence," and the hypothetical sister of Musa, "a distant symbol of our land, plowed by customers and passerby." Years ago, Harun was fully convinced that the prostitute represented an exploited Algeria; now, however, he remarks simply that he and Musa never had a sister.

Harun uses the two women to convey the difference between settlers, who are enriched and protected from harm by the colonial regime, and Algerians, who are exploited by it. However, this metaphor also reflects his tendency to see women as primarily symbolic, rather than individuals with their own desires and concerns—exactly the attitude Meursault takes towards Musa.

On another note, Harun wonders what Meursault was doing on the beach. According to his novel, Musa was already there when Meursault arrived, so it's almost as if he came there looking for Musa. Meursault didn't have any right to idleness on the beach—he had a good job, was beginning to get famous as a writer, and could have gotten married to his girlfriend. His idleness and dissatisfaction with his life are as difficult to understand as his causeless murder.

Harun emphasizes the vastly different backgrounds that divide him and Meursault—his enemy is privileged and educated, while he is part of an oppressed racial group with few prospects. While Harun and Meursault both feel as though life is generally meaningless, it seems more logical that Harun should come to this conclusion than someone with better prospects.

Harun wants another drink, so he calls out to the bartender. As he gets older, it seems that more and more of the story's elements don't actually exist, from the beach itself to Musa's imaginary sister, to the various witnesses who never appeared after the crime.

For Harun, the increasing vagueness of circumstances surrounding the crime is almost as tragic as Musa's death, as this prevents him from gaining any closure or sense of justice.

Harun knows that Meursault's book is very successful, but he thinks it's a "swindle." He's read a lot of Meursault's work, and whenever he does, he feels like he's looking in at a party "that neither my mother nor I had been invited to." The entire story occurs without referencing them or their loss; the whole world participates in a story that eliminates any trace of their lives.

Harun will later contradict what he's saying now, acknowledging that Meursault is a brilliant writer and saying that he was personally moved by the book. In fact, Harun is often baffled that the book can be so artistically magnificent while being so cruelly dismissive of Harun, Musa, and Mama.

Harun breaks off and notices that the "bottle ghost" is absent tonight. He imagines that the ghost is at home "reading books nobody understands."

Harun imagines that the bottle ghost shares his own obsessive attraction to storytelling, and projects his frustration with the intractable ambiguity of his own story onto the ghost.

CHAPTER 7

Meeting his interlocutor again at his own apartment, Harun turns down the offer of a coffee. He says he hates Fridays, which he normally spends on the balcony of his apartment, looking at the nearby mosque. Watching young children play, he feels like he's seeing them push the older generations off a cliff. He hates them, although he's ashamed of this feeling.

Harun rejects many of life's conventionalities, from the idea that he should unquestioningly respect his mother to the idea that adults must value and be indulgent towards children. Like Meursault, he feels that these conventions are a way of imposing meaning on circumstances that are actually random and irrational.

One of Harun's neighbors reads the Koran loudly all night on the weekends. No one can tell him to stop, because he's doing it in the name of God. For Harun, religion is "public transportation I never use." He wants to travel towards God, but not as part of an "organized trip." He doesn't know if he believes in God, but he does know that while other people "natter" about his spiritual condition, he is the only one who understands his life and pays his bills, and he will die alone. He certainly doesn't want to "run panting after a father who has never set foot on earth."

As the novel progresses, Harun will make a series of increasingly astringent criticism of religion. What he most objects to is the dominance of meaningless religious dogma, which prevents people from having private spiritual experiences. Here, Harun argues that religion negates individual experiences—just as colonial rule negates the individual value of people like Musa.

Responding to an unheard question, Harun says he doesn't know anything more about his father than what he's already said. There are no surviving photographs, Mama would never talk about him, and Harun has no tribe to preserve his memory. Now, he feels that he's taken after his father in that he turned his back on a future family by refusing to get married. Although he's "known the love of lots of women," he can't get rid of "a mighty distrust" of women as a whole.

Harun's rejection of religion is similar to his dismissal of his father, as both involve defying conventional forms of authority. He's also been similarly betrayed by his father's abandonment and the failure of religion to provide any sense of meaning in the wake of Musa's death.

No woman has been able to liberate Harun from his own mother and her constant unspoken accusations that he hasn't avenged Musa's death. Moreover, when Harun was young he lived in Hadjout, a conservative society where boys could only speak to women who were relatives.

Harun seems to blame Mama for his distrust of women and to blame women as a whole for his failure to extricate himself from Mama's control. Although Mama's behavior is certainly problematic, at moments like this Harun refuses to take responsibility for the course of his own life.

The only exception to Harun's distrust of women is Meriem, with whom he had a brief relationship in 1963. He still remembers her "wild hair." Meriem was the only woman "willing to defy my mother" by not treating Harun as though he was his mother's property. They saw each other briefly during the summer, had a long correspondence, and then drifted apart. He doesn't know if she's married or where she is now.

The qualities Harun admires most in Meriem are her independence and confidence, two things he lacks especially in relation to Mama. Harun sees Meriem as sort of escape valve from his troubled family life—but perhaps his desire to be rescued, rather than take responsibility for himself, is what drives her away.

Harun says that Friday is "the day closest to death." People wear pajamas in the streets, as though "religious faith encourages laziness in private matters." In fact, Harun thinks people have started to dress sloppily in general. Men of his habits seem to be disappearing.

With its promises of an afterlife, religion is supposed to be a means of transcending death. On the contrary, Harun feels that religion conjures the specter of death more than anything else.

Harun especially dislikes the prayer hour, when he hears the imam's voice through the loudspeakers and sees people walking down the street with their prayer rugs. For him, it underlines the essential "hypocrisy" of the "devout." Harun says that Friday is the day God "decided to run away and never come back." The absence of God is clear in the absent look on people's faces.

Instead of a day sacred to God, Harun sees Friday as a day devoted to dogma, which to him is diametrically opposed to the idea of the divine. It's important to note that Harun doesn't negate the presence of a God; he just doesn't think one can access the divine through conventional religious rituals.

