THE IDEA IN THE CHARACTER:
PROTAGONISTS DEFINED BY PHILSOPHIC PRINCIPLES

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Winter-Spring 2017

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program at Vermont College of Fine Arts

The concept that the atom is the basic building block of all matter is forced by educators into the long-term memory of their pupils at a very early stage in education. I could not unlearn what the atom is at this point in my life—after having heard about it, read about it, and seen diagrams of the simple atom itself hundreds of times—no matter how strongly I might desire to. The simplest concepts also happen to be the concepts that are easiest for the human mind to cling onto: 2 + 2 = 4, humans breath oxygen and plants breathe carbon dioxide, Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492, etc. Similar in simplicity and principle to these concepts, but requiring a bit more abstraction, is the word functioning as the basic building block of any style or form of writing. Words are used and played with at a much earlier age than a child learns that the atom is the basic building block of matter or that Columbus sailed to America in 1492, but the use of words in constructing sentences—making writing—is not a concept that sticks to the mind as easily as simple math equations or scientific facts. More power is required of the brain to break down the process of words and writing to its root principles. Perhaps, a child easily recollects that for, and, nor, but, or, and yet are conjunctions—words used to separate sentences with a comma instead of a period—but to excel at writing, the process requires more depth of thought than the memorization of simple principles. Thus, the word must be recognized as the building block of all writing; it is the atom. The two nouns, atom and word, function the same in their given subjects. From the word all writing is constructed. Letters are arbitrary. The alphabet exists and dictates the spelling of words but beyond that plays no part in the writing itself.

To expand on the concept, as atoms become elements, more complex matter, words become sentences, more complex parts of language. Different elements are made of atoms that differ in their degree of complication. Each element has a specific combination of protons that make it unique. Hydrogen is the simplest element; it is made up of a single proton. Then, in

contrast, the most complicated element, Oganesson, is made up of 118 protons. As with elements in nature, the complexity of the sentence differs in how it is constructed. A sentence at its simplest is constructed of a subject and a verb, nothing more. The boy runs: the hydrogen of sentences. As sentences become more complex, dependent clauses are added, both at the beginning and end of sentences, indirect objects, and prepositions are added, etc. There are many tools to complicate sentences, and—like in chemistry, with elements—the simplest and the most complex in tandem serve to create something greater. One product of the combination of elements is water, a simple compound of hydrogen and oxygen that humanity depends on for survival. I like to think in writing the story functions similarly to the way water functions in nature.

Within writing, stories are the lifeblood of the medium. Although writing serves many purposes—lyrical, cathartic, prophetic, just to name a few—the story is the only type of writing with the potential to demonstrate any and all of its purposes. A story can be lyrical like poetry, the short story *The Dead* by James Joyce being the perfect example, a story that weaves a beautiful image of upper-crust individuals in twentieth-century Dublin. Stories should be cathartic both for the author and the reader. A shared experience is created between the author and reader. Delving into a story is-and-always-will-be an escape from the mundanity and anxiety of daily existence, whether you are the writer or the reader. Stories can be prophetic in purpose and execution. George Orwell's novel *1984* is currently flying off of bookshelves and selling out on Amazon because of how prescient the words have become to the current political mood of the United States. Stories are the ultimate potential of words and sentences. Most practiced religion is made up of stories. Stories have existed longer than words, but words and sentences as they came to be, became the perfect conduit for the story.

At the root of all stories there was an idea that sparked it into being. Like the word is the basic building block of sentences—of the written word—in a practical sense, and thus of stories as well, the idea is the basic building block of stories in a metaphysical sense, through abstraction. Without the writer's initial idea there is no story. Stories can be birthed from multiple ideas and often are. A novel like *Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut is nothing but ideas loosely connected through character interaction and coincidence. Vonnegut informs his reader in the beginning of the novel that the function of the novel, first-and-foremost, was as a fiftieth birthday gift to himself, and it contained the ideas that were important to him and enjoyable for him to write about. In contrast to the way Vonnegut went about writing *Breakfast of Champions*, is the story (or novel, as I will specifically be looking at moving forward, the long-form story) crafted completely around a very specific idea. There is occasion upon which a writer is so haunted by an idea, a study of theirs, that they devote the unwinding, or making-sense-of, the specific idea haunting them, the principle upon which their mind cannot break, into a complete novel. The result of this process, the novels that have come to fruition from writers enslaved by lofty, single notions, have come to be known as the novel of ideas. These novels often deal with the spiritual, the philosophical, the psychological—basically, the metaphysical and abstract. Not to say those qualities are exclusive to the novel of ideas. Again, *Breakfast of Champions* proves the perfect example because despite the method through which it was written, it still deals with very lofty, philosophic, spiritual, and psychological subject matter.

