

# **The First Man Study Guide**

## **The First Man by Albert Camus**

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# Plot Summary

The First Man by Albert Camus is an autobiographical novel. Present day, forty-year-old Jacques Cormery goes on a search for information about his deceased father, Henri Cormery. In the first section of the novel, Jacques is born in a small village named Solferino in the Algerian countryside in 1913. The next section jumps to 1954, with Jacques as a man. The reader learns that Henri dies before Jacques' first birthday, leaving Lucie, Jacques' partially deaf and mute mother, to raise him. Henri dies in the war in France.

Adult Jacques first explores his father's grave site in a small village in France. Jacques lives in Paris and visits. This visit deeply touches Jacques because he realizes his father died at twenty-nine years old, and he is forty. He realizes that Henri hardly lived life. Jacques travels to Algeria, back to the poor neighborhood where he grew up in Algiers and where Lucie still lives.

Once he is back in the neighborhood, he has long sections of flashbacks to his childhood. In fact, most of the novel is about Jacques' childhood. In the midst of childhood remembrances, Jacques tries to get information out of Lucie and others about Henri. But Lucie cannot remember and the others have no answers.

Child Jacques grows up in extreme poverty and without a father. He lives with Lucie, the grandmother, who is Lucie's mother, his Uncle Etienne, who is fully deaf and partially mute, and his older brother Henri, who is hardly mentioned in the novel. He remembers the good times of growing up, such as playing games, swimming in the beach and causing mischief with the other neighborhood boys. The grandmother is the disciplinarian in the family and takes over the mother's role. Any time Jacques does something bad, the grandmother whips him.

Jacques is intelligent and his teacher recognizes this. Jacques passes a special exam to enter lycee, an advanced secondary school in downtown Algiers. He attends and tries to fit in with classmates who have more money than his family does. He becomes a sensitive young man, who observes the people and places around him, and the plight of the Arab-European relationship. He is also wild and vain and gets into trouble at school.

In the midst of his childhood memories, an adult Jacques comforts Lucie when terrorist bombs explode in the street. He also goes to visit Solferino, the village where he was born. However, no one knows of his family, in particular, his father. No one can help him in his search for Henri.

Jacques grows into a sensitive, caring and mature young man by the novel's end. He leaves poverty and succeeds in France. He realizes all of his life experiences both good and bad, including being fatherless, shape him as a person. He is The First Man.



## **Part 1, Search for the Father, first section (unnamed)**

### **Part 1, Search for the Father, first section (unnamed) Summary**

The First Man by Albert Camus is an autobiographical novel that centers on the life of Jacques Cormery in Algiers, Algeria. Jacques' father dies when Jacques is just under a year old. Jacques goes in search of information about his mysterious father from various family members and old friends throughout Algiers. The novel interweaves present-day forty-year-old Jacques in 1954 and child Jacques in his Algiers childhood.

The book opens to the rolling expanse of the Algerian countryside. A wagon travels over a road, pulled by a horse, and full of furniture and other household items. The driver in the front seat is an Arab. There are also a French husband and his pregnant wife in the wagon. She is beautiful, and must be half Spanish. The husband worries because his wife is about to give birth. The Arab says there is only eight kilometers to go. The husband takes the reins and makes the horse go faster. Day turns into night as it begins to rain.

It is 1913. The family travels from Algiers, Algeria to the small village of Solferino. The Arab driver warns the husband of bandits. The wife complains that her contractions hurt. They go to the house. The Arab and husband take Lucie, the pregnant wife, into the house and lay her down on a mattress. The Arab tells the husband they will have a healthy boy. Lucie cries out in pain. The husband tells the Arab to fetch the Arab's daughter-in-law. The husband knocks on a stranger's door and introduces himself as Henri Cormery. He asks the Arab woman stranger to watch his wife while he gets a doctor. She agrees. Henri finally finds a doctor, and they ride to the couple's house.

The baby boy has already come by help of the Arab woman. The doctor cuts the cord. Henri names the baby after the Arab woman, Madame Jacques. The baby is Jacques Cormery.

