

The Stranger and The Lover: A Female Manifestation of the Existential Modern Man

World or global literature is unique not only for its ability to provide meaningful insight into and deeper connections with one's own history and heritage, but also for its ability to offer a more intimate and authentic understanding of other cultural perspectives and world outlooks. Theo D'haen, editor of *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature* points out that global literature "... is not an arcane subject for ivory tower scholars. [Rather,] it reverberates with the changes taking place in the world itself ... [and] constitutes literature [that] reflects the changing constellations of power around the world: literary, intellectually, but also, and perhaps even foremost, economically, politically, and militarily" (4). In addition, global literature helps its audience redefine the world, transforming it from an abstract concept to a larger community, the nebulous of which is rooted in one's own native land. In his essay, "The Local as the Global Reflections on Teaching World Literature," professor and scholar Emad Mirmotahari emphasizes global literature's power to transform the world from "... something exotic, menacing, and inhospitable [to] an accretion of what [one] considers home..." (53). In doing so, he concludes that global literature is "... especially conducive to fostering an understanding between the local and the global" (53). While Johann von Goethe is widely credited for popularizing the term world literature or *Weltliteratur* in the nineteenth century, global literature today has a long history and is defined in a number of different ways. In its broadest sense, global literature is "... literary works written in any language, in any place, at anytime and anywhere in the world" (Chengzhou and Shuling 2). Some categorize it simply as "... a canon of world literary masterpieces," (2) while others regard it as "... any works of literature that circulate beyond its culture of origin, either in the original language or in translation," (2) and others, still, recognize it as "different literatures of the world conceived as one literature" (3). In

his essay “Goethe and World Literature,” Bhaskar Roy Barman argues that true world literature is distinguished from “... mere fashions of the moment” (18) by “... widespread acclaim that not only transcends nationality, but also stands the test of time.” (18).

This research paper focuses on two works of world literature that embody both the term’s varied definitions and its distinguishing characteristics. The first is Marguerite Duras’ novel *The Lover*, which follows the scandalous relationship between an impoverished 15-year-old girl and her much older Chinese lover in prewar Indochina. The second work is Albert Camus’ novel *The Stranger*, which centers on Meursault, a young, French Algerian who commits a senseless and seemingly unprovoked murder. Both are celebrated texts, credited with exposing the brutality of war and the injustice of colonialism, specifically French imperialism. Since its publication in 1942, Meursault, *The Stranger*’s protagonist, has been hailed by critics as the quintessential existentialist modern man. A philosophical movement that emerged in the twentieth century, following World War II, existentialism is distinguished by absolute freedom of choice, personal sincerity, and absolute autonomy that “... liberates human life from determinism” (Islam 31). Indeed, from beginning to end and to his own detriment, Meursault remains staunchly true to himself and his ideals, disregarding social conventions, cultural propriety, and others’ expectations, while navigating a world that lacks meaning, order, or rational structure and from which he is largely disconnected. In Camus’ “Preface to *The Stranger*,” the author writes of his character:

...the hero of my book is condemned to death because he does not play the game. He refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say what isn’t true. It is also and above all, to say more than is true, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, to express more than one feels. This is what we all do, every day, to simplify life. He says

what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings, and immediately society feels threatened.... He [Meursault] is animated by a passion for the absolute and for the truth. Without it, no conquest of ourselves or of the world will ever be possible. One would therefore not be much mistaken to read *The Stranger* as the story of a man who agrees to die for the truth.” (qtd. in Sagi 90)

It's evident why Meursault is regarded as the epochal literary character who confronts his own existence. But in the male-dominated existentialist movement, little to no consideration was given to female characters who, too, forge their own authentic path at great personal sacrifice and in the face of stifling cultural constraints and scathing social criticisms. One such character is the female protagonist in Duras' *The Lover*. This paper seeks to examine the many parallels between Meursault, Camus' famed existentialist modern man, and Duras' unnamed female narrator in an effort to successfully argue her merits as an important female existentialist figure.

