The Stranger Reading Guide:
Albert Camus’ philosophy is called Absurdism or “philosophy of the absurd.” It is the idea that even though man seeks meaning to life, there is none. His most famous philosophical essay detailing his worldview was The Myth of Sisyphus. He wrote The Stranger around the same time as The Myth of Sisyphus, and the two books in many ways parallel one another. The Myth of Sisyphus can be read as an attempt to clarify and to make explicit the worldview expressed in The Stranger, and The Stranger can be read as an example of the absurd hero and the absurd fiction described in The Myth of Sisyphus.

As you read The Stranger this week annotate passages that demonstrate Camus’ philosophical points (below).

Camus’ Philosophy of the Absurd:

1. Death is the one central, inescapable fact of life (think in terms of how the story begins, the event in the middle, and how it ends—what is the focus?)

2. There is a fundamental conflict between what we want from the universe (whether it be meaning, order, or reasons) and what we find in the universe (formless chaos). This is considered Absurd.

3. We will never find in life itself the meaning that we want to find. Human existence is meaningless.

4. There are two choices-God/hope, which Camus says doesn’t exist or suicide, which Camus claims is an absurd solution to the issue. Camus offers a third possibility: that we can accept and live in a world devoid of purpose and meaning.

5. A meaningless existence is horrible but does not mean we turn our lives into a perpetual party. Rather we need to embrace the meaninglessness.

6. Camus proposes that man rebel by pretending that there is meaning. All logic and reason tells us that there is no meaning but we must rebel against this reality and make our own meaning.

7. There is no meaning in the end, but the process of searching for meaning can provide meaning in itself. The meaning is the search itself!

8. The struggle itself (Sisyphus pushing the rock) can satisfy the heart. The journey is what it’s all about. The absurd hero sees life as a constant struggle, without hope. Any attempt to deny or avoid the struggle and the hopelessness that define our lives is an attempt to escape from this absurd contradiction.

9. There is passion in the absurd. The absurd man will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusion and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him.

10. Since God does not exist and man dies, everything is permissible. One experience is as good as another; the important thing is simply to acquire as many experiences as possible. “The ideal of the absurd man is the present and the succession of present moments before an ever-conscious spirit.” All values collapse; thrown into this world, the absurd man, rebellious and irresponsible, has “nothing to justify”.

11. The absurd man is innocent in regards to what is lawful and what is forbidden—in a sense, a terrible innocent who shocks society by not accepting the rules of its game. He is an outsider to society because he doesn’t fit according to the world’s standards.

12. The world is chaos, tomorrow does not exist, since we all die. “In a universe suddenly deprived of light and illusions, man feels himself an outsider. This exile is irrevocable, since he has no memories of a lost
homeland and no hope of a promised land.” The outsider is man confronting the world. This divorce between man and life, the actor and his setting is the feeling of absurdity.

13. Camus claims that Sisyphus is the ideal absurd hero and that his punishment is representative of the human condition: Sisyphus must struggle perpetually and without hope of success. So long as he accepts that there is nothing more to life than this absurd struggle, then he can find happiness in it.

14. Life itself is a futile struggle devoid of hope. However, Camus also suggests that this fate is only horrible if we continue to hope, if we think that there is something more that is worth aiming for. Our fate only seems horrible when we place it in contrast with something that would seem preferable. If we accept that there is no preferable alternative, then we can accept our fate without horror.

15. Camus’ single requirement for the absurd man is that he live with full awareness of the absurdity of his position.

16. An artist should describe (and not explain) ordinary events without getting too caught up in their philosophical implications and without trying to point to any universal themes. In these descriptions, we can find fascination and exuberant joy at the myriad of possible life experiences.

Consider these questions regarding the inadequacy of Camus’ philosophy:

1. Is it consistent with reality? In other words, does man live out his conclusions consistently? Example, can an atheist live consistently with his worldview?