The idea developed to its full potential, or its full understandable potential, is what earns 'the novel of ideas' its own title—its own genre practically—within literature. Many, if not all, of the works of Dostoevsky can be included within this categorization. Ultimately, through all of Dostoevsky's writing, he was using the writing itself as a tool to uncover the truth as to whether

or not a god exists in the universe. Of course, that question being what he was seeking the answer to in his writing, it also became the theme of most of his great writings: *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Possessed*, and *Notes From Underground* all demonstrating Dostoevsky's search. David Foster Wallace—looking at a more contemporary author—also wrote in this tradition. *Infinite Jest* is the perfect example of the novel of ideas. In *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace deeply analyzed the consequences and roots of depression, most of his characters in the novel suffering from the disease in some form—as well as himself, the author, having been a victim of depression throughout his life. Other notable authors who have written novels of ideas include Leo Tolstoy, James Baldwin, Voltaire, and Margaret Atwood. Clearly there are many more than are listed, far too many to include in a list, in fact.

Within 'the novel of ideas' genre, an interesting tool used at times to strengthen the focus on whatever concept or philosophy is being dissected and analyzed is turning the protagonist of the piece into a conduit for the principle itself. If the character at the heart of the work is defined by the principle the work concerns, all points, plots, sub-plots, and themes will directly correlate to the philosophy of the work. It all happens through the protagonist. They dictate the course a novel takes. The philosophic principle is channeled through the protagonist into the life and blood of the work—into its essence. A protagonist wholly representing the philosophic principle of a work becomes a powerful literary tool in the novel of ideas. The clarity with which an idea can be communicated is increased exponentially when it is done so through the definition given to the protagonist of the work. There are two novels of ideas where the utilization of protagonist taking on philosophic principle in their being clearly stands out: *The Stranger* by Albert Camus and *Wittgenstein's Mistress* by David Markson. Fascinating, in-and-of-itself, the title of each novel addresses the philosophic principle upon which the work is a meditation and the

protagonist of the work. In Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Meursault perfectly represents the absurd hero that Camus developed in his manifesto on the philosophy of absurdism, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, the protagonist, Kate, is the complete embodiment of Wittgenstein's particular brand of solipsism concerning language.

In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Kate—the proposed, metaphorical mistress of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein—sits, observes, thinks, and writes. The cyclical process that she goes through makes up the entirety of the novel. At a point in the novel she informs all of the words on the page, which the reader has processed through, mulled over, are the musings she has transcribed into a typewriter over the course of weeks. This confession creates an incredibly close relationship between the reader and Kate. Markson uses Kate's epistles as a tool to bring the reader as close as possible to the subject of his philosophic novel. Because Kate is clearly mad, the closeness between subject/character and reader makes for a harrowing, claustrophobic journey—most paragraphs in the novel consisting of one or two convoluted sentences.

Kate, in the first page of the novel, claims that she is the last living creature on the planet. She never addresses what happened to wipe out the population of earth, but instead muses on history, art, and her journey in the time since people started disappearing. Occasionally she ruminates on the past—but these ruminations are few and far between—about the husband she used to have, the child who passed away, and the people she left messages for. As the novel progresses, the question becomes more and more pronounced: is Kate actually the last living creature on the planet or is she insane? It doesn't take a savvy, investigative reader to come to the conclusion that Kate is in fact mad, but the nature of her madness is what becomes baffling. Through Kate's ruminations—in a progressive fashion, like the exposure to madness also—it becomes clear she is a brilliant character. The wealth of knowledge she possesses and ability to

draw parallels between different artists, literary figures, and philosophers is unparalleled. At times she mixes up the facts, like when she misquotes the words of the philosopher from which the novel takes its namesake. Nonetheless, the apparent understanding she has of the world of art, culture, and history is far above that of the average person. Plot-wise, the central question the novel asks is what brought Kate to the place of madness her mind occupies? The answer, vague through Kate's stream-of-consciousness, seems to be the destruction of her family life. She suggests her relationship with her husband crumbled due to her infidelity. She also suggests that she is responsible for the death of her child. It seems the path of isolation those events set Kate on is what lead to the existence of interiority she demonstrates. Kate lives completely inside her mind; the world of thoughts and language becomes everything to her.