Perhaps the characteristic that most distinguishes the existentialist modern man is his effort “to forge an authentic, meaningful identity” (Saur 197). When defined in these terms, Meursault certainly fits the bill. Seemingly impervious to others' expectations, Meursault lives “... according to [his] own honest personal reactions rather than religious or social norms” (198). For example, he is criticized and, in some ways, convicted at trial for his lack of emotion following his mother's death. Not only is he scrutinized for his lack of emotion at his mother's funeral, he's also lampooned for his actions the day after his mother's burial. Rather than display the grief that social convention dictates in response to the loss of one's only parent, Meursault chooses to enjoy a day at the beach and a comedy movie with his lover Marie. From the outside looking in, society, Meursault's jury, and even his own defense attorney saw a callous, uncaring man. However, Meursault explains rather matter-of-factly that “[... his] nature was such that

[his] physical needs often got in the way of [his] feelings” (65) and that on the day of his mother’s burial he was simply tired, “... so much so that [he] wasn’t really aware of what was going on” (65). Similarly, after Meursault is convicted of murder and condemned to death, he is visited in his jail cell by the prison chaplain seeking to offer Meursault hope in God. Meursault, who denies God’s existence, reacts violently to the chaplain’s unwanted presence and assertions of a higher power. Grabbing the chaplain by the collar, Meursault begins yelling at him and the two must be separated by the prison guards. Meursault, whose self-awareness remains at question up until this very scene notes, “He wasn’t even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man. Whereas it looked as if I was the one who’d come up emptyhanded. But I was sure about me, about everything, surer than he could ever be, sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me” (120). Though his stoicism and detachment ultimately seal his fate, Meursault remains true to his authentic self—despite any perceived deficiencies by others—until the bitter end.

The narrator in Duras’ novel *The Lover* also lives as authentically as she possibly can as a white woman in prewar Indochina. The setting of the novel is important, because there were “strict prohibitions on the sexual and professional behavior of white women in the colony” (Mann 4). Despite these restrictions, however, the narrator is established in the first few pages of the story as a quirky character who marches to the beat of her own drum. Take, for instance, the way she chooses to dress. She insists on pairing her mother’s lowcut, threadbare silk dress with one of her brother’s leather belts, gold lamé stilettos “decorated with little *diamanté* flowers” (12), a man’s flat-brimmed fedora that features a broad black ribbon, and cherry red lipstick. She refers to herself as “... so strangely, so weirdly dressed” (12) and concedes that “No woman, no girl wore a man’s fedora in that colony then. No native woman either” (12). Like Meursault,

however, Duras' narrator is not moved by social convention or expectations. Rather, she acts and reasons by her own set of morals and motivations. Thus, she not only acknowledges the oddity, the singularity of her appearance, she revels in the defiance of it, staking it as "the hallmark of her identity" (Eileraas 15).

In addition to operating as an outsider "... who strives, despite profound doubt, to forge an authentic, meaningful identity," (197) the existential modern man is characterized by his emphasis "on the sensual and physical nature of human life" (198). This holds true for Meursault, who enjoys sex, food, and cigarettes almost to the exclusion of everything else and who is unusually sensitive to sensory stimuli like "the heat of the sun; cool ocean breezes; [and] the tastes of coffee and wine" (198). For example, on the day of his mother's funeral, while his mother's friends cried, Meursault seemed more in touch with his physical surroundings than his own emotions. He noted that the coffee and milk provided by the caretaker were very good. He also took time to examine the hills, the sky streaked with red, the wind, and the smell of sea salt. Adding together these observations, he determined "It was going to be a beautiful day. It had been a long time since I'd been out in the country, and I could feel how much I'd enjoy going for a walk if it hadn't been for Maman" (12). To an outside observer, it almost sounds as if Meursault regards his mother's death with a certain amount of resentment. Rather than approaching her death as a loss to be grieved, Meursault speaks of his mother's burial as an obstruction, a hindrance to what would otherwise be a great day. Similarly, the following day, once back at home, Meursault is at a loss for what to do with his day off. Though he was tired at his mother's Friday funeral and professes to still be tired that Saturday, he opts to go for a swim and runs into Marie Cardona, a typist with whom he'd once had a flirtation. Meursault is decidedly more animated and seemingly more invested in his day with Marie than he had been at

