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LIT 652: Global Literature Seminar

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August 7, 2022

**Untangling Orientalism and Colonial Desire in *The Lover* and *The Stranger*: Issues of Race and Class in French Colonial Literature**

**Introduction:**

In both Duras' *The Lover* and Camus' *The Stranger*, the poor white French settlers were actually middle class. They could claim alliance to the French Empire by virtue of their birth, being the children of White French settlers. However, the French Empire did not treat them the same way as it did members of the wealthy ruling class. They were certainly second class citizens and both *The Lover* and *The Stranger* speak to this experience. The social ridicule that the girl feels for being born poor and the forced distance from Mersault's mother distorts his sense of identity so badly he doesn't know who he is anymore; these feelings are side effects of this pervasive class divide. Because they both feel rejected by society, they act out. The girl pursues an affair with the Chinese businessman whom she knows her family will not approve of. This same feeling of intolerance is what drives Mersault to ally with Raymond because he is longing to reconnect to his French roots. He lost his direct connection to France when his mother died. Unfortunately for Mersault, Raymond is an embodiment of colonial violence. So when he allies with Raymond, he seals his own fate. The girl is also punished for her affair with the businessman. Her punishment is to be sent to France to finish her education. For her supposed transgression, she is forced to be taken back into empire and redirected to a more acceptable life path where she eventually becomes a wife and mother. Similarly, Mersault is charged for a crime and receives an oddly imperial punishment as well. His crime is not that he killed the native

Algerian man, though this would make sense in a just world. Camus, however, is well aware that the courts of colonial Algeria are far from just. Mersault is instead punished for “abandoning his mother” by which Camus means Mersault’s transgression was that he betrayed France when he allied with Raymond. That is an unforgivable crime to the colonial court, so they sentence him to a traitor’s death via guillotine. This was the same way that the French killed their enemies during their bloody 1790s’ Revolution. Effectively, in their own ways, Mersault and the girl are scapegoats for colonialism. While neither are entirely innocent themselves, it is easier for the empire to punish and make examples of them because they are from the lower class of settlers. For Camus and Duras, the issue of colonialism in their novels was not primarily about the struggles between different races but the struggles between different social and economic classes. However, the issue of race is still a factor that affects not only the outcomes of the novels, but how critics have viewed these novels in the years following their publications.

### **International Cultural Significance and Legacy of *The Stranger* and *The Lover***

It cannot be denied that both *The Stranger* and *The Lover* have had big impacts on international culture. *The Stranger* is one of the most republished works written in French. There was a movie made by an Italian production company in 1967 based on Camus’ *The Stranger*. It even garnered an award-winning rebuttal in 2015 *The Mersault Investigation* by Kamel Daoud written from the perspective of the native Algerian characters. *The Lover* similarly inspired an international hit movie which came out in 1992. Both of these novels have exported the idea of colonial French life to an international audience, showing what life was like for poor white settlers in these early 20<sup>th</sup> century colonies. The issues of class, race and politics that are present in these works have also been exported too; showing what complex places these colonies were. These novels or their later movie adaptations might be the only time foreigners have exposure to

this particular culture. Though the novels are set in Vietnam and Algeria, the culture being examined is *not* Vietnamese or Algerian; it's actually colonial French. The books were not only originally written in French but both Camus and Duras considered themselves to be culturally and ethnically French. These novels also employ the postcolonial theoretic concepts of Orientalism and Colonial Desire, which further perpetuate not only how France and French culture is viewed globally, but how both Vietnam and Algeria are perceived internationally as former colonies of France. This paper will also discuss how the author's intent does not always match the resulting criticism they receive for their work. Understandably, work that concerns colonial themes will ignite strong, passionate responses from different groups of people as colonialism is an incredibly politically charged topic.

#### **What is Orientalism and how does it affect Duras and Camus' novels?**

In his 1977 article, "Orientalism", Edward Said, a Palestinian scholar, coined this Postcolonial theoretic term to explain the mindset that 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europeans had when regarding Asia and the African Muslim World. Orientalism was described as a phenomenon that was cultural, political, and historic all at once.

"The Orient was an almost European invention, and had been since a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences... perhaps it seemed irrelevant that Orientals themselves had something at stake in the process... and it was now they who were suffering; the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and it's contemporary fate" (Said 1107).