In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Kate is a living conduit for the philosophy of solipsism, especially concerning language. The word solipsism finds its root in two different Latin words: *solus* meaning alone, and *ipse* meaning self—alone with the self. Broken down to its most basic understanding, solipsism centers on the concept that the only thing an individual can trust to exist is their own mind. Wittgenstein's early work in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* largely focuses on solipsism concerning language. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein makes seven propositions that summarize the intent of the work:

1. The world is everything that is the case.
2. What is the case (a fact) is the existence of states of affairs.
3. A logical picture of facts is a thought.
4. A thought is a proposition with a sense.
5. A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions. (An elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself.)

6. The general form of a proposition is the form of a truth function . . . This is the general form of a proposition.
7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. (Wittgenstein)

Words are all that exist to make sense of the world. Because words are largely insufficient for defining the world, the individual can only understand the world through the sense prescribed to it by him or herself. Thus, Wittgenstein defines a solipsism based strictly around language and words. This is the trap Markson makes Kate fall into in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. When she is left completely alone, devoid of human interaction, all she has are her inadequate words to define the world. In her loneliness, she sits at a typewriter and creates her own brilliant and nonsensical world based on her interpretation of experiences she previously had in the world. She is defined by solipsism and it is reflected through her writing. In David Foster Wallace's essay on *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, *The Empty Plenum*, he says about Kate, "His mistress, though, asks the question her master in print does not: What if somebody really had to *live* in a *Tractatus*ized world?" (Wallace 246).

One example of Kate being defined by a '*Tractatus*ized' solipsism, utilized throughout her epistles in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, is the way she ruminates on houses. In the novel, Kate claims that she is living in a beach house somewhere along the eastern coast of the United States. She often discusses her perspective of the houses nearby the house she occupies and a specific house she deconstructed to use as firewood. The main point of concern for Kate being how is a house defined? What makes a house? Kate recognizes the construct she occupies along the beach as a house. Traditionally defined, it is a house. There are many houses that she observes close to the house she occupies, but she struggles to define them as houses in the same way she does the

house she lives in. This is where language begins to fail Kate through the solipsism that defines her. Kate writes:

> What I was looking at was the other house, which is deep in the woods some distance from here.
>
> I do not believe I have ever mentioned the other house.
>
> What I may have mentioned are houses in general, along the beach, but such a generalization would not have included this house, this house being nowhere near the water.
>
> All one can see of it from that upper rear window is a corner of its roof.
>
> In fact I was not aware of the other house at all when I came to this one . . .
>
> One cannot see this house from that one . . .
>
> After all, why on earth should one be able to see one house from another, but not vice versa? Surely there is no difference in the distance between this house and that, and that house and this? (Markson 88, 91)

Kate struggles with her perception of things from the vantage points of the two different houses. From her house she can see another house, but when she goes to that house, she cannot see her house. Factually, this is irreconcilable for Kate since the houses are the same distance apart. She also struggles to categorize the other house along with the houses she has already grouped into a single category. The houses she has referred to in the past all sit on a beach. The new house she visits is in the woods. In Kate's world, this other house, functioning differently, seems like it should earn some sort of distinction as a different thing, but in the language she uses to define her world, she has nothing to call it but a house. The reality Kate creates in her mind is telling her things are different than their physical manifestations represent and the words she possesses

to describe those manifestations. In another instance there is a house Kate used to live in, that she has begun breaking into pieces to use as kindling in the fireplace at her new house. Kate struggles with, through the deconstruction, whether the old house is still a house or not. She writes:

> Granting that I am burning that house board by board, and that it will be quite some time before I have dismantled it full enough to be able to consider it as having been burned to the ground, nonetheless the fact that I am doing exactly that would appear to be indisputable . . .
>
> There is the house that I dismantled board by board and erased to the ground, I will think in walking past. (Markson 79)

Since the house exists still in a partial state, Kate can't come to terms with whether it is a house or whether it is burned to the ground. What is something that is half of something concrete and half of something completely different that is also concrete? The way Kate recognizes and struggles with these pretty commonplace phenomena would not become a flutter of a thought for a person blissfully in their right mind. Yet for Kate, these notions torture her day-in-and-day-out, causing her to question the world, making her the last woman in the world—in her solipsistic mind and writing. Wallace writes, "Kate's damnation to a world logically atomized in its reflective relation to language as bare data-transfer concern the narrator's obsession, marvelously American, with property & easements & houses" (Wallace 257).