his own mother's funeral. The two spend the afternoon swimming, joking around and laughing. Like at his mother's funeral, Meursault is acutely aware of his physical surroundings. He recalls, "I let my head fall back and rest on her stomach ... I had the whole sky in my eyes and it was blue and gold. On the back of my neck I could feel Marie's heart beating softly" (20). As for his feelings about his day spent Marie, he is less certain, noting: "It was nice, sort of joking around" (20). Following their day at the beach, Meursault invites Marie to a movie. It's only later that evening, when they've both changed clothes and Meursault is donning a black tie—the customary vestiges of someone in mourning—that Marie even becomes aware that he's suffered the loss of his mother and, when he informs Marie that his mother had passed just the day before, she is noticeably surprised. In fact, she gives a little start that nearly prompts Meursault to absolve himself from any guilt by professing that his mother's passing is not his fault. Not one to be mired by the internal, Meursault casually declares in the very next line, "By that evening, Marie had forgotten all about it" (20) and reverts back to ensconcing himself in observations of the external world. He notes that the Fernandel movie they go to see is "funny in parts, but otherwise ... too stupid" (20). Then, almost as quickly as he shifts from the topic of his mother's passing to the silliness of the movie, he describes pressing his leg against Marie's in the theater, fondling her breasts, and giving her a kiss before taking her back to his place.

The narrator in Duras' *The Lover* is also acutely aware of and drawn to the physical nature of human life. In fact, one might argue that it is her astute observations of the physical that impelled her initial entertainment of her lover's advances. Still on the ferry, she notes an elegant man, smoking an English cigarette, get out of a black limousine and approach her. She's aware of his nervousness, his trembling hand as it offers her a cigarette, and she is aware that part of his nervousness is borne from the fact they are two different races—he Chinese, she white—and, as

such, an unacceptable match in French Indochina. After accepting his offer to chauffeur her to her final destination, the narrator climbs into the Chinese businessman's black limousine and, even there, continues to observe: "She listened, watching out for anything to do with his wealth, for indications as to how many millions he had" (34). Eventually, they become more acquainted, and their relationship turns physical. The first time he brings her to his flat, "she pays close attention to externals, to the light, to the noise of the city in which the room is immersed" (36). Shortly afterward, as they consummate their relationship, she becomes aware of her own physical desire, calling it, among other things, a torrent that is simply beyond compare. (38) She takes the lead, undressing him, touching and caressing him, and tells him when and how to move his body.

Like Meursault, *The Lover's* narrator's attachment to the sensual and the physical is closely linked with her subversion of convention. That is to say, her actions and observations are catalyzed by a personally defined and established set of rules and needs that blatantly disregard the parameters set in place and followed by society at large. Just as Meursault's reaction to his mother's death is a misinterpreted byproduct of his physical exhaustion, the reaction of the narrator in Duras' novel to the Chinese businessman's advances is a misinterpreted byproduct of her sense of familial obligation. In "Unachievable Masculinity in Marguerite Duras' *The Lover*", Nanni Mann notes:

The young girl's sense of obligation towards the family's financial well-being is a direct result of the death of the father and the lack of a suitable replacement. With the younger brother's weakness, her mother's madness and the older brother's brutality and lack of obligation, she is the only person in the family capable of filling the part of the patriarch. (3)