Said further explained the function of Orientalism in a colonial context:

"Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European- Atlantic power over the Orient...Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about The Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment" (Said 1111).

It should be noted that Camus and Duras are not the same as Europeans who were writing about Asia and Muslim Africa from a distance. The “Orient” for them was not a far off land that they only dreamed of, but their home countries where they grew up. Still, the concept of Orientalism matters when looking at their texts and the effect of predominant European cultural ideas and should not be ignored.

Even if Camus and Duras were attempting to highlight the struggles of poor white settlers in the French colonies, their novels do appear on a surface level to disregard the colonized native Algerians and Vietnamese people. Camus' Algerians do not speak for themselves as many critics point out (Makari 372, Lorcin 18, Kulkarni 1528). As Kulkarni further points out in his article “The Ambiguous Fate of a *Pied Noir*: Albert Camus and Colonialism”, the native Algerian characters do not even have names or dialogue (1528). This distances them from the reader. They are minimized as much as possible so that Mersault's suffering can take center stage. This deceptive framing that Camus employs allows the reader to sympathize with Mersault (Kulkarni 1528). Camus purposely misleads his reader in order to prove a point: that his fellow *Pied Noirs* could easily mistake loyalty to Imperialistic ideas for pride in French heritage. This is the ultimate mistake that Mersault makes in *The Stranger*.

Similarly, in *The Lover*, there are almost no Vietnamese characters present in the story though it is set in Vietnam. Here too, Duras focuses on the inner emotional world of the poor white French girl who because of her family's illness and violence, feels like she belongs nowhere. According to French critic Guicharnaud: “[Duras’] novels...deal with the personal, individual experience of women who live *hic et nunc*, their present boredom, their very personal hopes or despair.” (Winston 472). The inner psychological worlds of the main characters in both

novels become the primary focus; thus framing the narrative through their eyes. Because issues of class oppress them most directly, that is what the authors primarily choose to focus on.

It should also be noted that the authors' based these texts somewhat upon their own life experiences. Like her nameless girl, Duras, was raised as a poor French settler in 1920's Vietnam. Camus' origins likewise mirror Mersault's as being a *Pied Noir* who was raised by a single working class mother in Colonial French Algeria (Kulkarni 1529). Algerian Writer Mouloud Mammeri said of Camus: "as great as Camus is, he was unable to escape his background. He was a *Pied Noir* and for all of his intellectual efforts, he was the son of poor whites" (Lorcin 17). Duras more than Camus, admitted these connections between her narrator and herself outright, but from what can be concluded from Camus' style, this is to be expected. She did not shy away from declaring the story as being more autobiography than fiction (Hulley 32). Camus is not direct like Duras in his admission in being closely connected to his character. The fact that he wrote under the penname "Mersault" from time to time cannot be ignored either (Kulkarni 1530). It seems that he too felt a pull towards this character; indeed Mersault may have functioned like a shadow self, the person that Camus was afraid he could become.

### **The Definition of Colonial Desire and how it affects Critical Readings of *The Lover***

Another element to untangle in understanding the colonial French texts *The Lover* and *The Stranger* is the concept of Colonial Desire. This concept comes from Karen Ruddy's 2006 article "The Ambivalence of Colonial Desire in Margurite Dura's 'The Lover'". Because Ruddy's article only applies Colonial Desire to *The Lover*, how the concept applies to *The Stranger* will be addressed in a following section. The application and effects of Colonial Desire function pretty differently in *The Lover* than they do in *The Stranger*. For Camus, his usage of Colonial Desire reveals his actual intention, contrary to what Makari claimed in his 1988 article.

Ruddy's main argument was on how the concept of colonial desire affects the relationship between the girl and her lover. She defined colonial desire as "when the colonizer desires the colonized, exposing both gender and sexual dynamics. Usually this refers to a white man's desire for colonized men and women" (Ruddy 77). Colonial desire, at its center, is about power. Within the context of *The Lover*, there exist some problems with Ruddy's argument. The traditional definition of Colonial Desire usually refers to an adult white man's desire for the people who are being colonized.