Another demonstration of the solipsism that plagues Kate's mind—that defines her—is her repeated ruminations on historical figures and artists. As Kate repeatedly makes connections between historic figures, the connections never remain the same. The connections are in flux. Kate will be thinking of an accomplishment of a particular artist, and something about her

recollection will cause her mind to divert to the accomplishments of another artist. Because Kate made a connection between the artists, she decides there must be historical precedence for this. The precedence is often created by Kate or eschewed from true, recorded history. The situations in which artists are connected also change in her mind as she continues to ruminate. Despite this, the connections, in the moment, remain true to Kate because the connection is what gets her from point A to point B. Without the connections, why in the world would her mind be jumping so quickly? Kate must create means to reconcile this question. Of Rembrandt and Spinoza living in the same part of the world around the same period of time, Kate ruminates:

> On the other hand it is probably safe to assume that Rembrandt and Spinoza surely would have at least passed on the street, now and again.
>
> Or even run into each other quite frequently, if only at some neighborhood shop or other.
>
> And certainly they would have exchanged amenities as well, after a time.
>
> Good morning, Rembrandt. Good morning to you, Spinoza.
>
> I was extremely sorry to hear about your bankruptcy, Rembrandt. I was extremely sorry to hear about your excommunication, Spinoza. (Markson, 142)

Rembrandt and Spinoza were both Dutch, and they both lived during the mid-1600s. Kate believes that both Spinoza and Rembrandt being on her mind must be beyond coincidence. Otherwise, why would they both be there? Thus, she creates a highly unlikely circumstance and convinces herself it is the matter-of-fact truth. This is the path of my mind, so obviously it is taking me down this road for a purpose, seems to be Kate's justification. Interestingly, the circumstance under which she weaves the meeting of Spinoza and Rembrandt is one of mutual disaster. They are acquaintances of epic proportion that exist in the same place and time to

console each other over their losses. This function is manipulative of Kate's mind. To Kate, everything is a product of loneliness and loss, and she is comforted by the notion of a universal loneliness. Again, in *The Empty Plenum*, Wallace writes, "And since no things *present* connect either with each other or with her, Kate's memorial project in *WM* is sensible & inevitable even as it reinforces the occluded solipsism that is her plight. Via her memorial project, Kate makes 'external' history *her own*. Ie rewrites it as personal" (Wallace 255-256). Due to the solipsism Markson defines Kate by, and the loneliness he makes central to her interior plight, anything that manifests in Kate's mind must be connected to her experience and her emotions, and in being so, is dire.

Finally, the most tragic representation of Kate's solipsistic mind in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is the way she relates to events from her actual existence. Throughout the novel Kate makes allusions to a family she once had. Even more subtle, inferences can be made from a few of Kate's thoughts that the basis for her reversion into a solipsistic world—allowing the philosophy to become a virus that overtakes her mind—is the disintegration of her family and her inability to cope with the tragedy. Kate defines herself by Wittgenstein's musings as a means of disassociating herself. By allowing her mind to function in a way where there is no meaning except what is found in words—and words are inadequate means of definition—Kate provides herself the opportunity to confuse the tragedy in her life she felt overwhelmingly burdened by and responsible for. As Kate is writing in the state she is in, the story of her previous life, before bowing to solipsism, is all but gone. Toward the end of the novel she writes, "Because what I am also suddenly now thinking about is that it could be an absolutely autobiographical novel that would not start until after I was alone, obviously" (Markson, 230). Which is in fact exactly what Kate is writing within the narrative structure of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. The only solution to

overcoming the tragedy in her life was by becoming Wittgenstein's mistress, and when she did so a new life was formed, one, despite its loneliness, that is easier for Kate to cope with. And it is not difficult to justify Kate's method of coping, or at least to feel sympathy toward it. When she does have flashes to the past, the extent of the tragedy she suggests is intense. Moments before the notion of writing a solipsistic, autobiographical novel, Kate lets slip the most defined references to her previous life:

> There being surely as many things one would prefer never to remember as there are those one would wish to, of course…
>
> And even if it was nobody's fault that Lucien died after all.
>
> Although probably I did leave out this part before, about having taken lovers when I was still Adam's wife.
>
> Even if one forgets whether one's husband had become drunk because one had done that, or if one had done that because one's husband had become drunk. (Markson, 225-226)

