

Assignment: Dramatize your understanding of a literary work by writing an imaginative recreation of all or part of it. You become the artist and “extend” a work by adding to it in some way that reflects your feelings about your subject.

Bill Mihalik has chosen to dramatize an episode that takes place immediately after the end of Albert Camus’ novel *The Stranger*. This novel tells the story of Monsieur Meursault, a man capable of rich sensory experience but indifferent to the conventional sentiments that too often pass for human emotions. Almost by accident, Meursault kills a man and is arrested for his crime. At his trial, his refusal to lie to save himself and his refusal to utter any expression of remorse earn him a sentence of death by the guillotine. In his epilogue, created to follow the actual last lines of the novel, Bill reveals Meursault’s final thoughts and experiences as he is led to his death

The Stranger: Epilogue
by Bill Mihalik

The sky turned red and the stars faded away. The red was the red of the rusty hinges on my cell door. I thought I heard footsteps. But maybe that was my heart pounding. I stopped breathing. Yes, those were footsteps echoing down the cold stone corridor. I listened as hard as I could, as if my body were one giant ear and the footsteps were the pounding of a stone heart. I pressed my body to the wooden door. There were many heavy footsteps. They sounded like a company of guards. Perhaps the footsteps would stop before they came to my cell. The footsteps became louder. Perhaps the footsteps would go past my cell. But the footsteps stopped in front of my door. Maybe I had been pardoned.

“Meursault?” It was Edmund, the Sergeant of the Guard. I wanted to answer, but I couldn’t breathe. “Meursault, we’re going to open the door. Are you ready?”

I croaked “Yes” in a voice so hoarse I didn’t recognize it as my own. The wooden door creaked open on rusty hinges that hadn’t been oiled since I had been there. I saw Edmund’s face. Next to him was the commandant of the prison. Behind them I saw more guards standing at attention. They held their rifles motionless. It was as if time had stopped.

The commandant’s head was entirely bald. The morning sun glinted off the top of his head. His eyes were light gray, like the light gray of fine dust. He had small wrinkles around the corners of both eyes. He neither smiled nor frowned. A thin black moustache curled above each end of his small mouth. He was taller than I, but not by much. He was heavier than Edmund. He could have been forty or sixty. Six medals hung limply on his dress uniform. In a toneless bass that echoed down the corridor like a church bell he began, “Patrice Meursault, your appeal has been denied. It is my responsibility to carry out the sentence ordered by the high court of the French people. You will be taken to the courtyard and executed by guillotine for the murder of Ali ben Hassan. That is all.”

The head guard spoke. “Meursault, you will be escorted to the courtyard. Come with us.” Of course, what else could I do? I did not want to cause trouble for Edmund. He had been my only friend these past few months. Two guards came into the cell. They crouched under the low arch of the doorway and faced me. They looked at me with a curious stare of pity and hardness as if I were already a headless corpse. I walked out of the cell. My legs felt like rubber. The two guards followed me. More guards were ahead of me. Our footsteps echoed down the stone corridor. As we turned the corner and entered another corridor, I saw an open door at the end. The light was growing brighter and brighter as we approached the door.

Almost blinded by the morning sun as I walked out into a prison yard, I felt dizzy, shaded my eyes, and looked around. Onward we marched until we passed outside the prison gates and into a courtyard. I was surrounded by many faces. The priest held his book by his chest. A string of beads dangled in his left hand. The magistrate rubbed his cross in the fingers of his right hand. The old reporter

with the little mouth wrote furiously in his notebook. And then there was the mob. The French stared quietly at me. Their eyes accused me. The Arabs shouted curses at me. What had I done to any of them? I knew none of them. And none of them knew me. I was the stranger. I turned around and saw the instrument of death. The sun gleamed off the blade. I closed my eyes.

The commandant asked, "Meursault, do you want the priest to say a prayer?" The priest started to move forward.

I shot a hot, angry look at the commandant. "No. I see no use for it!" The priest flinched and moved back next to the magistrate. The magistrate blinked and his tongue licked his dry, straight, thin lips.

"Meursault, do you have a last request?"

I thought for a moment. I thought of Marie swimming in the ocean and having lunch at Celeste's. I thought about the Sundays when I sat and watched people walking up and down the street. "I'd like to smoke." Edmund came up to me and offered me one of his cigarettes. They were American, Lucky Strikes. I put the cigarette in my mouth. He struck a match. The acrid phosphorus smelled like a woman's perfume to me. The flame flickered toward me as I inhaled. He waved the match twice and threw it on the dirt. The little blue and yellow flame flickered and died. A wisp of smoke rose from the matchstick and curled up into the cool summer morning air. There was no wind. I took a long puff. What could be better than relaxing on the balcony with a cigarette and seeing Marie walking up the street to my apartment? The match stopped smoking. The last wisps rose skyward. The cigarette tasted stronger than my regular brand.

The commandant's voice rang out, "Meursault, are you ready?"

Ready? Who is ever ready? Was he ready? Was the magistrate ready? Was the priest ready? No, none of them were ready. I may have no choice, but I was not ready. I took one last puff and savored the taste. I blew out the smoke through my nose and mouth and watched the smoke rise up in small wisps. I threw the cigarette on the ground and stamped it out.

"We will put a cloth around your head," said Edmund.

"I don't need it, and I don't want it. I want to watch every last moment." The guard holding the cloth stopped. The cloth hung limply in midair like the tricolors on the prison towers.

Edmund hesitated. Then in a lowered voice he continued, "It is more convenient for us. It will be easier for the guards to collect your head after the execution."

I thought about that for a moment. I had to agree that it was a perfectly reasonable request. I nodded. The guard pulled the cloth like a sack over my head and darkness descended on my eyes.

The guard touched my arms gently and led me. "Please bow down."

I hadn't bowed to anyone or anything since I had been a little boy. I didn't want to bow down now. I knew I would never again stand up straight. I would never again see the sea or sky. I would never again know a woman. A hand gently pushed my head down on the wood. My neck brushed the smooth wood. I listened for the blade to rush down the arms of the guillotine. My muscles relaxed. I felt at one with the uncaring universe. I was alone no more.