In fact, Harun hates all religions, because they "falsify the weight of the world." Sometimes he wants to break through the wall and throttle his neighbor and tell him to stop praying, "accept the world," and accept "his own dignity." Harun points out the window at a girl who is wearing a veil, even though she's too young to "know what a body is."

Ironically, it's while railing against religion that Harun reveals his own cautious optimism. Saying that his neighbor should take pleasure in the world and his place within it, Harun implies that there is inherent value in human life, regardless of its place within a divine plan.

On Friday all the bars are closed. People think that Harun is strange because he doesn't pray and cultivates his solitude. It seems odd that he's gotten so old without becoming religious. However, Harun feels that he's already approached death; now he's returned and is watching other people "marching to death in single file."

While religion is supposed to bring enlightenment, Harun feels that by rejecting religious dogma he's accessed higher truths to which his neighbors remain blind.

Harun keeps his beliefs to himself, because he knows his neighbors are already suspicious of him, especially because he drinks so much. Even though they sometimes insult him in the street, he feels pity for his neighbors, who believe that God has spoken to just one man and then disappeared forever. When he looks through "their book" (the Koran), it seems full of "redundancies, repetitions, lamentations, threats, and daydreams."

Referring to the Koran as "their book" even though he too is technically a Muslim, Harun distances himself further from his neighbors. However, by rejecting the idea that God has "disappeared," he also evinces a faith in the presence of the divine in human life.

Harun wonders what the "bottle ghost" does on Fridays. Maybe he goes to the beach, or returns home to a wife and mother. Every Friday the sky looks different to Harun, and he remembers the awful days during his time in Hadjout, when he felt that he was stuck there forever.

Harun evades his own solitude by thinking about the bottle ghost. It's important that this is the first person he thinks of—this moment emphasizes Harun's growing sense of the similarity between them.


Harun has sat on his balcony observing the world below for so many years that all the people seem like "a single person" that he tries to avoid. His neighbors are familiar—there's a retired soldier who washes his car all the time, a fireman who beats his wife, and a small man who rents folding chairs for funerals and marriages.

This passage is similar to Harun's description of his neighborhood in Algiers—in both cases he describes the routines of his different neighbors. Although Harun holds himself alert, he clearly enjoys being in proximity to the petty drama of human life.

This is only one of Harun's balconies. The other one is inside his head, and from it he looks out onto the hot beach, Musa's body, and Meursault holding a gun. The man is very thin, and he seems stiff like a robot. The scene always remains the same, but Harun can only look at it, not "step inside" and change the outcome. Imagining it now, he feels the same emotions as when he was seven—anger, sadness, and curiosity.

Harun's real and imaginary balconies share a sense of stagnancy—his neighbors never change their routines, while the choreography of the murder stays the same as well. This stagnancy recalls Harun's complaints about the new Algerian government, which doesn't make any positive changes in the country.


In this tableau, Meursault looks nothing like "the other one," the Frenchman Harun killed. That man was very large and blonde. Harun knows his interlocutor is wondering who that man was and what happened. He says that "there's always another" person even when one thinks one is alone, "staring at you or turning his back to you and deepening the perspectives of your solitude."

Instead of craving human connection, Harun often seems to prize his solitude at all costs. Perhaps because of his troubled relationship with Mama and because of his guilt over the murder he's committed, all human contact seems fundamentally invasive and uncomfortable.


CHAPTER 8

Harun shoots the Frenchman with seven bullets, two more than Meursault fired into Musa. Mama stands behind him the whole time, and Harun feels that she is guiding him and helping him take aim. The man looks surprised as Harun shoots him, and a dog barks. It occurs to Harun that the man's death is "not a murder but a restitution."

Harun tries to think of his act as just retribution, rather than an act of murder on par with Meursault's. However, as the years pass this distinction will come to seem specious, and his sense of guilt will grow.

Behind Harun, Mama breathes softly, much more easily than she has since Musa died. It's nighttime, and the moon seems to calm everything down. Harun knows that, with this deed accomplished, Mama is "packing her bags, on her way to meet old age." Harun imagines that Musa is talking to him. When you murder someone, he tells the interlocutor, your mind immediately starts to make up explanations in order to absolve your guilt.

Mama views this act of retribution as the culmination of her life; the murder seems to end her obsession with Musa's death and inaugurate an era of tranquility. However, for Harun it just adds a new source of stress and guilt.

Harun already knows he won't be punished for the murder. Outside, the War of Liberation is raging, so this murder will be considered part of the combat. It's one of the first days of Independence and all is chaos, with the French trying to flee or save their possessions while young men, filled with revolutionary fervor, maraud in the streets.

After Musa's death, Harun constantly wondered how justice could be achieved when the government protected his murderer. Now, he has to figure out how to atone for his own crime in the absence of any formal punishment.

After killing the Frenchman, Harun feels a sense of immense freedom. Finally, he's no longer being silently asked to murder someone but has already done it. He can finally go to the movies, or on a date with a woman. He and Mama look at the body for a long time, with Mama still holding Harun's arm. Harun has always considered himself a prisoner to "Musa's death and my mother's vigilance," but now he sees himself inhabiting the entire night, free to do what he wishes.

Harun's sense of relief shows that he feels not just grief over Musa but a sense of resentment that his brother's memory has so dominated his life. Even though Musa is dead, Harun has always felt powerless compared to him; in a sense, by taking action now, he's proving himself the more powerful brother.

Mama is already looking at the body and planning the grave they must now dig. She exhorts Harun to work quickly, and sweeps away the sand. As he works to obscure the details of this murder, he thinks of how Meursault obscured the details of his own crime. It occurs to Harun that he has murdered the Frenchman around two in the morning, just as Meursault murdered Musa at two in the afternoon.

Already it's becoming obvious to Harun that he has not extricated himself from the tangle of circumstances surrounding Musa's death, but merely linked himself more closely to the first murderer.

