

UNIT 6: READING**1 Look at the article below from a magazine for literature students at a UK university. Choose the best title.**

- 1 Essential writers: Albert Camus (1913 – 1960)
- 2 Where do I start? Albert Camus (1913 – 1960)
- 3 French writers: Albert Camus (1913 – 1960)
- 4 Overrated writers: Albert Camus (1913 – 1960)
- 5 My favourite writer: Albert Camus (1913 – 1960)

There are some writers whose works of literature can change lives. For many people, Albert Camus is one of those writers. In particular, two of his novels are very accessible to all readers and offer an excellent introduction to his writing: *L'Étranger* (1942) (trans. *The Stranger*) and *La Peste* (1947) (trans. *The Plague*). Although Camus wrote in French, his work has been translated across the world.

Camus was born in 1913 in Algeria to a French-Algerian family. His family were poor and his father was killed in the First World War. After working his way through school and the University of Algiers, he became involved in the political and social struggles of the time. Some of the many groups he joined and participated in were the French Communist Party, the Algerian People's Party and the French anarchist movement. He was politically active and was involved in demonstrations in support of workers in East Germany, Poland and Hungary in the 1950s.

In the early 1940s, during the Second World War, Camus started writing articles for an underground newspaper. Throughout the 40s and 50s, Camus wrote for many newspapers focusing particularly on political and social issues. His writing was heavily influenced by his knowledge of the tensions in Algeria and his experience of the Second World War and the aftermath of that event. By the time of his death, he had published widely and on many different subjects. He wrote essays, plays, non-fiction, short stories and novels. In 1957 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. It was said that he illuminated 'the problems of the human conscience in our times'.

*The Stranger* is perhaps the most famous of Camus' books and it often appears in modern songs and films, such as the recent war film *Jarhead*. In *The Stranger*, the emotionless main character Meursault is involved in a series of events over several days that starts with his mother's funeral and ends with him killing an Arab man on a beach.

Meursault is honest and direct in the way he lives his life and simply experiences a sequence of events that happen to him. The physical sensations of these events are the only real things for him. His final action of killing is in response to the strong glare of the sun. He does not pretend to have emotions that he does not have, nor does he take part in social conventions such as demonstrating grief at his mother's funeral. Meursault is one of the most fascinating characters in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and ultimately the book investigates such issues as truth, life, responsibility and meaning.

In *The Plague*, the Algerian town of Oran is suddenly full of dying rats. This soon leads to the spread of a plague that ravages the city. This is generally considered to be an allegory of the Second World War inspired by Camus' experience of fighting with the French resistance. Thus the plague is a metaphor for the invasion of France. In the book, Camus uses a number of characters to explore the different human reactions to such a disastrous situation. By doing this, he raises many questions about the human condition and paints a fascinating picture of life in the face of disaster.

Why bother, I hear you say? Read Camus and you will learn something about yourself.

By Patricia Poiccard

**2 Find this vocabulary in the text.**

- 1 In paragraph 1, find an adjective that means 'not difficult to understand or read'.
- 2 In paragraph 2, find a verb phrase containing a verb, an adverb and an adjective that describes someone who is very involved in politics.
- 3 In paragraph 3, find a verb that means 'to throw light on something'.
- 4 In paragraph 4, find an adjective that is used to describe someone who shows no feelings.
- 5 In paragraph 5, find a compound noun (a noun phrase consisting of two words) that is used to describe the type of behaviour that is expected of people in society
- 6 In paragraph 6, find two literary terms that are used to describe the situation where one thing is used to represent another thing

**3 Answer the following questions using information from the text. Try to put the answers in your own words.**

- 1 Why does Patricia Poiccard recommend *The Stranger* and *The Plague*?
- 2 What two things are mentioned as being strong influences on his writing?
- 3 According to Patricia Poiccard, which is the best known of Camus' books?
- 4 What is the reason given for Meursault killing the man on the beach?
- 5 In *The Plague*, Camus uses a number of different characters. Why?