L’Etranger – Albert Camus

From your reading of the text, your understanding of the themes and Camus’ philosophy: Is Meursault an absurd hero? Is he a moral monster? Is he a rebel against conventional morality?

Below are some of my ideas and ‘readings’ of the text – hopefully, you can use these as points for your own response (whether it be an essay, presentation etc). These are by no means definitive thoughts and, of course, there is no correct answer. You may have included other facts, information and personal ‘readings’ that are equally pertinent.

Camus’ ideas on the ‘absurd’

A brief definition of ‘the absurd’ is the confrontation with ourselves, with our demands for rationality and justice in an "indifferent" universe, in an existence that appears to have no purpose or objective.

Camus was not the originator of ‘absurdism’ and his philosophy of ‘the absurd’ was the result of his desire for clarity and meaning within a world and an existence that has neither. Camus’ ideas on the ‘absurd’ focussed on the absurdity of the human condition and on the idea of dualism – happiness and sadness; dark and light; life and death. The only meaning or value that Camus gives to human life is the pure joy of living in a world with which man is connected. He rejects religious belief and existentialism which he believes serve only to support and glorify the irrational. He proposes a moral philosophy in which he suggests that we should accept the absurdity of life and live it as fully and intensely as possible. He believed that the gap between absurdity and clarity can never be filled and that people, erroneously, have a longing or an impulse towards immortality. In his view the only principle of life by which one should live in order to cope in an ‘absurd’ world is to establish one’s own identity through exercising freedom and choices.

L’Etranger was published in 1942 and is a reflection of Camus’ own philosophy of absurdity. In the novel he is forcing us to think about our own mortality and the meaning of our existence. It is the story of a man, Meursault, who is apparently leading an ‘absurd’ life which he unconsciously accepts. His life and attitudes lack rational order. He makes no judgments, accepts unsavoury characters as his friends and neighbours, and remains unmoved by the death of his mother and his own killing of a man. Facing execution for his crime, he "opens his heart to the benign indifference of the universe."

The main events in the novel to which you should make reference

1. The death and funeral of Meursault’s mother
2. His marriage to Marie
3. The killing of the Arab
4. Meursault’s trial

Is Meursault an absurd hero? Is he a moral monster?
Rather than being a ‘hero’, is Meursault an ‘antihero’ as many critics believe?
It may be helpful therefore for you to consider some formal definitions of a hero and an
antihero (see, for example, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hero).

Characteristics of Meursault’s personality and behaviour

- At first Meursault appears unresponsive, puzzling and almost repellent.
- He chooses his own way of thinking, his own pattern of life. He dares to say “no”
to the stereotyped values and morality. He believes in himself and the choices
that he makes.
- Meursault refuses to play the game – and is condemned for not doing so. He
sticks to own principles of honesty and sincerity by which he has always led his
life - he does not and cannot lie about his feelings. He is incapable of pretence
and shows that he cannot make socially acceptable responses as is evident
from:
  a) his reaction to his mother’s death
  b) his behaviour at her funeral
  c) his merciless honesty to Marie
- He is indifferent to social wrong. For example, he does not intervene when the
Arab girl is beaten up.
- He refuses to exaggerate his feelings and when asked if he regrets his crime, he
does not give the conventional answer expected and states his exact feelings:
  “J'ai réfléchi et j'ai dit que, plutôt que du regret véritable, j'éprouvais un certain
ennui. J'ai eu l'impression qu'il ne me comprenait pas.”
- Society feels threatened by the honesty of this unconventional response and
condemns Meursault outright
  “A-t-il seulement exprimé des regrets? Jamais, messieurs. Pas une seule fois
au cours de l'instruction cet homme n'a paru ému de son abominable forfait. »
- Meursault’s actions and feelings are strange to us and there appears to be no
reason behind them. Why does he not show any emotion on learning about the
death of his mother? Why did he marry Marie? Why did he gun down the Arab?
He does not provide any reasons or answers and as a result society reacts by
trying to construct meaning behind his actions.
- Meursault is the ‘Stranger’ in society who does not appear to conform to any
moral convention.
- However, Meursault is not wholly insensitive; he is ultimately motivated by a
passion for the absolute and the truth. This is summed up by his thoughts after
an uncomfortable visit from a priest before his execution:
  “J'étais sûr de moi, sûr de tout, plus sûr que lui, sûr de ma vie et de cette mort
qui allait venir. Oui, je n'avais que cela. Mais du moins, je tenais cette vérité
autant qu'elle me tenait. J'avais eu raison, j'avais encore raison, j'avais toujours
raison. J'avais vécu de telle façon et j'aurais pu vivre de telle autre.”
- Camus made the following comment about L’Étranger:
  “Dans notre société tout homme qui ne pleure pas à l'enterrement de sa mère
risque d'être condamné à mort ».
Is Camus infact portraying Meursault as a martyr who accepts dying for telling
the truth?