Kate confesses, abstractly, that negligent familial relationships lead to the death of her son and the disintegration of her marriage. Interestingly, blame is the one factor the solipsism she has become defined by denies her the memory of. Her mind goes to the past, but it refuses to make sense of it. Solipsism refuses to allow her the burden of guilt that she sought the interiority of solipsism to relieve her from in the first place. In Wallace's essay he relates the realism of Kate's struggle on a broad scale by writing, "For (obvious tho this seems) to the extent that Kate is not motivationally unique, she can be all of us, and the empty diffraction of Kate's world can map or picture the desacralized & paradoxical solipsism of U.S. persons in a cattle-herd culture that worships only the transparent I" (Wallace, 268). Basically, with the understanding Kate has of

complex philosophy, history, and art, it is not so farfetched that she would allow her mind to embrace the labyrinthine abyss she does in becoming Wittgenstein's Mistress.

In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Kate is the perfect representation of a character being defined by the philosophic principle "the novel of ideas" is intent upon analyzing. By making Kate a living embodiment of Wittgenstein's solipsism and putting the reader directly into Kate's mind, Markson allows the philosophy to take on organic qualities in his text. As the reader grows closer to Kate throughout the course of the novel, the solipsistic world she lives in becomes one the reader understands better and better through her musings. Wallace sums it up succinctly and beautifully in *The Empty Plenum* when he writes, "But, see, this is *exactly* what Markson does in *WM*; and in this way Markson's novel succeeds in speaking where Wittgenstein is mute, weaving Kate's obsession with responsibility (for the world's emptiness) gorgeously into the character's mandala of cerebral conundrum & spiritual poverty" (Wallace, 260).

The hero, Meursault, in Albert Camus's 'novel of ideas', *The Stranger*, functions similarly to the way Kate does in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Whereas Markson probes and expands upon Wittgenstein's solipsism, Camus writes about absurdism, his own philosophy that was a response to twentieth century existentialism. *The Stranger*, similarly to *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, is written from the first-person perspective of its hero, but it is a simpler novel in nature. *The Stranger* is broken up into two parts that have a very clear breaking point. In the first part of the novel Meursault is a free man, and in the second part of the novel he is incarcerated. Although being more plot-driven than *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, *The Stranger* is still light on plot and action. It is an introspective novel, careening into the final part of the absurd hero's life.

The novel begins with Meursault's mother dying and her funeral. Despite having loved his mother, Meursault feels very little in the way of an emotional response to her passing.

Meursault's response perplexes the people in his life, the opinion constantly being expressed to him that he should be grieving more openly. Nothing changes the way Meursault feels, and he retreats back to a life of normalcy and routine, as quickly as possible, following the death of his mother. The remainder of the first part of the novel consists of Meursault delving into a casual relationship with a woman he is attracted to, named Marie, and his time spent with her and his dubious friend Raymond. The climax of the novel, and finale of the first part, is when Meursault, for no reason, kills an Arab on the beach.

In the second part of *The Stranger*, Meursault is incarcerated for the murder he committed. Page time in the second part of the novel is committed to Meursault's ease at adjusting to prison life, the mockery of a trial he is given, and his ultimate execution. Because Meursault is emotionally detached from the mundanity of life, adjusting to an existence in prison is no problem for him. Just as well in one place as the other seeming to be the way he emotionally responds to any situation he is put in. This aloofness is also what is used against him in his trial, ultimately to seal his fate with the death sentence. The prosecuting attorney time and again accuses Meursault of being morally corrupt. The attorney's greatest evidence, at least that he provides the court, in support of Meursault's moral bankruptcy is his lack of emotion during his mother's funeral. The trial, as depicted by Camus, is never about the actual murder, but instead is a trial of Meursault's moral sensibilities: Meursault's inability to cry at his mother's funeral being what is held against him strongest of all. After the trial, Meursault accepts his fate. He is at peace with being put to death. The only hiccough in the proceedings is the violent response Meursault has to the priest attempting to save his soul before his sentence is acted upon. Meursault explains, "Then, I don't know why, but something inside me snapped. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him and told him not to waste his prayers on me. I grabbed

him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy" (Camus, 120). Following his encounter with the chaplain, Meursault peacefully goes to the guillotine with a smile on his face.