### **Part 1, Search for the Father, first section (unnamed) Analysis**

The book opens in Algeria, an unknown and far away place. Yet the way Albert Camus writes, it seems as if the book has an everywhere quality, as if this small village could be anywhere in the world. The way he describes the landscape is similar to that of an American pioneer novel. He focuses intently on description of the land, setting and the physical characteristics of the people. The latter description is of great important, since Algeria is split between the white, French Algerian man, such as Henri Cormery, and the



Arabs, such as the driver and woman. This foreshadows a problem between the two groups, since they appear to be fine at first, but their physical features are of great concern.

Henri Cormery is unemotional throughout the opening section, except at the end, when he places his hand atop his wife's hand for comfort. She shows her emotion though. In fact, she tries to hold back her labor discomfort. But the pain is too much and she screams. Therefore, the baby is caught between these two parents, one of an unemotional French upbringing versus one of a very emotional Spanish upbringing. This foreshadows an identity crisis as Jacques grows up into an adult. Where does he fit in best: Africa, France or Spain?



# Part 1, Search for the Father, Saint-Brieuc

## Part 1, Search for the Father, Saint-Brieuc Summary

Forty years later, Jacques take a train to visit his father's grave in Saint Brieuc, the French countryside. Jacques lives in Paris. He decides to travel to Saint Brieuc because he promises to do so before visiting his mother back in Algeria. Jacques arrives at the cemetery and asks the caretaker of the location for the soldiers who died in the 1914 French war. The caretaker remembers the name Henri Cormery, a soldier who died at the Battle of Marne, Saint Brieuc on October 11, 1914. He takes Jacques to the grave.

Lucie, Jacques' mother, has never seen the grave. That is why she makes Jacques promise to visit it. Jacques wants to get this over with, since he's visiting his mentor in Saint Brieuc. The grave is well-maintained with fresh flowers. Jacques reads the gravestone and sees his father's age, born 1885 and died 1914. He was only twenty-nine when he died. Jacques grows very sad and guilty about the fact his own life is longer than his father's when he died. Jacques feels sorry that Henri never experienced life, and died so young before he could really experience it. Jacques leaves the cemetery.

## Part 1, Search for the Father, Saint-Brieuc Analysis

Jacques has a long, introspective moment when he visits Henri's grave. This is important because it symbolizes the longing Jacques has for his father. This fatherly bond or connection is not something that Jacques has yearned for in the past, as he admits, but knowing his father died young touches him. Thus, the roles of the father and son switch here. Jacques takes the position of a wise, older man looking down on a young man's grave. The dead father, Henri, takes the position of the inferior one, since he does not have the life experience or maturity Jacques has.

At the grave site, the reader can see Jacques takes on both personalities of his parents. He can be cold and rigid like his father; for example, when he says to the caretaker he is not affected by his father's death because he died when Jacques was less than a year old. Yet when he sees the grave, emotions take over, which is similar to his mother. It is apparent Jacques has a duality in his personality, and this duality may affect the result of future situations in the novel.



## **Part 1, Search for the Father, Saint Briec and Malan (J.G.)**

### **Part 1, Search for the Father, Saint Briec and Malan (J.G.) Summary**

Jacques, or J.C., watches his old friend, Victor Malan, eat. Victor is a retired customs administrator. Victor is an outstanding man, but he is not boring. He has an unusual way of thinking and Jacques appreciates this quality. Victor tells stories of "his friend" or "a man who he knew," but really it is himself. Victor looks Chinese. He tells Jacques that no one really knows anyone. Everyone has their own separate life away from others, such as his wife, who says she hates pastries, but goes to the bakery in secret. Victor disapproves of Jacques going in search of his father.

Jacques says he is not arrogant with Victor because he loves him dearly. Victor does not respond. Jacques says Victor is like a father to him, but he also says he has faults, such as he is cheap and always suspecting of others' motives. Jacques says he himself is stingy, but he would give Victor everything if he had too. Then Victor says he does approve of Jacques' search for Henri. He says the fact that Henri never grew old is a blessing, but Jacques answers that Henri never experienced many of life's pleasures. Victor responds Jacques loves life and believes in it. Jacques says he wants to live forever. Victor believes he is close to death and tells Jacques to find out about Henri, but come back and visit him before he dies. Jacques leaves, but keeps hearing Victor's voice saying he is empty and indifference hurts him.