In *The Lover*, the white person in the interracial affair is a teenage girl. Neither does her desire for the wealthy Chinese businessman directly disempower him; in fact, he seems to be more in power since he has the means to provide for her, as men in a traditional heterosexual relationship are often expected to do. Though one could argue that there could be an exploitive nature to their relationship; because he pays for expensive things she herself could never afford. A question is then presented to readers: *is she using him for his money?* This is a speculation that is thrown around by side characters who are aware of the ongoing affair. The girl herself is subjected to the neighborhood gossip, which claims that she is a prostitute and the horrible possibility that her family, low on funds, put her up to it, hoping to benefit themselves (Duras 24). Similarly some of Duras' critics also describe the girl as being prostituted by her family for money (Hulley 31). The girl, however, claims to love her businessman, even calling him her lover.

Readers ought to question: *Is this a romance or a situation where someone is exploiting someone else?* The biggest question then becomes the uncomfortable consideration: who truly has the power in this relationship? Much of postcolonial theory concerns itself with who has the power. Duras may have wanted to present a "more equal relationship" by pairing a white girl

with an Asian man in a French colonial setting. They both have identities where they are empowered: the businessman by his class, his gender and his age; he is her experienced lover. Because of the setting, the girl's only obvious privilege is her race; she is white in a European run colony. Her age might arguably be somewhat to her advantage as women have historically been valued for their youth and beauty. This is a double-edged sword though too, since due to her extremely young age, she is impressionable and does not have an equal level of experience to her lover. So, even when we look at identity as being multifaceted; the girl is still oppressed by class and gender (and possibly age) while her lover is mainly oppressed by race. He is Chinese in a French run colony in Asia. He is not as oppressed as other Asian characters that appear in *The Lover* (like Do, for example) mainly because he is extremely wealthy. His being of a higher economic class benefits him and ultimately gives him the ability to woo the girl whom he loves.

The girl, however, is not an empowered adult and is susceptible to how her family thinks. She cannot stand up for her lover; she turns away from him when her family treats him badly. "In my elder 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 [and] rejects my lover" (Duras 52). This quote shows how the girl will default to pleasing her elder brother's wishes. The oppressive elder brother functions not only as family patriarch but also upholds racist colonial ideals. The girl, though young, does not fight her family on their poor treatment of her lover (Duras 50-52). Her rejection of her lover via her silence is a refusal to stand up to her brother, a refusal to stand up to the racial hierarchy present in Colonial Vietnam. This is one of the reasons why their relationship is doomed to fail.

Likewise, her lover seems to get satisfaction from the idea that she is poor and needs him and his money. When she tells him how poor she and her family are now, he seems to find her

desperate situation a turn-on. The girl says to him “I don’t regard my present misfortune as a personal matter...it was just so difficult to get food and clothes, to live...on nothing but my mother’s salary” (Duras 45). Soon after her confession, the girl “finds it difficult to speak” because she is ashamed that she’s so poor. A few moments after telling him of this misfortune, she says “He is on me, engulfed again. We stay like that, riveted moaning amid the din of the external city... and then we don’t hear it any more” (Duras 45). The juxtaposition that Duras has here is not a mistake: the businessman enjoys the power that his money gives him over this girl.

There is some sense of an exploitive nature to their relationship. Even if she isn’t prostituting herself as the gossips of her village claim, both lovers’ intentions do not seem to be pure of prejudice or ulterior motive. The girl is also an attempt for the businessman to relive his youth in Paris, where he had affairs with women there as well. The girl notes “he thinks about Paris a lot. He thinks I’m very different from the girls in Paris, not nearly so nice” (Duras 47-48). In a way it seems that the businessman is not in love with the girl herself but rather he is in love with what she represents to him. Yet critic Kathleen Hulley aptly points out that Duras’ girl is “this blank text, this [white girl] who does nothing but represent the object of all bourgeois desire, who drifts with no story of her own...” (37). What is important for the businessman is the fact that she is a French girl, an echo of the women he had affairs with in the past. However, he notes rather bluntly that she is not as *nice*; by which he means she is so poor. The fact that she is poor ruins for him the fantasy of sleeping with a French woman, who in his mind should be of a certain class. This facet of their relationship doesn’t follow Colonial Desire since China never colonized France, but it might be read as a reverse of the colonial power dynamic.