Harun and Mama bury the Frenchman's body quickly. No one seems to have noticed the gunshots. In any case, right now no one in the village is concerned about vanished French people. Back in the present, Harun tells the interlocutor that he now knows Harun's secrets. The "bottle ghost" might have heard as well, but Harun doesn't really care.

Harun seems to dismiss the bar ghost, but he also imbues him with importance just by mentioning him. As one of the few people who have heard Harun's narrative in its entirety, the ghost is now closely linked to Harun's obsession with language and storytelling.

Harun didn't even know the Frenchman he killed. He resumes his story. Moments before the murder, the Frenchman climbs the wall outside the house in order to take refuge in the garden, awakening Harun and Mama in the process. There is a lot of killing going on outside, between the liberation army and the unofficial freedom fighters. People are abandoning the fields and settlers are fleeing in large numbers.

It's important to note that Harun's act takes place in the context of the War of Liberation. The fact that he's committed an unjust murder at this moment foreshadows his later convictions that the "liberated" Algerian government is hardly a paragon of righteousness.

The Larquais family left three months ago, so since then Mama has commandeered their house, and Harun stays up every night on watch for burglars. On their departure, the family had charged Mama with looking after the house until their return, but she knows they will never come back. At first, Mama and Harun are too intimidated to settle into the main house, but they take over the kitchen and eventually sleep in the bedrooms. In order to cement their ownership of the house, Mama invites some neighbor women over for coffee and gives Harun a jacket left behind in a closet.

Algerian freedom fighters and the new government want to portray Independence as a momentous ideological moment, but for Harun and Mama it's a more prosaic moment, one of modest economic gain. At the same time, this is the first time the family has been economically secure—or even lived in a real house—since Musa died, so it is a truly meaningful moment.

In the days following, it seems impossible to trust anyone. Any neighbor could kick them out of the house by brute force. Once, Harun sees a resistance fighter shooting out streetlights so he can plunder in the dark.

In a sense, Harun must take on Musa's role even more during this tense time—he has to embody his role as head of the family in order to protect their dominion over the new house.

Some of the French have stayed, as they are technically entitled to official protection. One afternoon, Harun walks past a group of them protesting the recent murder of two French people by resistance fighters. He notices the Frenchman whom he will shoot two days later, wearing the same shirt. When they make eye contact, the other man looks away. Harun recognizes him as a friend of Mama's employers, who often comes to visit. Harun walks home quickly—people are suspicious of his refusal to join the resistance, so he doesn't go out much.

Here, Harun is describing events that occur before the murder, but both he and the reader are fully cognizant of the fact that the murder will soon occur. This technique makes it seem as if the act was inevitable, rather than an avoidable and conscious decision Harun made. Harun uses language not just to illuminate Musa's story but to evade moral responsibility for his own crimes.

When Harun hears noises on the night in question, Mama is already awake and directs him to pick up the gun, which he found in the shed weeks before. When he goes outside, he finds that the sounds are coming from a panting man near the shed. Harun knows he could just walk away, but Mama is standing behind him demanding revenge.

Harun reluctantly but firmly embraces Mama's concept of retribution—the idea that a crime can only be expunged by an equivalent action. As an adult, Harun will become convinced that such cut-and-dry concepts are neither just nor rational.

Harun is sure that he and Mama thought about Musa simultaneously, believing that killing this Frenchman is their duty to Musa and at the same time a chance to move past him. As Harun moves forward, the Frenchman moves away, and "the darkness devoured what remained of his humanity."

Just as Meursault kills Musa because he sees him as a faceless "Arab" rather than a complex individual, Harun's murder is prefaced by the erasure of Joseph's essential humanity.

After shooting the Frenchman, Harun drags his corpse into the courtyard, where he and Mama bury it with difficulty. The night begins to lighten and the trees of the courtyard become visible. Harun realizes that something very important has ended; he lies down in the courtyard and closes his eyes. When he opens them, he sees stars and knows that he is "trapped in a bigger dream, a more gigantic denial" than he was before.

Mama sees the murder as the finale to her long period of mourning, but for Harun it brings on new and thornier moral dilemmas. This shows that his ideas of what constitutes appropriate retribution are much less fixed and harsh than Mama's.

CHAPTER 9

Harun insists that he's not telling the interlocutor about his crime in order to relieve his conscience. He's not afraid of going to hell. Harun then continues his story.

It's important to note that Harun's guilt is not related to religious belief. For Harun, morality is not dependent on religion and can exist without any belief in the divine.

The day after the murder, everything seems the same. The only new development is Harun's conviction that he has condemned himself, without the aid of "judge nor God nor the charade of a trial."

Harun believes that conventional mechanisms of justice—like courts or fear of divine punishment—are not necessary in order to feel true remorse.

In fact, Harun wishes he could go on trial now, as Meursault did. He'd like to see a crowd of people looking at him, and for Mama to be incapable of defending him. In his imagination, Meursault is the protagonist and questions him about his family history. Joseph, the Frenchman he has killed, is there, as is Harun's Koran-reciting neighbor, who visits him in jail to preach about God. However, Harun says he can't be accused of anything—he was just serving his mother, and in any case so many people have died in the lead-up to Independence that no one would consider it important.

In this fantasy, Harun recalls the end of The Stranger, in which Meursault faces trial for his crimes and receives a visit from a priest in his jail cell. Even though such a scenario would involve prison time, he wishes that his feelings of guilt and regret could be solved through such obvious and rational means. As it is, he feels that conventional mechanisms of justice are unable to achieve meaningful retribution or eliminate the stain of a crime.

Harun says that his life has been more tragic than Meursault's. In his memory, he acts out every role in the story, from the Musa's part to that of "the stranger" (Meursault) to the judge at the trial. This constant performance doesn't change after his revenge; it's still a "curse" to him.

Here, Harun reiterates his belief that, as much as he might wish for one, a trial and even punishment would do nothing to alleviate the moral burden of his crime.

Again, Harun says he wishes he could stand trial. However, he blames Mama for his crimes. She was the one who held his arm while he shot, "while Musa held hers." Harun knows that he is philosophizing, but he says that Meursault did the same in his book. He points out the sky outside the bar is darkening. He loves the beginning of night, since it always reminds him that night's darkness allowed him to commit his crime.