Absurdism is a philosophy created by Albert Camus and expressed in great detail in the author's essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus was enamored with 19th century existential philosophy, but left unsatisfied in the conclusions drawn from the key tenants of that school of thought. Camus recognized Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Shestov were keenly aware of the absurdity in the world, but Camus found dissatisfaction in their response to the actualization. In Camus' thinking, Shestov focused too heavily on despair, Kierkegaard too much on hope in a higher being. These earlier philosophers recognized what was absurd in the world, but their responses, according to Camus, came from a place of fear, historical background, and/or other factors. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus defined the absurd as, "the divorce between man and his life, actor and his setting…" (Camus, 6). Basically, the question of life and its meaning is beyond the ability of the human mind to understand; the world is a concept too complex. In recognition of the absurd, irrational world, Camus asserts one question must be asked of the self: is suicide necessary? Throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus hammers the point into the reader's psyche, the only rational response to an irrational world, a world that doesn't exist as most will or desire it to, is suicide. Throughout history, blind responses have come about as substitutes to what Camus claimed is the obvious response: religion being what he focused on most. Religion was created and continues to be practiced because the mind can rationalize that a greater being created and understands the world, since the human mind cannot. Ultimately as reconciliation between the ignorant, spirituality and other blind responses to the absurd, and the obvious, rational suicide, Camus says, "There is thus a metaphysical honor in enduring the

world's absurdity. Conquest or play-acting, multiple loves, absurd revolt are tributes that man pays to his dignity in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance" (Camus, 93). Suicide makes sense as a response to the absurd, of course, and yet, life has qualities too enjoyable—qualities that supersede the fatalism of honorable suicide. Finding a rather optimistic solution to a cynical world-view, Camus concludes humanity must revolt against the absurd, and in revolt, humanity demonstrates its value and greatness. In tandem to the scribbling of philosophical musings in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus worked on the novel *The Stranger*. Seemingly, *The Stranger* acted as a parable companion piece to the philosophical text.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus details three different, archetypal absurd heroes, emblematic of a proper revolt against the absurd: the Don Juan, the actor, and the conqueror. Camus defines his absurd hero as, "assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime" (Camus, 66). All three archetypes, as defined by Camus, demonstrate the values of the absurd man to a T.

The Don Juan embraces earthly love regardless of consequence. In absurdism, the Don Juan is not the prototypical player—accumulating notches in his belt of conquest—but he is one who embraces the joys of physical love and the unparalleled pleasure that is a result of love making. The Don Juan seeks constant pleasure in response to his acknowledgement of the briefness and pointlessness of life. Camus says of the Don Juan, "Don Juan does not think of "collecting" women. He exhausts their number and with them his chances of life. "Collecting" amounts to being capable of living off one's past. But he rejects regret, the other form of hope. He is incapable of looking at portraits" (Camus, 72).

The actor lives as many lives as possible within his life. Through accepting the absurd, the actor discovers the pleasure of accumulated life. The actor can be whoever he wants, for however long he desires, and through this experiment, experience so much more of the world than individuals devoted solely to themselves. Camus asserts, "Never has the absurd been so well illustrated or at such length. What more revelatory epitome can be imagined than those marvelous lives, those exceptional and total destinies unfolding for a few hours within a stage set? (Camus 78-79).

Finally, the conqueror responds to the absurd in a more forward manner than the Don Juan or the Actor. The conqueror has witnessed man and his many different philosophies and lifestyles. The conqueror can respect each choice individually, but he relies on forward progress—taking the world for himself. The conqueror is constantly moving through life and analyzing himself. Camus exults the conqueror:

> Conquerors sometimes talk of vanquishing and overcoming. But it is always 'overcoming oneself' that they mean. You are well aware of what that means. Every man has felt himself to be the equal of a god at certain moments. At least, this is the way it is expressed. But this comes from the fact that in a flash he felt the amazing grandeur of the human mind. The conquerors are merely those among men who are conscious enough of their strength to be sure of living constantly on those heights and fully aware of that grandeur. (Camus, 88)

In *The Stranger*, the protagonist, Meursault, represents, at different points through his journey, all three of Camus' absurd heroes. By creating a character and placing that character in realistic, yet absurd, scenarios—making that character take on the archetypes of absurdism—throughout the novel, Camus is able to provide a more practical, less abstract, illustration of what the absurd

man is. By defining his character by the tenants of his philosophy, Camus gives the philosophy itself greater meaning.