Though there is an element of Colonial Desire at play in *The Lover*, it doesn’t follow the traditional model of a white man or white men lusting after conquered native people. The man



that she has an affair with is not an oppressed native Vietnamese man. He is a wealthy Chinese businessman. He too is a foreigner in a foreign land, putting him on a more even level with her. The businessman experiences racism in his relationship with the girl; for her family's rudeness towards him is indeed racist because his being Asian, rather than European matters to them (Duras 50-52). So rather than be considered a potential life partner, the businessman is considered by the girl's family to be a rebellion against them.

Another important power difference to note in their relationship is the girl's age. A teenage girl of any background is almost never more powerful than a full grown adult man, the only exception in which she would have power over him, is if he was a slave that her family owned. She is fifteen at the time of their affair, still a school girl and from a poor family- unlike her wealthier, experienced lover who is an adult. On an individual level, she does not exert power over others like colonizers do. Like Camus' Raymond, the girl's older brother acts as an example of a colonizer. He exerts power over others; bullying their younger brother, manipulating their mother and abusing Do. The girl, however, acknowledges that she looks like her brother, admitting her privilege as a white settler in a French colony (Duras 53). Because she looks like her violent older brother, she is protected by the colonial system, even if she does not directly participate in his violence. While some of her critics claimed that Duras was blind to colonial politics, this added remark, though small, is not insignificant. The girl, who will grow up to be Duras, is highly aware that she is somewhere between her oppressive older brother and their nearly powerless servant Do. She is admitting her privilege as a white settler in a French colony; as poor, young, and female as she may be.

**“Colonial Desire” at play in *The Stranger* and how it reveals Camus' Actual Intention**

Arguably, there is an instance of traditional colonial desire mentioned in *The Stranger*. This depiction of colonial desire is the first incident of violence in the text. Raymond, a white French man, had a native Algerian girlfriend. He perpetuates violence against his former girlfriend. In his own words, Raymond admits openly to Mersault that “he had beaten her until she bled” (Camus 31). Perhaps more unsettling is the fact that Raymond is not satisfied with this level of violence either. Raymond further tells Mersault that “she still hasn’t got what’s coming [to her]” implying that he wishes to do this woman further harm (Camus 31). He convinces Mersault to help him bait her by writing a fake apology letter (Camus 32). Raymond’s feelings towards this former girlfriend are not of love but of ownership. He wants to dominate and punish her for acting in a way that he doesn’t like. He claims that she cheated on him and tries to play the victim so that Mersault feels bad for him. Mersault, because he is overly sympathetic to Raymond, feeling a brotherly loyalty to him, willfully goes along with his plan. For Camus, Mersault is a *Pied Noir* who is desperate to prove his loyalty to French Imperialism at all costs, even if that destroys his own character and integrity.

Mersault knows that Raymond is beating up his ex-girlfriend while he and Marie are in his own room down the hall. It’s not a mistake that they are in such close proximity to this violence either. Mersault was involved in the luring of that girl; even if he does not beat her up himself. Camus implicates Mersault in Raymond’s violence as an accomplice. He wants his reader to understand that Mersault is guilty of this violence by association. This was meant to represent the fact that many *Pied Noirs* were well aware that native Algerians were being violently oppressed by the French colonial government at the time. While they may not have been the most privileged people (for example, Raymond, who likes to fight, can easily beat up Mersault who is obviously ill), they still have more privilege than the native Algerians. Mersault

might have stopped Raymond by saying “wait, this is wrong.” Instead, it’s Marie in this scene who acts as a voice of conscience and tells Mersault to intercede. Unlike Mersault, she has no personal stake in the violence; she isn’t yet aware that Mersault even knows Raymond.

When the desperate Mersault allied with Raymond, he betrays the memory of his mother. If Mersault is the *Pied Noir* who feels forgotten by Maman France, then his substituting her for the violent colonizer Raymond makes sense. He has mistaken France his beloved country with France the Imperial Empire. In a way, he kills his mother again rather than honors her with this newfound alliance. Make no mistake; Mersault is *not* a hero but a cautionary tale for Camus’ readers. In writing *The Stranger* Camus attempted to warn his fellow *Pied Noirs* that they shouldn’t be so quick to ally themselves to imperialistic ideals and violent ideologies (embodied by Raymond) in the name of France and French glory (represented by Mersault’s mother). To do so would betray the spirit of France. This aligns with Camus’ own commentary outside the novel, which has been purposely misunderstood and incorrectly translated to spark outrage against him. In accepting the 1957 Nobel Literature Prize, Camus said “people are now planting bombs on the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one those tramways. If this is your justice, then I prefer [that] my mother [would live]” (Lorcin 17). This statement had been shortened and retranslated to “If I had to choose between Algeria and my mother, I would choose my mother” (Lorcin 17). This second quote makes Camus sound like he prefers France to Algeria because his mother is taken figuratively not literally as he originally intended. A person who only heard the second shortened translation might jump to the incorrect conclusion that many people did: that Camus was solidly on the French side of French-Algerian political debate.