Harun is partly correct in saying that his crime is the result of a long chain of circumstances, from Musa's oppression by the colonial regime to Mama's determination for revenge. However, he's also a capable adult who is responsible for his own decisions.

Harun remarks that the interlocutor seems surprised by his articulate French. Harun says that he learned at school, by teaching himself, and through Meriem. She was the one who introduced him to French literature and Meursault's book. For Harun, French became "the main tool" of all his investigations into Meursault.

While formal mechanisms like courts and government prove inadequate to address the problem of Musa's death, language is the one "tool" that is effective.

Harun knows that the only trial he'll ever have is the one he performs in this bar, so he wants to return to the story of his murder. After he kills Joseph, he doesn't wish for his lost innocence but rather misses "the border that had existed until then between my life and crime." Now that he has killed once, it feels increasingly possible to kill again. He imagines killing everyone from his neighbor, who pretends to be a resistance fighter but is really a crook, to an old uncle who never pays Mama the debt he owes her.

For Harun, true punishment for his crimes doesn't come from any external source but from his own changed and deteriorated relationship to the world. Even though Harun evades formal punishment as does Meursault, becoming a murderer still warps the rest of his life.

Moreover, the crime forever alters Harun's ability to love. After talking one man's life, life itself is "no longer sacred" to him. He can never again appreciate the sensuality of the female body. Every time he desires a woman, he also remembers that "life reposes on nothing solid." He says that there's one verse in the Koran he likes, which states that "if you kill a single person, it is as if you have killed the whole of mankind."

Becoming a murderer not only harms Harun's self-conception, it also prevents him from connecting positively to other people. Isolated and depressed, he's in a mental jail of his own construction, even though he's technically at liberty.

This morning, Harun read an article about an Indian man who has kept his right hand raised for the last thirty years, after receiving a commandment from God to do so. Harun feels that his arm is still raised to shoot. His whole body has shriveled and stiffened just like the man in the article, and Mama's has as well. Now, she's more like a statue than a person. Now that she has compelled Harun to execute Joseph, she has no more reason for existence.

Harun and Mama both feel that the murder has ended their desire to exist. However, while Mama feels that she can die because she's accomplished everything she needed to, Harun feels so aware of the proximity of death that it feels useless to go on living.

CHAPTER 10

The day after Harun murders Joseph, everything is tranquil. He wakes up to the smell of coffee and Mama singing in the kitchen. He decides not to go out, and to bask in Mama's sudden affection. However, when she brings him a coffee, he pushes her hand away from his hair. He knows he'll never be able to bear another body close to his.

Harun has waited for a long time for Mama to care for him on his own terms, rather than as a substitute for Musa. However, now that he's bought her affection with a murder, he can no longer take pleasure in it.

Harun sleeps for several hours, but eventually Mama wakes him up to say that the police have come looking for him. She's not worried, as "they couldn't kill her son twice." Apparently some soldiers heard the gunshots and have come for an explanation; Mama put on a tearful performance about her grief for Musa, and eventually the soldiers just kiss her forehead and tell her that her son has been avenged. Still, Harun has to go to the town hall and answer some questions.

It's clear that the police share Mama's notion of what constitutes adequate revenge. In this light, Mama's ideas seem like an extension of absurd government bureaucracy, which addresses complex moral questions with reductive and formulaic solutions. Unlike Mama and the government, Harun does not believe that jail time or even another death can erase the fact of the first crime.

Harun already knows that the new authorities don't want him to account for the murder but his refusal to join the liberation fight. Sleepy and lethargic, he decides not go to the town hall that day. He feels stunned by the fact that he is alive, when Musa and Joseph are not. He can't believe that Mama is going about her tasks normally and talking to herself. He feels sorry for her.

Harun's lack of concern about his own fate is shocking—although this is partly in keeping with his general character, his apathy seems to have been exacerbated by the murder. Refusing to act on his own behalf is one way that Harun punishes himself and expresses his guilt.

Harun sleeps for three days, while fighting continues to rage throughout the country. Now, thinking back on the events surrounding Independence, he wishes he could write a book—a sort of cookbook describing how the country was in a frenzy of "devouring everything, gobbling up the land and the rest of the sky and the houses." Harun urges the interlocutor to look around him, where all the structures of the city are being devoured, down to the sidewalks.

With this metaphor, Harun imagines Independence as a movement not towards progress but towards general destruction. Just as Musa's death can't be put right through another murder, the evils of colonialism can't be erased by another brutal war.

While Harun sleeps, he sees "people and trees differently, from an unexpected angle, over and above their usual designation." He feels that he's experiencing Meursault's ability to transcend normal language and "emerge on the other side," where he can narrate events with more precise and accurate words. Meursault's access to this language is the reason he could write the story of Musa's murder so definitively.

Here, Harun's admiration for Meursault's craft—in spite of the ideas he uses it to convey—emerges strongly. It's Meursault's brilliant use of language to tell an inaccurate story that encourages Harun to develop his own linguistic capabilities.

Five days later, Harun goes to the town hall. He is arrested and put in a cell with some Algerians and Frenchmen he doesn't know. He readily admits that he's suspected of killing a Frenchman, and everyone avoids him. He waits in the cell overnight, until a guard ushers him into a jeep and he's driven to the police station. On the way, he sees Mama walking down the road. He waits for a long time in a cell at the police station.

Although the other people in the jail may have committed crimes, Harun incurs their suspicion by openly admitting his. This foreshadows his encounter with the officer, where he will be berated not for committing a crime but for failing to do so according to proper conventions.

Eventually, Mama comes to visit him. She seems calm and unconcerned, assuring him that she has explained to the authorities that she couldn't let her only son join the revolution. She has told them about Musa's death, but she's not sure if they believe her, since her newspaper articles don't even mention his name. Harun feels that he should hug Mama or cry, but he can't do either. When it's time to leave, Mama promises to find Harun a wife once he's released.