Meursault's role as the Don Juan is the most obvious of the three archetypes in *The Stranger*. Early in the novel, shortly after the funeral of his mother, Meursault runs into a former co-worker, Marie, while out swimming and is quickly attracted to her. The two characters consummate a physical relationship in a matter of days. Meursault enjoys being around Marie, and he enjoys having sex with her, enough to continue in a relationship, but as Marie falls in love with Meursault, he doesn't reciprocate the emotion. For Meursault, Marie is no more than a source of pleasure. It is not that Meursault is using Marie for sex, but because Meursault is the absurd man, love is nothing, physical pleasure the ultimate. Meursault provides a snapshot of his dynamic with Marie, "That evening Marie came to see me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said it didn't make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I answered the same way I had the last time, that it didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't love her" (Camus, 41). Not believing in love, marriage is a meaningless institution as far as Meursault is concerned, yet, since Meursault enjoys sex with Marie, he is not opposed to marrying her. Throughout the novel Marie continues to love Meursault but cannot reconcile his attitude toward love. For Meursault, there is nothing about Marie in particular that is worth committing to other than that he enjoys being with her and fucking her. It isn't misogyny or bigotry, but it is absurdity. There is no point for Meursault to be attached, but if something pleases him and continues to do so, the pleasure is worth whatever label must be slapped on it. Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

> If it were sufficient to love, things would be too easy. The more one loves, the stronger the absurd grows. It is not through lack of love that Don Juan goes from woman

> to woman. It is ridiculous to represent him as a mystic in quest of total love. But it is indeed because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest. (Camus, 69)

The catharsis of passion is what Meursault finds when he is with Marie, but he knows it is not the same as her love. Thus, Meursault must express indifference toward her. It could be anyone Meursault feels the passion toward, and if someone were to cross his path that could increase his passion, he would move on from Marie to this new person. Meursault demonstrates his understanding of the absurd, and his revolt toward it in his relationship with Marie in *The Stranger*. Toward the end of the novel, while in prison, Meursault ruminates on the depth to which he misses sex, but he also thinks it is not sex with Marie in particular he misses; he misses good, passionate sex.

In the different roles Meursault takes on throughout *The Stranger*, he perfectly manifests the absurd archetype of the actor. In *The Stranger*—a novel that spans a relatively short period of time, less than a year—Meursault is put in the position to take on many different roles, and he never fails to accept the different roles that are presented. Whether it is grieving son, loyal friend, passionate lover, cold-blooded killer, or prisoner, Meursault accomplishes all of the roles thrust upon him with the same satiated indifference. Meursault goes out of his way to attend his mother's funeral as a grieving son. Yet, his grieving is deemed not good enough by most. Meursault's grieving doesn't align with the culturally accepted state of grief. With the same aplomb, Meursault accepts the role of loyal friend to his neighbor Raymond, despite the nefariousness of Raymond's actions. He makes love to Marie passionately, but not in the way Marie desires. When he is compelled by the environment to kill a stranger, he does so. Finally, upon imprisonment for his crime, Meursault makes no resistance; he accepts his fate willingly.

Failing in the cultural perception of the way roles should be filled—with the exception of killer—demonstrates Meursault's place as an absurd man. It is not the role itself in any given circumstance that appeals to Meursault, but it is the opportunity to fill so many roles in which he finds value. There is no single role Meursault values more than the other; he simply accepts every opportunity for a different life in revolt against the absurd. How quickly Meursault makes the decision to switch roles, as the actor, is never more evident than when he kills a man on the beach. Meursault describes the incident:

> It occurred to me that all I had to do was turn around and that would be the end of it…The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman…The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire. My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started…Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. (Camus 58-59).

The day Meursault became killer began with him passionately spending time with Marie and his friend Raymond. All it took for Meursault to switch from unassuming citizen to killer was a change in the weather, a change that prompted his nature and provided an opportunity. Meursault took advantage of the opportunity and accepted a brand new role. Camus elaborates in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "Entering into all these lives, experiencing them in their diversity, amounts to acting them out. I am not saying that actors in general obey that impulse, that they are absurd men, but that their fate is an absurd fate which might charm and attract a lucid heart" (Camus, 77). Through noticing and accepting all the different roles that present themselves, Meursault revolts

against the world, against the absurd, and further cements himself as Camus' absurd hero, fully embodying the end-game of the philosophy.

