

Mortality and The Meaning of Life in The Stranger and Invisible Man

The search for purpose has been an infamous struggle for people throughout history. When traveling on the journey of self-enlightenment, many people face obstacles that hinder their ability to determine who they really are. People may ostensibly believe they have found their purpose, whether it be through their career, family, or otherwise. However, many wish to dig deeper in hopes of discovering their authentic purpose, without the shadows of societal expectations and common ideologies. In the novel, *The stranger* by Albert Camus, the main character, Meursault, does not unearth his identity until he comes face-to-face with his own mortality. Likewise, in *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the Narrator struggles to figure out his purpose because his own sense of identity is clouded by the ideologies of others. Both stories are strikingly similar to the hardships of immigrants in America in the early 1900s, they had to figure out who they were in the midst of ostracization and confusion.

The stranger teaches readers an important lesson: sometimes, one must embrace mortality to determine the purpose of living. This is precisely what happens to Meursault. He goes through the motions of living, rather than actually caring about how anything turns out. For example, in regards to Marie asking him if he loves her, he thinks, "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). This exemplifies how his relationships are not meaningful to him, resulting in his detachment from the world. His romance with Marie had little effect on his thoughts and feelings, which is unusual for someone in a committed relationship.

It is clear throughout the novel that Meursault believes solitude, coupled with a boring job, is his only purpose in life. However, before the day of his execution, he has a revelation, his purpose is for other people to learn from his mistakes (Camus 121-125). It is one goes through life

carelessly and without attachment, the search for self will never truly develop. In a more general sense, Meursault teaches the reader that finding a purpose in one's life requires the realization that death is inevitable, and that leaving any legacy, positive or negative, will be beneficial. This idea is similar to the struggles of the Narrator in *Invisible Man*, as both men need an eye-opening experience to develop a true sense of identity.

In *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the Narrator feels unseen to the rest of society. Because he is a black man growing up in a period of segregation and discrimination, others' views of him are clouded by the color of his skin. In fact, he is told by Dr. Bledsoe, "You're nobody, son. You don't exist and you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think, (Elison 14). This greatly affects his self-perception and makes him feel as if his destiny is predetermined. He lets the judgments of others distort his own sense of identity, which is a lesson from which readers can learn. In order to find purpose, one must objectively look at oneself without any prejudices or stereotypes clouding what is truly there. Although the Narrator is certainly weighed down by the shackles of racism, his self-concept does not have to be damaged. His internal struggle, although definitely caused by external forces, is not a permanent one. This teaches the reader that the discriminatory ideologies of others should not stand in the way of a person's quest for purpose.

Like the Narrator, immigrants in the early 20th century struggled to stay true to their own beliefs and culture. After arriving in America, they were seen as outsiders and were often ostracized for being different. Although they traveled to America in hopes of finding a greater purpose, they were hindered by the judgments of others. Their hardships relate to those of Meursault in *The Stranger* and the Narrator in *Invisible Man*; they are seen as the odd men out in society, as were immigrants. However, immigrants had a certain drive for success that the

aforementioned men do not possess. Neither Meursault nor the Narrator have any motivation to change their circumstances. Both men float through life, letting others' ideologies and prejudices define how they view themselves. In contrast, immigrants that arrived in America in the early 20th century did not accept others' views of them as fact. For example, Irish immigrants were often chastised simply for their ethnicity. They were barred from applying to jobs and were seen as lesser than natural born Americans. Despite this mistreatment, most persevered and were successful in society as a minority. They did not let others' ideologies blur their own sense or self-purpose, which is a lesson that many could learn from today ('Irish Immigrants').

Authors utilize characters to teach readers imperative life lessons. Camus and Ellison both did precisely this through Meursault and the Narrator. After reading about Meursault's trial and eventual execution, readers realize that becoming aware of a person's own mortality is the key to finding true purpose. Moreover, when seeing how the Narrator is so quick to conform to society's idea of him, readers recognize why being true to a person's own identity is so crucial to finding meaning in a person's life. These rather negative examples of the search for identity are in stark contrast to the struggles of immigrants in the early 1900s, when the oppressed Irish-Americans overcame the barrier of others' ideologies to form their own destiny. Although very different, all three instances exemplify the different ways literature speaks to humanity, man cannot find true purpose while facing the cruel reality of nature without illustrations to guide by example