However, members of the colony view her liaison as an act catalyzed by sexual desire. Consequently, the couple's relationship irrevocably tarnishes the narrator's reputation. Once known simply as the daughter of the teacher in Sadec, she becomes a "little white tart [who shacks] up in front of everyone with this millionaire Chinese scum" (92), and people gossip that "every morning the little slut goes to have her body caressed by a filthy Chinese millionaire" (89). Her relationship colors the colony's perception of her. For instance, they turn the clothes, shoes, and lipstick she wears—introduced at the beginning of the novel as endearing quirks—into the shameful attributes of a promiscuous woman. Her mother and her two brothers are labeled "a family of white layabouts" (88). Other girls stop speaking to the narrator. Her own aunts refuse to let their daughters (the narrator's cousins) associate with her. Additionally, the narrator is forced to endure beatings from her mother, who also subjects her to humiliating searches of her body and underwear. Her mother says she "can smell the Chinese scent" (58), calls her daughter a prostitute, threatens to throw her out, says she wishes she would die, and labels her "disgraced, worse than a bitch" (58). Her mother informs her that her affair with the Chinese man has forever ruined her chances of marrying in the colony, where "everything gets known" (93). However, the narrator makes plain her reasoning for taking the Chinese man as her lover, despite knowing the ramifications, on the same night she gives herself to him. And, it is not an act of lust. Postcoital, as the couple lay together, she recalls:

We look at each other. He puts his arms around me. Asks me why I came here. I say I had to, it was a sort of obligation. It's the first time we've talked. I tell him I have two brothers. That we haven't any money. All gone. He knows my elder brother, has met him in the local opium dens. I say my brother steals from

my mother to go there, steals from the servants, and that sometimes the keepers of the dens come and demand money from my mother. ... I tell him my mother will die, it can't go on like this. That my mother's approaching death, too....

(39-40)

Thus, at the very beginning, the narrator lays bare her tale of woe, from her family's bankrupt state to her drug-addict brother to her mentally ailing mother. She also confesses that she views their relationship as an arrangement, a means to an end—an obligation that will allow her to “replace the lack of a patriarch in the family” (1) and provide for her mother and brothers through the Chinese businessman. While the narrator's words elicit the pity of her lover, he also understands the arrangement and the role he will play in it. He responds, “You only came because I am rich” (40). In response to his accusation, the narrator answers honestly. “I say that's how I desire him, with his money, that when I first saw him he was already in his car, in his money, so I can't say what I'd have done if he'd been different” (40). In that moment, the two come to a mutual understanding. “He says he certainly hasn't been lucky with me, but he'll give me some money anyway, don't worry” (40).

To further underscore her status as an existentialist character whose fate is one of her own making, the narrator makes it clear that the decision to masculinize herself and borrow, through her Chinese lover and his father, the financial support her family needs is hers alone. On the day she first meets her lover, the narrator acknowledges she “can no longer escape certain duties toward herself” (35). One can interpret that to mean that with her mother and brothers unable to better their family's state, she recognizes that the time has come for her to step into the role of provider. “The Chinese man is the only option she has to establish financial security for the family...” (2). Certainly, the argument can be made that she goes about this the wrong way.

After all, she chooses “a man who is never able to give her permanent financial security through marriage and ... [she sleeps] with the man, removing any chance of a possible future marriage” (2). But the viability of her plan does not negate the fact that it is her plan alone. The day she met her Chinese businessman, she made a conscious choice to pursue him as a means to her family’s survival. “As soon as she got into the black car she knew: she’s excluded from the family for the first time and forever. From now on they will no longer know what becomes of her. Whether she’s taken away from them, carried off, wounded, spoiled, they will no longer know. Neither her mother nor her brothers. That is their fate henceforth” (35). Later, after their relationship turns physical, she marvels at her actions. “I wonder how I had the strength to go against my mother’s prohibition. So calmly, with such determination. How I managed to follow my ideas to their ‘logical conclusion’” (39). Therefore, from beginning to end, she remains true to herself, her motives, and her obligations, even when they are misunderstood or stand in stark contrast to what is socially acceptable.