2. If there is no God, then who determines right and wrong?

3. Is it consistent with the Word of God, our ultimate source of authority?

The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good. Psalm 14:1

Study guide questions: Part 1

Annotation Guide

1. Annotate examples of absurdism throughout chapters 1-5

2. Annotate any new characters - add short description to front cover

3. Annotate 3-5 examples of detachment in Mersault

4. Annotate light imagery throughout ch. 1-5. How does the light seem of impact Mersault in each example?

Chapters 1-3

1. Light and darkness play an important role in the novel. Describe the light imagery in chapter 1.

2. How does Meursault seem to deal with Maman’s death? Does this seem to be the way he might think about death in general?

3. In light of what you know about Camus’ philosophy, what do you think he might be saying with the whole scene involving Thomas Perez? What is Perez’s role?

4. What does Meursault choose to do on Sunday? What does this demonstrate about his character?
5. What does Meursault mean when he says, “it occurred to me…really, nothing had changed.”

Chapter 4

1. How do you know if Meursault is upset or calm about what just happened in Raymond’s room?

Chapter 5:

1. What is the significance of Salamano’s conversation with Meursault on pages 44-45? How has Salamano’s loss brought out his humanitarianism?
2. In your opinion, is Meursault’s behavior normal regarding his job and his girlfriend? Why? Why not?
3. Why do you think Meursault responds to Marie’s question of love and marriage with “it didn’t mean anything, but he didn’t think he loved her” and “it didn’t make any difference” but they could get married if she wanted to?
4. What explanation can you offer as to why Mersault follows the woman from Celeste’s? What is the role of the little woman in the novel?
5. What does Meursault’s advice to Salamano about replacing his dog suggest about how Meursault understands relationships?
6. After reading this chapter do you think Meursault fits the label “Stranger” (or “ Outsider”)?

Chapter 6:

1. What does Meursault mean when he says, “It was then that I realized you could either shoot or not shoot”?
2. When Meursault encounters the lone Arab, he is once again overcome by the sun’s heat. What event does the heat force him to recall?
3. What is meant by “it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness?” (59)
4. Why does Camus not prepare us for this murder? What is his purpose in the narrative for its abruptness? Notice Author’s style has an impact on the meaning.
5. Why do you think Meursault kills the Arab?
6. Contrast Camus’ prose right before the murder with his prose earlier in the chapter. What rhetorical devices does he use?

Study guide questions: Part 2

Annotation Guide

1. Annotate examples of absurdism throughout Part 2
2. Annotate any new characters (or new information about characters mentioned earlier in the novel hint: the little robot lady, Perez) — add short description to front cover
3. Look for examples of how Mersault is effected by physical elements (weather, sound, people). Annotate for this and try to identify some significance.

Chapter 1

1. Is Meursault taking his circumstances seriously? Give an example.
2. What explanation does Meursault give regarding his nature?

3. Describe how Meursault’s laziness in explaining his situation correlates with Camus’s theory of the absurd?

4. On pg 70, Meursault says, “I thought about it for a minute and said that more than sorry I felt kind of annoyed.” Does Meursault have a conscience? Why or why not?

5. What does Meursault seem to miss the most while in prison? What does this say about him?

Chapter 2

1. On page 79 Mersault states that having a “memory’ is an advantage.” Explain.

2. The last sentences on pg 81 refer to Meursault’s mother’s funeral and to what nights in prison are like. In your opinion, is there a connection between the two? What does he come to understand the words of the nurse from the funeral procession “there was no way out” to mean?

Chapter 3:

1. How do temperature and light play a role in this chapter (think about previous scenes in the novel)?

Chapter 4:

1. Meursault comments on human qualities and how they can be viewed from different perspectives. Specifically, good qualities can be “crushing” for a guilty criminal. What is Camus trying to convey to the reader?

2. How does Camus’s styling of the verdict scene contribute to the overall mood of the chapter?

Chapter 5:

1. What does Meursault’s reformed execution scheme (random poisoning) say about his world-view?

Final Assignment

**Choose 2 passages that you annotated in Part 2 that demonstrate absurdism. List the page number and explain the passage in relation to absurdism.

Passage #1 -

Passage #2 -