Although Independence should bring recognition for Musa as a martyr, the new government, unwilling to hear Mama's story without unattainable proof, seems just as bureaucratic and impersonal as the old. Even though they are opposed to the French, they seem to be functioning according to the rules and conventions of their predecessors.

Back in his cell, Harun remembers his old neighborhood in Algiers and his arrival in Hadjout. He wonders why he never joined the resistance, even though all the young men are practically required to do so. For years people have made fun of him for being Mama's "prisoner," and this just confirms their suspicions. When he was a teenager, he even killed a dog with his bare hands to get the other kids to stop making fun of him.

Harun is desperate to be seen as independent from Mama. At the same time, he's unwilling to do the one thing that would make this clear—join the army. This decision reflects both his lack of faith in the liberation effort and his desire to return to the comfortable relationship he had with Mama prior to Musa's death.


Harun recalls that during his adolescence, Mama makes him go to school, where he quickly progresses until he's able to read aloud the newspaper clippings describing Musa's death. In a way, Harun reflects, he has fought the revolution within his own family before anyone else in the country thought about it.

Here Harun not only contextualizes his family history within Algerian colonial rule, but he also says that it's more important than the course of national politics.

Unburdened by Musa or Mama, Harun feels free and calm in the cell. However, when the guard comes with his dinner, he asks curiously why Harun never joined the resistance, and warns that the authorities will question him about this. Harun knows that many people view his refusal to align himself with either the colonists or the resistance as a crime.

One of the most ridiculous things about Harun's experience in jail is that those around him are indifferent to the glaring crime he's actually committed, and much more preoccupied by his understandable, if unpopular, decision not to join the army.

Throughout the night, Harun savors his idleness. He feels that he can move between the living and the dead just by changing his name, from Harun to Musa, Meursault, or Joseph. These days, death is as random and "absurd" as it was when Meursault killed Musa. He knows that it's equally likely he will be shot or released with no punishment. Looking out the window, he sees a small piece of the moon.

Harun is adopting Meursault's own philosophy, that it's pointless to seek out meaning in the random events of life. While this is a bleak worldview, it enables Harun to face his uncertain future with equanimity.


CHAPTER 11

At the police station, Harun is questioned several times, but no one seems truly interested in getting to the bottom of his case. Eventually, Harun is taken to an officer of the new Army of National Liberation, who asks about Harun personal details and whether he knew Joseph. Harun knows he doesn't have to lie—he's been arrested not for killing but "for not having done so at the right moment." Evasively, he says that "some people used to know him."

What Harun means is that he's being questioned not for murder but for not being part of the army. Many Algerians have killed French people with just as little cause, but under the auspices of the official liberation struggle everything is allowed.

The officer smiles and says that he's not asking for the truth. He even laughs at the idea of judging an Algerian for murdering a Frenchman. The officer says that Harun has been arrested because he killed Joseph on his own, rather than as part of the army.

The officer is making a specious distinction between killing as a soldier and as a layman. On the other hand, Harun knows that his crime is still grave, whether or not the authorities care about it.

Harun is led back to his cell, where he looks out the window into the sun. He imagines Mama at home, sweeping the courtyard and doing chores. In the afternoon, Harun is again taken to the officer. This time the officer shouts at him, demanding to know why he didn't fight for his country in the war. He pulls out an Algerian flag, waves it Harun's face, and begins a long speech about the sacrifices made by soldiers. Harun should have killed the Joseph "with us, during the war," instead of by himself. Harun says he doesn't see the difference, and the officer shouts that "it makes all the difference."

The officer's long tirade emblematizes government bureaucracy's inability to address crimes or act as a moral arbiter. The officer is more concerned with following the rules—even though he's just finished fighting a rebellion—than punishing wrongdoing.

Harun asks him to explain, and the officer shakily says that "killing and making war were not the same thing," and that the army was fighting for freedom rather than committing random murders. Harun should have killed Joseph before July 5, when the war ended.

The officer's distinction between acceptable and unacceptable dates for murder is truly absurd—this episode mirrors Meursault's derisive depiction of the justice system in his own narrative.

A soldier enters and places an envelope on the desk. In the ensuing silence, Harun asks whether it counted as before or after the war if he killed Joseph on July 5 at two o'clock in the morning. The officer slaps him in the face. Afterwards, both men stare at each other for a long time.

The officer feels that Harun is being impertinent, but really Harun is just addressing him on his own terms. Hearing this ridiculous question, the officer recognizes how silly his standards of judgment really are.

The officer asks if Musa was really killed by a Frenchman, and Harun says that he was. After this the officer becomes calmer, although he still mutters about obeying the rules. The officer listens to his story without seeming to absorb it. At the end he says uncertainly that Musa is a martyr.

This is the first time that anyone besides Mama has recognized Musa's "martyrdom." However, the moment is anticlimactic and unsatisfying, suggesting that even public acknowledgment won't bring Harun closure.

Eventually, Harun is taken back to his cell. He knows he's going to be released, but he can't recover the tranquility he felt before. He wants to be "sentenced" and "relieved of the heavy shadow that was turning my life into darkness." He hates how casually they treat the idea of his crime. No one seems to understand the magnitude of his act. He feels that his murder has taken on the same "insignificance" that Musa's death had in the eyes of the French authorities. The next day, the soldiers release Harun at dawn. Some young men mutter suspiciously as he walks away.

Although Harun rarely expresses guilt, his desire for some external body to put him on trial and "sentence him" reveals feelings of remorse, and a desire to expunge his crime through some tangible punishment like jail. However, the officer's behavior and the general indifference to his crime show that formal mechanisms like courts won't be of any help to Harun as he grapples with his actions.

Harun explains to the interlocutor why Mama decided he must kill Joseph (he believes that Mama chose her victim, even though technically he came to the house of his own accord). From her days as a housekeeper, Mama knew that Joseph habitually went swimming at two in the afternoon, after which he paid lively visits to the Larquais family. She grew to know everything about him, from his "age, his appetite for young girls' breasts, [to] his work in Hadjout." This similarity to Musa, added to her conviction of his bad character, made her want to punish him. Harun feels bad for Joseph and his "gratuitous" death. Harun breaks out of his reverie and addresses the interlocutor, saying that he should invite the "bottle ghost" to join them.