However, abandoning Maman France for dead is so offensive to the colonial court that they declare Mersault a callous madman. They cite his extra shots as proof of his madness which

is the only time that they care about the fate of the murdered man. Makari pointed out that it would be highly unlikely that Mersault would have been charged for killing the native Algerian man. Usually, the Algerian colonial court didn't punish crimes that *Pied Noirs* committed against the native population; so the reason Mersault is charged, he argues, is due to the four extra shots he took following the man's death (Makari 372). Mersault, though, did nothing wrong in regards to his mother. That's why this punishment is absurd and a distraction from Camus' real message: *to embrace the violence of colonialism and imperialism as a Peid Noir is to turn your back on France, your mother.*

To further support this reading, Lorcin offers several bits of proof that a literal reading of *The Stranger* doesn't make sense. To read *The Stranger* literally would be to disregard Camus' life and personal politics. It would make no sense for Camus to write something that went against his own political beliefs. According to Lorcin, "Mouloud Feraoun, who died at the hands of the OSA in 1962, believed that 'Camus was an Algerian in the real sense of the word,'" declaring in a Radio Algeria interview that although he wrote in French, he identified with Algeria and its Muslims, as his reports in the 1930s" (15). There were several Algerian as well as French philosophers, scholars, writers and activists who liked Camus; if he had been an unapologetic colonialist, it is highly unlikely that any of the native Algerians would have liked him. His middle-ground approach when it came to French-Algerian conflict, however, also won him many critics and enemies.

### **Explanations of the Extreme Polarization in Critic's Opinions on Camus**

Camus has had a variety of reactions from his many critics since his death. Some understandably have a stake in Algerian or French politics, history and culture. These critics,

because of their immediate affiliations are more likely to quickly react to the novel's surface level violence that saturates and overwhelms Camus' more subtle message. The idea that someone who advocated against violence in both WWII as a member of the French Resistance and also worked for peace between the Muslim Algerians and the *Pied Noirs* being accused of writing such an offensively racist text makes no sense. The mistake being made is that Camus is being read too literally (i.e. a mentally disturbed *Pied Noir* kills a Muslim Algerian; this is the most literal reading of the book). That message, though the most straightforward, does not make sense when we look at Camus' personal beliefs and political work. Camus advocated for peace in his lifetime, not violence. To read his novel this way would also ignore the use of absurdism present in Camus' work. Many things about *The Stranger* don't make sense if you take the work literally and read it without understanding the political context of the work.

Understandably, the complicated issues of race in a postcolonial society would illicit strong emotions by people who have been directly affected by the injustice of colonial rule. When some of Camus' Muslim critics say they hate him for writing this novel, their reaction is completely understandable. The depersonalization of the Muslim characters in the novel is highly problematic. They are more symbols than actual characters, standing in for the class of oppressed native Algerians. This type of symbolism could also be argued about the white French and *Pied Noir* characters but at least they have names and some level of agency in the story. To have a name is to have power; this concept is widely used across cultures in literature. But perhaps, the namelessness of the Muslim 'Arab' and his sister, who is always identified in her relation to Raymond, her oppressor, speaks to the level of powerlessness that they had in colonial Algeria. As a *Pied Noir* himself, Camus was highly aware of the politics of his native Algeria.

Perched between the French colonial ruling class and the most oppressed native Muslim Algerians, Camus had the ability to see both sides of the conflict.

Again, it should also be emphasized that Mersault is *not* a hero; he is Camus' warning to other *Pied Noirs* that choosing violence against the native Algerians is to turn their back on their French cultural values. To this day, it's widely known that the French still fiercely defend their own rights and liberties. A quick look into their history would make their strong investment in political culture all the more understandable. Camus himself saw the violence of WWII firsthand when he still lived in France. Notably, he published *The Stranger* in 1942 during WWII, while France was still occupied by the Nazis under the Vichy government. Misreading Mersault as a hero is part of the reason some of Camus' critics do not like him but it is understandable that they might see the colonizer in Mersault. He certainly allies with the colonizer Raymond and does not regret this choice until it is far too late; a woman is beaten, a man is dead, and he himself is condemned to death.