Another defining characteristic of Meursault as an existential modern man is his lack of “career ambitions or interest in achievement” (198). It speaks not only to his alienation from the world in which he lives, but also from the people in it. While Meursault maintains employment and repeatedly mentions that he works hard at the office, he never appears to aspire to anything more. In fact, when his boss unexpectedly calls him in and offers him a promotion, Meursault is generally uninterested. Though the new position would mean a move to Paris and the opportunity to travel part of the year, Meursault tells his boss the promotion makes no difference to him. When his boss counters by asking Meursault if he’s “interested in a change of life” (41), Meursault readily confesses that he is not. “I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and I wasn’t dissatisfied with mine...” (41). Meursault

openly admits he has no real ambition, that he hasn't had ambition since his youth. "When I was a student, I had lots of ambition..." (41) he recalls. "But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered" (41). This ambivalence transfers to other areas of Meursault's life as well, particularly his relationships. His acquaintance with his neighbor Raymond, for instance, is more a matter of convenience than one of true friendship. Meursault introduces him as an unpopular neighbor, rumored to live off women, who stops by Meursault's place on occasion because Meursault listens to him. One evening, Raymond invites Meursault over to his place for blood sausage and wine. Meursault goes, not because he particularly enjoys Raymond's company, but because eating at Raymond's apartment would spare Meursault the inconvenience of having to cook for himself. During this visit, Raymond asks Meursault if he wants to be pals, to which Meursault unenthusiastically and noncommittally replies "it [is] fine with me" (29). After they've eaten, Raymond enlists Meursault's help to write a letter to his girlfriend, who he is convinced has cheated on him. His plan is to write her a letter "one with a punch and also some things in it to make her sorry for what she's done. Then, when she came running back, he'd go to bed with her and right at the last minute he'd spit in her face and throw her out" (32) to punish her. Though it is clearly an unconscionable plan, Meursault agrees to write the letter and gives no other reasoning for his complicity than that he wants to please Raymond. Both his lack of ambition and his ambivalence toward the few relationships in his life, including his mother, Raymond, and Marie, are characteristic of the "psychological and spiritual malaise of the alienated existential modern man" (202).

As an existential modern woman, *The Lover's* narrator also exhibits a lack of ambition to achieve the traditional goals for women of marriage and motherhood. Nor is she interested in the course her mother has mapped out for her, centered on education and earning a math degree. Her

disinterest in her studies does not mean she is unintelligent, however. Her mother notes on several occasions how easily academics come to the narrator—much more easily than they came to the mother when she was a student. Still, the more involved she becomes with her lover, the more the narrator neglects her studies. When their affair becomes public knowledge, she gives up all pretense of trying to be a good student and begins to skip classes and stay overnight at her lover's flat. Her absence eventually catches the attention of the head of the boarding school, who informs the narrator's mother of her daughter's misdeeds. "... there were strict prohibitions on the sexual and professional behavior of white women in the colony, and 'the colonial discourses of sexuality, gender, and race assigned to French women in Indochina [was] the subject-position of the racially and sexually pure guardian of whiteness'" (5). This meant remaining respectable by sticking with one's own kind. Thus, the narrator's actions seem particularly unwise and, perhaps, a product of the carelessness of youth. Considering that few options existed for colonial white women outside of marriage and motherhood or independence gained through education, she appears to have all but backed herself into a corner. However, when the narrator's mother informs the narrator that her relationship with the Chinese businessman has left her permanently disgraced and, thus, unweddable, the narrator merely shrugs and smiles. She simply has no desire to play by society's rules or to live up to any expectations other than her own. In fact, much to her mother's chagrin, the narrator announces that her one true desire is to become a writer of books, novels. Her mother disapproves. "She's against it, it's not worthy, it's not real work, it's nonsense ... a childish idea" (21). Ever the existentialist character, though, the narrator is unmoved by her mother's disapproval. Rather than be deterred, she predicts that she will be the first of her three siblings to leave home. "There are still a few years to wait before she loses me, loses this one of her children. For the sons there's

nothing to fear. But this one, she knows, one day she'll go, she'll manage to escape" (22). And, in the end, she manages to achieve all she's told she can't, escaping her family, she becomes a wife, a mother, and a writer.