Joseph is linked to Musa through his habit of swimming in the afternoon (just as Musa was on the beach the afternoon he was killed). However, he also embodies Meursault in that he is French and of generally bad character. These two factors help Mama to see Joseph's murder as equivalent to Musa's, and therefore justified. However, Harun sees these connections as contrived, meaning that the murder seems less like retribution than a "gratuitous," unprovoked act, as Musa's murder was.

CHAPTER 12

Harun thinks that love is "inexplicable." He's always puzzled by the way couples touch each other constantly, until they blur the edges between them. He doesn't understand how they manage to forget that that they were born and will die separately. To Harun, love seems to be an "accommodation" to the harshness of life, rather than a "mystery." For him, death causes the same impressions that love causes in others—"sensation that every life is precarious and absolute." Actually, he says, he's very scared of love and its ability to "devour" people.

Here, Harun is describing love in the same way that he often talks about religion—something essentially false that humanity has contrived in order to gloss over complicated and unpleasant aspects of life. However, later he will reverse his position and say that love is one of the inherently meaningful experiences of life, casting it in opposition to religion.

Harun returns to the subject of Meriem, and their brief affair in 1963. He loved to look up from his depression and see her smiling at him. She made him feel that he could have had a peaceful life on a small piece of land somewhere, if only "Musa, Mama, and your hero" (Meursault) hadn't already killed him.

Harun sees Meriem as a possible escape from his complicated family life. At the same time, he blames his family for the end of the affair, even though the breakup seems to occur of Meriem's own volition.

Harun still remembers how beautiful Meriem was, especially her smile and her hair. However, even when he was with her, he felt that he could never possess her, as a "stranger" like him "possesses nothing."

Calling himself a "stranger," Harun links himself to Meursault and his novel, whose title (The Stranger) refers to himself.

Harun tells the interlocutor to look around the city, which contains everything from Ottoman walls to colonial buildings to offices and roads built after Independence. Outside the city, Harun imagines, lies a "purgatory" inhabited by everyone who has died for Algeria or because of it. Harun asks the interlocutor if the "bottle ghost" is refusing to answer him. He says there's a precise formula that can elicit a response, but he doesn't know it yet.

Harun is becoming increasingly determined to interact with the ghost. This seems like a last attempt to induce people besides the interlocutor to listen to his story. It's also possible that, since the ghost has heard the secret of Harun's murder, Harun wants to see if the other man will judge or forgive him.


CHAPTER 13

Harun wishes he could speak about his life in a better order, but the interlocutor will have to figure it out when he writes his own book. Harun continues his story.

Since Harun's narrative is circular and spontaneous, it's inherently ambiguous. His inability to state things "in order" reveals the limits of language in empowering Harun and facilitating personal reflection.

As a teenager in Hadjout, Harun finally begins school, where he is one of two Arab students. Both Arab boys arrive without shoes, as they don't have any, and Harun is still grateful for his teacher for pretending not to notice.

Harun's lack of shoes emphasizes the wealth gap between him and the other French students, as well as the rarity of an Algerian boy acquiring any kind of education.

Harun does extremely well in school, and quickly learns French. He's driven not by a desire to fit in among the other students, but because he wants to uncover the truth of Musa's murder. As he becomes more confident, he can read and translate the newspaper clippings that Mama still keeps in her breast, and which she asks him to read time after time. In fact, they contain very little information, and Harun is insulted by their brevity.

Mama has always treated the newspaper clippings like talismans, which could shed new light if decoded, but Harun quickly realizes this is not the case. Although the newspapers have partly inspired his respect for language, they ultimately show how language can be used to obfuscate the truth.

As his French improves, Harun realizes that Mama has sent him to school so that he can revive Musa by retelling his story. Harun knows that he's expected to produce some new information from the newspaper clippings, so he makes up details, witnesses and explanations, which he tells Mama are contained within the newspaper. He says it's like a vast tale like *Thousand and One Nights*, only he never wrote it down. He feels a little guilty for lying, but mostly happy to give Mama what she wants.

In a sense, Harun practices for his current narrative endeavor by telling stories to Mama. This episode mirrors her earlier habit of telling exaggerated bedtime stories about Musa. However, it's important to note that Mama and Harun only tell made-up stories to each other, whereas right now he's attempting to identify some core of absolute truth.


In this way, Harun's education was "marked by death." For Mama, everything Harun learns has to relate to their family story. Harun says his relationship with Mama continued this way until a few months before he commits the murder, when she stops talking about Musa so much. Perhaps she already had a premonition that Joseph would appear in the courtyard. Now, he doesn't even know what became of the newspaper clippings.

Although education removes Harun somewhat from his complicated and unhealthy family life, he still feels that Musa's memory and his brotherly duty to avenge him are always present. Language both helps Harun develop an identity distinct from his family and binds him to it more tightly.

Both Mama and Harun are taken aback when a young woman (Meriem) arrives at their house in 1963, asking if they are the family of Musa Uled el-Assas. Almost no one pays them visits, especially since Harun has disgraced himself by refusing to fight for Independence. He's startled to hear a stranger utter Musa's name. Mama invites the woman inside.

Meriem is one of the only people to know and use Musa's name. Although she clearly admires Meursault's work, she also values Musa's narrative, even before she really knows what it is.

Harun leaves his bed to find a small, beautiful woman coming into the house. He feels that until now, he's never felt it possible to have a relationship among all the other things that have occurred in his life. He's so used to living reclusively with Mama. The woman introduces herself as Meriem and sits down on a stool, telling Harun that she is a teacher studying a book written by Musa's murderer, Meursault.

In a sense, Meriem is a precursor to the interlocutor. Both are young academics led to Harun by Meursault's work. Since nothing concrete comes of Meriem's investigations, this similarity undermines any impression that the interlocutor will be able to change public opinion about Meursault's work or achieve anything from talking to Harun.