Mersault is a desperate man, blind to consequences of his actions. He is missing the approval of his late mother so he seeks approval in the violent Raymond. His identity shatters when his mother dies. That's why he seems to go mad. This is why he tries to find someone to replace his mother in his affections. His failed relationship with Marie doesn't fill this void. No, instead he turns to Raymond who mirrors his own desperation to form an alliance. When Mersault becomes Raymond's friend, he becomes implicated in the violence that Raymond begins against the Muslim Algerian family. This violence only continues and increases until Mersault shoots the man on the beach with the gun Raymond gave him. Even if he didn't kill the man himself, make no mistake, Raymond is as guilty as Mersault in that man's death.

The colonial court did not understand Mersault at all hence why he is the titular *Stranger*. He did everything out of grief from losing his mother, though his grief does not take the traditional course. If the reader understands his actions from the frame of colonialism and classism, Mersault's reasoning for his actions become extremely clear. He is a colonist of France, cut off from his motherland, abandoned in a place that does not fully accept him as French because he is not wealthy enough. He is and always will be a *Pied Noir*, a second class, ethnically French settler who is neither properly French (unlike Raymond or his own Mother) nor native Algerian (since he is not a member of the oppressed Muslim population). Being neither of these distinct classes, Mersault belongs nowhere in colonial Algerian society.

### **Mother Trouble: How Disconnected Colonial “Children” are affected by Absent Mothers**

It cannot be ignored that in both *The Stranger* and *The Lover*, the main characters have fraught relationships with their mothers. I have already discussed Mersault's own grief over his late mother whom Camus uses to represent the distant figure of Maman France for the *Pied Noirs*. This concept of distance from his mother is central to understanding Mersault's motivation and Camus' intention in the novel. However, just as important to Duras' *The Lover* is another relationship between an absent mother and her wounded child. The girl feels distanced from her mother who is severely mentally ill, possibly suffering from an untreated form of bipolar disorder. The girl's varied descriptions of her mother's behavior lend one to thinking that bipolar disorder is a strong possibility for her mother:

“I see that my mother is clearly mad. I see that Do and my brother have always had access to that madness... [I have] never seen my mother in the state of being mad. Which she was. From birth. In the blood. She wasn't ill with it, for her it was like health, flanked by Do and her eldest son. No one else but they realized...she always had people around her, all her life, because... of her lively intelligence, her cheerfulness, and her peerless, indefatigable poise” (Duras 30-31).

This girl cannot properly connect with her mother due to the woman's mental illness. And it's her mother's inability to be a proper caretaker that partially drives the girl to take the wealthy Chinese businessman as her lover. She feels that she wants to forget her own origins of which she is ashamed. She knows she is French but this doesn't empower her; because she is constantly reminded by her mother how poor they are. She is embarrassed by her mother's Old Country habit of "wear[ing] everything until it wears out" (Duras 23). Because her whole family are basically "wildernesses" and "wastes", she is forced to find a way to support herself (Duras 24). This is what leads to the people of Sedec to gossip about the girl being a "child prostitute" because her situation does seem to suspiciously look that way (Duras 24).

If this is true, then this would classify the relationship between the girl and her much older lover as being one of exploitation. He is exploiting her for being poor and she is with him because he has money. Though this is a quick conclusion to draw, it doesn't quite explain the whole story. The girl's reaction when she and her lover are finally parted from one another shows another side to their complicated relationship:

"For her too it was when the boat uttered its first farewell, when the gangway was hauled up... that she wept. She'd wept without letting anyone see her tears, because he was Chinese and one oughtn't weep for that kind of lover. Wept without letting her younger brother or mother let her see she was sad, without letting them see anything, as was the custom between them (Duras 111)."

Her family steps in and punishes her for continuing her affair with the businessman. She is sent back to France to learn her proper place in society; to be a future wife and mother. Still, though there were suggestions of exploitation and racism influencing her behavior, in a way, this girl did have romantic feelings for her lover. She seems to consider him her first real love, even with all these problems within their relationship. He is, after all the title character, *The Lover*, not her.



