Care, or Life Will Feel Like an Attacking Bear

Why are we on this planet? Albert Camus, author of *The Stranger*, makes a strong case as to why we are not on this planet, illustrated by the life and actions of his novel’s protagonist.From that protagonist, Meursault, we learn that we are put on this planet to care about others. We are to use our time here to help others, to make something of ourselves. Meursault did not do this. He was self serving, throwing his life away. He ambivalent as to with whom he associated, becoming “mates” with Raymond despite Raymond’s obvious lack of commonly accepted morals. He went so far as to assist Raymond in hurting his sex-slave mistress. He did not examine his life, and in the end, it destroyed him. **Meursault learns to care, because when we don’t care, we hurt others, not just ourselves.**

Meursault is detached past the point of being human. He feels no emotion; to quote the man himself, “I...had pretty much lost the habit of analysing myself...” (65) He did not weep and he was not thinking about his mother, instead he was watching Perez. He didn’t care. He did not pay attention during the funeral, only focusing on the physical world around him. Describing the scene of the nightlong vigil, he says “I saw them more clearly than I had ever seen anyone, and not one detail of their faces or clothes escaped me” (9). He had no self awareness, and thus he was not living.

Another way that Camus shows Meursault’s detachment is through his affair.He had a girlfriend, but did not know if he loved her. He was completely ambivalent toward her suggestions of marriage, saying, “it didn’t make any difference to me and that we could (get married) if she wanted to”. (41) He hurt her with his apathy toward her, wasting both her time and his. To him, she was her body, and in this way he wasted her mind. He was wasting time, wasting his life, and thus it was wasting him, and he became just that: a wasted life. Not a wasted person, because he had no person.

His detachment causes him to waste a man’s life, and it truly is wasted, he was not defending himself or someone whose honor needed defense. It was not even a selfish act, he only did it to get the sun out of his eyes- “the light shot off the steel and it was like a long flashing blade cutting my forehead”. (59) It was completely pointless: if he had turned around, there would have been no conflict. But he did not know what he was doing. He was so unused to examining his own actions that when he started going down the line of murder, he did not see where he was going, and he was so apathetic that when he did notice, he noted “It occurred to me that all I had to do was to turn around and that would be the end of it” he did nothing to stop himself, showing how far gone he was on the road to autonomy.

But the end of the novel arrives at last, welcome relief from the apathy that the preceding chapters forced you to live through. Meursault begins to live, discovering the capacity that his memory had: “eventually, once I learned how to remember things, I wasn’t bored at all,” (78), and then he even started to have some thoughts: “but naturally, you can’t always be reasonable. At other times, for instance, I would make new laws.” (111) In this way, he learns how to care. His life has meaning, and he has an opinion: “I had only to wish one thing, that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate.” He finally cares about other’s opinions, not that they like him, but that they hate him because he has come to hate the world. He wants them to feel something, and the only authentic thing that they feel is hate. (last page)

It is easy to fall into the trap of not caring. When people don’t care, they hurt others. But when they do, they hurt themselves. We are giving, not taking when we care, because it is not easy to give part ourselves to others. But that is what life is all about. Because when we care, we kill ourselves, and time can’t hurt us. Is that not how the little old grandma never gets any older? Even when she is dead, her kindness is not forgotten, and she is timeless. Those who take are either forgotten, or made lessons, like Meursault and Hitler: don’t be this self centered, or you will be hated forever.