Harun has never heard of Meursault's book, and he and Mama are speechless. It seems that Musa is rising from the dead again, forcing them to feel grief. Meriem speaks gently to Harun about the book until he starts asking questions. He feels like the book is another bullet hitting his brother.

By describing the book as a "bullet," Harun emphasizes the power of language. He characterizes Meursault's linguistic power over Musa as equivalent to, or even greater than, the physical harm he has wrought.

Meriem shows Harun a copy of Meursault's book. For her, the story seems very simple—the only difficulty has been the investigating to find Musa's family. She and Harun arrange to meet the next day at the train station, without Mama's knowledge. Harun knows immediately that he's in love with Meriem, but he also hates her for "upsetting my equilibrium."

Harun's flirtation with Meriem occurs in the context of Meursault's novel, as well as many other books. It's important that passion and love, in Harun's mind, are inextricably linked to the process of storytelling.

CHAPTER 14

In fact, Meriem is writing her thesis on Meursault's book, just like the interlocutor. She waits until Mama has left to show Harun the book, which is small and well-designed. Harun is struck by the murderer's name written on the front, but he's also distracted by the closeness of a strange woman. Later, Meriem tells Harun that she is from Constantine; she asserts her independence fiercely, and he can tell she has developed this persona in defiance of a conservative family.

Although Harun doesn't know much about Meriem's background, he imagines her in opposition to a conservative, possibly religious family. This fuels the anti-religious beliefs he will come to hold, and perhaps inspires his future speech to the imam in which he says that religious dogma is nothing compared to his feelings for Meriem. Meriem causes him to understand love as directly opposed to religion.

Meriem leaves Harun with the book. Mama is astonished to know that the details of Musa's murder have been written down all this time. However, Harun thinks her awe is unmerited—the book is just the product of another man, not "some god." He thinks that they should feel stupid and ashamed that everyone knew the murderer's story except the two "pitiful natives" closest to it.

While Mama is excited by the book, it reminds Harun of his powerlessness compared to Meursault. Even though he's becoming more educated and learning French, Harun knows that people like Meursault and his audience look down on him for his race.

The next day, Mama has developed hostile feelings towards Meriem and warns Harun not to let her in if she returns. However, he just leaves the house without coffee and waits for Meriem at the Hadjout train station. He says that he wants to know more about the book, and they embark on a long walk. This becomes their regular happiness for the next few months, which feel like "centuries" to Harun.

During his affair with Meriem, Harun defies Mama for the first time. This is interesting because just months before, at the moment of the murder, he describes himself as bound to obey Mama's will. The revelation that he can disobey her quite easily suggests that, although he won't admit it, he too wanted to kill Joseph.

Finally, Harun is experiencing all the wonder and astonishment of love that "Mama's vigilance had always managed to neutralize." He can't even describe the process of love now. Meursault's book, and later many other books, form the pretext of their affair as Meriem patiently teaches Harun about literature. When he tries to hold her hands, she laughs but doesn't pull away.

It's clear that Meriem is the more powerful person in this relationship, and this power partly depends on education and language. Because she is a teacher, she has the freedom to move around independently of her family, which Harun lacks.

When Harun reads Meursault's book for the first time, he's enthralled; he feels both "insulted and revealed to myself." He can't come to grips with how beautiful the writing is, but he also can't believe that Musa's **name** is absent from the entire work. Contrary to his hopes, he can't learn anything about his brother from the book, although he can "see into the murderer's soul."

As an increasingly educated and intellectual young man, Harun identifies with Meursault's writing; however, as an Algerian Arab like Musa, he feels sidelined by the novel. He represents the dilemma of all marginalized people that want to interact with the artistic world but also feel it discriminates against them.

Harun feels that the whole book is "a perfect joke." Instead of teaching him about Musa, it shows him "his own reflection"; he realizes that he and Meursault are incredibly similar, down their mutual wish to be tried and sentenced for their crimes.

Meursault's desire to be sentenced for his crime reflects a general indifference towards the world, while Harun's is more indicative of his deep feelings of guilt.

Knowing that she will become obsessed with it, Harun doesn't show Mama the book. He also hides his meetings with Meriem. They always spend the day walking around the town or lying under a tree. He tells Meriem everything about his childhood and Musa's death; the only thing he hides is the murder he's committed. In turn, she brings him other books to read so he can understand Meursault's writing and worldview. He doesn't understand everything, but he grows more and more in love with Meriem.

While school is Harun's first step towards independence, it's Meriem who really introduces him to the world of storytelling. Although he wants to be close to her, Harun can't bring himself to reveal the murder that is becoming increasingly central to his identity.

Harun always knows their affair will end, but he wants to keep it going as long as possible. He believes that Meriem was amused by him until she realized how truly despairing and depressed he was. Or perhaps he just eventually stopped being entertaining to her. Just as Harun was feeling more confident in his affections, she stopped coming to Hadjout forever. Ever since then, Harun has found himself betraying every woman he's been involved with.

It's clear that Harun's sense of betrayal at Meriem's hands prevents him from having healthy relationships later on. This is similar to the way Mama's grief over Musa's death prevents her from being a good parent. In both cases, traumatic experiences lead to self-destructive behavior.

One day while Harun is lying under a tree with Meriem, he leans over and kisses her. When he sits up, he feels that the sky is especially brilliant. Meriem lies with her head on his thighs until it grows too hot, and then they walk away wrapped in each other's arms. When they get to the train station, Harun asks Meriem if she'll marry him; he's hurt by her look of surprise. She asks if he loves her, and he answers that he doesn't know how to say it in words, "but when I was silent, it became obvious in my head."

This is basically the culmination of Harun's affair with Meriem. Even though their relationship is founded on literature, words become inadequate when Harun wants to express his deepest feelings, showing the ultimate limits of language.

Harun remarks that the interlocutor is smiling, and admits that actually he made this anecdote up. He could never have said such a thing because Meriem's confidence and sophistication intimidated him. Self-assured and independent women have mostly disappeared from Algeria today, he says.

Here, Harun has used storytelling to obscure the truth—if only on this small matter—rather than illuminate it.