### **The Most Oppressed Class: The Nearly Invisible Vietnamese and Algerian Characters**

Perhaps because the writers themselves come from the “middle” poor white class in the colonial structure, they can’t speak to how this more disadvantaged class feels. These characters mainly serve to show the readers how cruel the colonizer characters are. If Raymond is an embodiment of Imperial France, oppressing the Algerian family with violence, then the girl’s big brother is also a figure of European colonial power in Vietnam; bullying his younger brother, manipulating his mother and sexually assaulting Do, the only Vietnamese character in the novel with a name.

When compared to the other native nameless characters, Do is an interesting case. Of all the native characters in both novels, she is the only one who is named. She is described by the girl as “the housekeeper who will never leave my mother, even when she goes back to France, even when my elder brother tries to rape her in the house that goes with my mother’s job in Sedec, even when her wages stop being paid” (Duras 20). Do, like the unnamed Algerians in Camus’ novel, never speaks for herself. She is a shadow in the background of a story where white and wealthier Asian characters have agency. Though this story takes place in Vietnam, there are no Vietnamese characters speaking or acting. Do’s actions are passive and she is acted upon by the other characters in the novel who have power over her. Because of how she functions in the girl’s narrative, Do also appears similar to the “mammy stock character” we see in Antebellum Southern Literature. She is loyal to people who treat her terribly and basically becomes their slave. Does Do have a name because she allies herself to the French family who has power over her? Maybe it’s notable then that the native Algerians in Camus’ *The Stranger* are in direct opposition to the ethnically French characters (Raymond and Mersault) and they do not have names.

### **How the Taboo of *The Lover* has Shifted Over Time for Readers:**

One final topic I'd like to touch upon is the shifting ideas of what is considered taboo in romantic and sexual relationships over time. The way a twenty-first century reader would read *The Lover*, they would be more likely to find the age gap rather than the racial differences between the lovers to be taboo. Perhaps in early 20<sup>th</sup> century France and China, it would not be unusual for a fifteen year old to have an affair with an adult man many years older than her. No one in the novel seemed concerned about their difference in age. Kathleen Hulley also points out this glaring issue: "All the stories in the Vietnam cycle point either obliquely or overtly, toward an abnormal violation, a transgression of the codes which ought to protect 'the child' from the sexual advances of a 20 year old lover" (39). Now it would most certainly be taboo, if not entirely illegal for their relationship to take place because of their difference in age. Them being of different races would not be an issue for most 21<sup>st</sup> century readers as interracial relationships and marriages are quite common now. Duras' text would still be shocking to her 21<sup>st</sup> century reader but for a different reason than it would have been for the characters in the book, living in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Across many countries and cultures today, it is understood that this relationship would be seen as predatory rather than romantic because the girl is still a child.

### **Conclusion:**

The varied contentious readings of Duras' *The Lover* and Camus' *The Stranger* have to do with the fact that they are unavoidably colonial texts. These stories, influenced by a blend of Orientalism, Colonial Desire and the author's own lives and perspectives, are wrought with issues concerning both race and class. Camus was calling for peace, pleading with his fellow *Pied Noirs* to not act against the native Algerians when he wrote *The Stranger*. Without knowing the personal horrors he witnessed while living in Paris during Nazi occupation and his later

attempts to work for Algerian peace, the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader could easily dismiss him as just another white man writing about The Orient, a place invented and colonized by Europeans. Like Duras, he was a lower class French settler, who grew up in this respective colony. Rather being blind to issues of race and class, Camus was highly aware of his place in the middle of the violent imperialists and the oppressed natives. *The Stranger* was an attempt to warn his fellow *Pied Noirs* to not confuse pride in their French identity with being willing to commit atrocities against the natives in the name of loyalty towards the Empire. The message has been twice obscured by Camus' purposeful use of absurdism and by the fact that time has revealed that this kind of colonial writing evokes the colonial era which is understandably traumatic for some 21<sup>st</sup> century readers. *The Lover* too, has its drawbacks for 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences but still can be understood as a text that was novel in its day because it depicted a forbidden affair that crossed the era's social barriers of class and race. Both *The Lover* and *The Stranger* are windows into the French colonial experience written by people who lived the experience of the middle ground; that of the poor white settler.

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