One last characteristic of the existentialist modern man is the fulfillment of his sexual desires without emotional attachment. Meursault does not hide his attraction to and physical desire for Marie. On multiple occasions he mentions how beautiful she is, and he always seems to enjoy her company. Generally, an emotionless character, he occasionally breaks from this stoicism when he is with Marie, laughing and playfully joking with her. In the morning, when she's left his bed, he rolls over and tries to find the scent of her hair on his pillow. He even invites her on weekend getaway with Raymond to a friend's beach house. For all intents and purposes, they are a couple seemingly headed toward serious commitment. However, when Marie asks if Meursault loves her, his answer is probably not. When she asks if he wants to marry her, he says it doesn't make him a difference. "I explained to her that it didn't really matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. ... I said we could do it whenever she wanted" (42). Later, however, after the shooting, when Meursault is in prison, he grows indifferent toward Marie, even refusing to look at her during his trial. Initially she visits and writes him but, over time, she stops. Meursault is unfazed. "Anyway, after that, remembering Marie meant nothing to me. People would forget me when I was dead. They wouldn't have anything more to do with me" (115).

The Lover's narrator is equally unencumbered by emotional attachment, at least throughout most of the story. She enjoys their sexual liaisons, and even, at times, acts as the sexual aggressor, undressing him and instructing him how to move his body when he is inside if her. Though younger than her lover, the narrator wields a considerable amount of power of him.

“... he adores me,” she notes matter-of-factly. “I’m the darling of his life. He lives in terror lest I meet another man. I’m never afraid of anything like that” (63). In many ways, there narrator seems to be living the old adage, “He who loves the least has the most power.” Her lover weeps the first time they have sex. He tries everything to impress the young girl’s disapproving family, taking them to expensive dinners and enduring their entitled and hateful attitude toward him. Desperate to be with her, he even implores his father to allow him to be with the narrator. “He’d begged [his father] to let him have his turn at living, just once, this passion, this madness, this infatuation with the little white girl, he’d asked him to give him time to love her a while longer ... let him have her a little longer, another year, perhaps, because it wasn’t possible for him to give up this love yet, it was too new, too strong still” (83). Contrarily, when out in public with her family and her lover, the narrator admittedly mistreats the latter. “In my brother’s presence he ceases to be my lover. He doesn’t cease to exist, but he’s no longer anything to me. ... My desire obeys my elder brother, rejects my lover. ... he becomes an unmentionable outrage, a cause of shame who ought to be kept out of sight” (52). Likewise, when the narrator’s mother accuses her of taking a Chinese lover and verbally and physically attacks her for disgracing herself and their family, the narrator completely denies the relationship. “I lie. I swear by my own life that nothing has happened to me, nothing, not even a kiss” (59). Though the lover, responding to his father’s threat to cut him off financially, does eventually end the relationship with the young narrator, he seems far more emotionally vested in their relationship than she ever is. In fact, the reader only glimpses her love for him in the very last pages of the story. Aboard a ship, on her way to France, she secretly weeps for the loss of her lover. “She wept without letting anyone see her tears, because he was Chinese and one oughtn’t to weep for that kind of lover” (111).

When compared side by side, the narrator in Duras' *The Lover* and the protagonist in Camus' *The Stranger* parallel each other in many ways. They are both isolated characters—outsiders who eschew social conventions and expectations in favor of forging their own authentic paths. Long heralded as the archetypal existential modern man, Meursault holds true to who he is, never allowing external circumstances, including the death of his mother, to change his behavior or his reactions to those around him. While his motivations are often misinterpreted by others and his choices and stoicism work to further isolate him from the rest of the world, he remains unapologetically honest about who he is and who he isn't. From his emphasis on the sensual and physical nature of human life to his lack of career ambitions or interest in achievement to his fulfillment of his sexual desires without emotional attachment, Meursault lives according to a personal set of values and ideals that not even the threat of execution can undermine. Likewise, the young narrator in Duras' *The Lover* lives according to her own set of rules. From the way she dresses to her decision to take a much older, Chinese lover to her ambition to write books for a living, she makes her own choices. Neither her family's disapproval, nor the colony's social constraints deter her from remaining true to her own desires or to her sense of familial obligation. Therefore, she, like Meursault, has earned a place among the great existential literary characters and can be considered a female manifestation of the quintessential existentialist modern man.

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