After Harun realizes that Meriem has gone for good, he smashes all the dishes in the house while Mama watches calmly. When Meriem writes Harun letters, he answers angrily; eventually their correspondence drifts off. He still sometimes waits for her at the train station.

Mama sees Meriem's departure as a solidification of her control over her son, hence her smug calmness. However, Harun becomes even more distanced and resentful of her as a result.

Harun tells the interlocutor that this may be their last meeting and tells him to summon the "bottle ghost" again. When the ghost comes over, it becomes apparent that he is deaf and mute, but can read lips. He says that the ghost should read Meursault's book, which will be more interesting than his newspapers.

Throughout the last several chapters, Harun has flirted with the idea of sharing his story with the ghost. Now it becomes clear that because of his disability, the ghost is incapable of listening at all. This small anticlimax hints at the futility of Harun's entire storytelling project.

CHAPTER 15

Harun asks the interlocutor to forgive him for his age and tendency to ramble. He feels that after living so long, he must have some "essential revelation" before he dies. He's often struck by "the disproportion between my insignificance and the vastness of the cosmos."

Harun dislikes religion, but that doesn't make him immune to profound spiritual reflections. In fact, it's his disregard of religious dogma that enables him to recognize and appreciate his smallness in comparison to the universe.

However, despite all the years Harun has lived, he finds he spends most of his time replaying Musa's story. He can't even talk about it with Mama anymore, as she has become mute. Nothing else in the country interests him, so he lives "like a streetwalker," moving apathetically between his office and apartment. He's never had a meaningful relationship with a woman after Meriem.

In a way, Harun's blighted life is the harshest punishment possible for the crime he's committed. Although he's never been formally incarcerated, by isolating himself from everyone around him, he lives in a jail of his own making.

In fact, Harun has been like a "ghost" among the busy people in his neighborhood. He often feels like he has access to a secret that they don't. Sometimes he wants to shout to everyone that he and Musa are the real heroes of "that famous story," but he knows no one will believe him.

Calling himself a ghost, Harun strengthens the connection between himself and the "bottle ghost." Both of them are obsessed with stories those around them consider irrelevant, and both are disdained and ignored by the rest of society.


Harun spends a lot of time on the balcony of his apartment, where he can look out at a large mosque; he says he loathes its "big finger pointed at the sky." Sometimes he wants to climb up the minaret and bellow all the profanities he knows through the loudspeakers. He wants to cry out "that I'm free, and that God is a question, not an answer."

Here, Harun defends the right to individual thought, which he believes religion stifles. He thinks that people should feel free to ask questions about the divine, rather than accepting the dogmatic answers provided by formal religion.

Just as a priest visited Meursault in his cell, lots of imams try to convince Harun to believe in God and become more religious. He imagines a scene in which he shouts blasphemies at them as they become increasingly more distraught. If they tell him that there's a life after death, he will say that he just wants "a life where he can remember this one." After this they will kill him, and he will die like a "martyr."

Religion encourages people to value the afterlife more than the current one, but Harun believes this is wrongheaded—rather, people should savor life on earth. The idea of the visiting cleric links Harun to Meursault, but his wish to die like a martyr references Musa, who is frequently described with this epithet.

One day, an imam visits Harun and tries to make him pray; when the man says gently that he will pray on his behalf, Harun becomes enraged and yells at the imam that "none of his certainties was worth one hair on the head of the woman I loved," and that the imam is "living like a dead man."

Here, Harun explicitly contrasts religious dogma with lived experience: even though his affair with Meriem hasn't provided lasting happiness, he considers his feelings of passion more profound and valuable than the dogmatic "certainties" of religion.

Harun tells the imam that he is confident in his own life and the death that awaits him. He says that nothing in life matters, because "throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in the future." Everyone is equally privileged, because everyone will eventually be condemned by death, even the imam. By now, other neighbors have arrived to rescue the imam from Harun's grasp. The imam turns around and disappears.

Attesting to the meaninglessness of life, Harun seems to be promoting a bleak worldview. However, by remarking that everyone must eventually die, he creates a sense of equality and therefore community among people, rather than the distinctions he believes that religion fosters.

The interlocutor asks if Harun believes in God, and he laughs. He says that people shouldn't ask other men about God, they should ask "Him" directly. Sometimes he has a feeling that he really is inside a minaret, and a mob is outside trying desperately to tear down the door. He knows that he will soon die, but she shouts out that "The mosque is empty, the minaret is empty." He's happy in the knowledge that a large crowd will watch his execution and hate him.

Harun's chief qualm with religion is that it prevents people from interacting personally with the divine: by adhering to religious dogma, people are prevented from asking God their questions. By saying that the mosque is "empty," Harun is not saying that God doesn't exist but that the divine is best approached through individual reflection.

Mama is still alive, but her life seems pointless as she doesn't say or do anything. On the contrary, Harun knows he talks too much—just like Meursault, another murderer who has gone unpunished. He remarks that Meursault's **name** translates to "the messenger" in Arabic.

It's ironic that Meursault means "messenger," because Harun is actively trying to refute the message Meursault presents in his novel. Harun's remark is a final reminder of his preoccupation with the significance of names.


The bar is going to close soon, and Harun tells the interlocutor that they need to finish their drinks. It seems like a joke that the only person witnessing their discussion is the deaf "bottle ghost."

Harun wants other people to hear and absorb his version of the story, but the ghost's deafness emphasizes the difficulty of meaningful communication, especially through language.

Harun wonders aloud if his story is "suitable," but it's all he can give to the interlocutor. He could be a compulsive liar who's just giving him false information to fill up his notebooks. Writing the biography of "the Arab" is like writing about God, because no one has really met either one. Harun wishes again that there could be a "legion" of spectators at his execution, "savage in their hate."

Discussing the possibility that he is lying, Harun once again references the ability of language to hide the truth—even as he's spent much of his narrative celebrating the positive power of language. In this passage, he turns "the Arab" from a dismissive name to a sign of power, equating Musa's ambiguous of ghostly nature to that of God.

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