In *The Stranger*, Meursault culminates in representing the absurd archetypes by taking on the qualities of Camus' conqueror. After having fulfilled his role as the Don Juan and the actor, Meursault finds himself openly facing death as the conqueror. By experiencing both the passion of the Don Juan and the many lives of the actor, Meursault can accept the fullness of mind and human experience he has encountered. Meursault embraces his imprisonment for murder, and ultimately, his sentencing of death. The openness with which Meursault accepts his fate demonstrates the mastery he has achieved over the absurd. While in prison, mulling over his impending execution, Meursault actualizes that death is the only certainty humanity stands to face. Thus, death is the only facet of an absurd world Meursault has yet to conquer. As Meursault approaches death by guillotine and meditates on the onlookers waiting to observe his demise, he thinks, "As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again" (Camus 122-123). By revolting against the absurdity in life—the overarching quality so many choose to ignore or reject—Meursault finds peace in his experience. He faces the ultimate absurdity—death—just as detached and peacefully as he did the everyday absurdity of mundane existence. He accepts being misunderstood by the vast majority and feels kinship and community in the absurdity itself. Meursault transcends absurdity and becomes Camus' absurd man, his absurd hero. Camus writes of the conqueror in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "Others, without compromising either, have chosen the eternal and denounced the illusion of this world…That

suits the conqueror and gives him a clear image of what he has rejected. He has chosen, on the contrary, the black iron fence or the potter's field" (Camus, 90).

It is clear, in *The Stranger*, Meursault functions as an embodiment of Camus' absurd hero. The tenants that Camus defined his absurd man by in *The Myth of Sisyphus* are all present in Meursault, the protagonist of *The Stranger*. He is the Don Juan, the actor, and the conqueror. Finally, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* superseding the absurd archetypes is the absurd creator. Camus, honoring the absurd creator, says, "There is thus a metaphysical honor in enduring the world's absurdity. Conquest or play-acting, multiple loves, absurd revolt are tributes that man pays to his dignity in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance" (Camus, 93). Clearly—lacking in both subtlety and humility—Camus functions as the absurd creator in relation to his texts, his ultimate creation being Meursault, the ideal figure of his philosophy. Camus creates both a world for and avatar of his philosophy to demonstrate its value and significance. Through the creation of Meursault and the fictional Algiers he inhabits, Camus better defines and demonstrates the value of his philosophy. Meursault functioning as the absurd man in *The Stranger* provides evidence toward the truth of absurdism in the physical world and metaphysical realm.

By using the literary technique of defining a protagonist by the philosophic principle central to the novel much can be accomplished. Both Markson and Camus used the technique to different means in their respective novels, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and *The Stranger*, and by doing so, both authors made their respective works stronger and better drove home the idea upon which their novels orbit. By defining Kate by Wittgenstein's solipsism, Markson was able to cast the reader into Kate's psyche, closer and closer as the novel progresses. Through this literary accomplishment, the spin Markson put on the philosophy of *The Tractatus* plaguing the mind of a suffering intellectual is elevated. Markson makes physical and real a lofty philosophy by

defining his novel's protagonist by the tenants of the philosophy. Camus utilized the method in a similar fashion, with similar success—to the way Markson did—but the means by which Camus utilized the technique couldn't be more different. In *The Stranger*, Camus defines Meursault by his own philosophy to strengthen the arguments formulated in his philosophical text. Camus' method contrasts Markson's because Camus was working to further the understanding of his own creation, as opposed to Markson whom was critically analyzing and spinning a preexisting philosophy in his novel. Both authors succeeded in strengthening the arguments made in their novels by injecting the core idea of their philosophical notions into the DNA of their protagonists.

The idea is pivotal in writing. Clearly, throughout history, ideas evolve and transplant previous ideas. Culture changes, worldviews change, and society changes. Authors must possess the skills to convincingly paint pictures with their words of the changing world. The novel of ideas is the perfect vehicle for writers to depict the philosophical, psychological, social-mood that is relevant, contemporary, progressive; that can break through and affect a changing world. As demonstrated through *Wittgenstein's Mistress* by David Markson and *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, defining a protagonist by the philosophic principles the novel aims to profess is one method an author can successfully use to empower their message. Subconsciously, the more conviction a character possesses toward whatever wisdom a novel or short story aims to impart, the more it will be felt by the reader. A character cannot carry more conviction than when they are defined by the teaching central to the work, as Meursault is one-in-the-same with the absurdism he represents and Kate acts as living conduit to Wittgenstein's solipsism.

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