### **Part 1, Search for the Father, Saint Briec and Malan (J.G.) Analysis**

An emotional and loving Jacques expresses his love to Victor, which symbolizes his love for the only father he knows. This love grows deeper after he visits his real father's grave, and realizes that Henri is an important missing piece of his life. Yet Victor cannot return his emotion, which is similar to Henri. Thus, Victor symbolizes an incarnation or reproduction of sorts to replace Henri. Now that Victor may be dying, Henri must still have a father, and that is why Victor urges Jacques to find out about Henri. He wants Jacques to have a father figure with him in spirit, if he cannot be with him in life.



# Part 1, Search for the Father, The Child's Games

## Part 1, Search for the Father, The Child's Games Summary

Jacques is on the ship to Algeria to visit his mother. He remembers living with mother, grandmother and family. He grew up poor in an Algiers neighborhood. The grandmother would insist on making Jacques take an afternoon nap when he was growing up. But Jacques never slept. He hated the naps and always tried to get out of them. Jacques is happy he escaped the poverty of his childhood, but he is also excited to return to Algiers.

Flashing back to childhood, Jacques plays with Pierre and his other friends. They play in decrepit places seeped in urine. They play a game called canette vinga, a poor man's version of tennis. Jacques lives in a slum, where people pile all of their unusable belongings. The best days are the summer. The neighborhood boys escape siesta and throw stones at fruit on trees to knock it down. Jacques and Pierre are both good at this game, but share their fruit with all of the boys. Max is the worst boy at this game, but the best street fighter. He has respect from all the boys. After the fruit game, they go to the beach and buy French fries. The boy who buys the fries gives one each to the others, while he has the rest. He lets the others eat the crumbs as well. Then they swim naked in the sea. When he returns home, Jacques lies and tells his mother and grandmother he and Pierre were busy doing homework. The grandmother smells and sees the remains of the beach on him and whips him for lying. Lucie lets her mother whip Jacques as a child.

Adult Jacques' boat approaches Algiers.

## Part 1, Search for the Father, The Child's Games Analysis

As Jacques remembers his childhood, his grandmother's oppressive and abusive nature spark memories of Algiers. But there are also memories of the good times with his friends, the neighborhood boys. Again, this symbolizes a duality in how Jacques views the world. Things are not simply black and white in his life. Every good memory comes with an equally bad one.

His mother remains silent during the whipping, and Jacques has no father to protect him. This symbolizes a loss of innocence, and a loss of both parents. Despite his mother raising him, she is not present at times. Instead, it is the Spanish grandmother that takes over her job, which is direct commentary on how the Spanish culture is a big



influence on Jacques' life. Though he grows up in Algeria, it is the Spanish influence that is dominant. Additionally, it is Henri's job in the French army that gets him killed. Both symbolize how the European influence dominates over Africa, not only socially and economically in Algeria, but also in Jacques' life. It is the European influence that dominates his home life. As the novel unfolds, it appears like the European influence continues to dominate his life, since he lives in Paris. But he is on a quest to find out more about Henri, and once he does, the Algerian side of him may take over.



# Part 1, Search for the Father, The Father. His Death The War. The Bombing

## Part 1, Search for the Father, The Father. His Death The War. The Bombing Summary

The grandmother died. But Lucie still lives in Algiers. Lucie kisses and hugs Jacques when he comes in to the apartment. He remembers her as a sweet, cuddling mother. As they sit and talk, Lucie keeps glancing nervously towards the street. The street gets noisy. Jacques sees Lucie is still beautiful and comments that she went to the hairdresser. She replies yes, because of his visit. Lucie has a hard life doing housework and taking care of her family. Jacques wants to tell his mother she is beautiful, but he feels it crosses an invisible barrier.

Lucie worked hard as a maid, but now she is retired. She is partly deaf. She refuses to leave her apartment and neighborhood because it is all she knows. It would be too difficult somewhere else. Lucie keeps the apartment very clean and uncluttered.

Jacques and Lucie talk about Henri. Lucie does not remember much information about him, but she does remember Jacques looks exactly like him. She does not remember when she or Henri was born. Jacques looks in the family book and sees Henri was born in 1885 and she in 1882. Henri's parents died young and his older brothers sent Henri to live in an orphanage. He was illiterate, but learned to read and write in the war. He wrote Lucie postcards then. Lucie met Henri at a farm where he was a wine specialist. Lucie says Henri had a good head on his shoulders, like Jacques. The French government sent Lucie the shell fragment that killed her husband. Henri also fought in the war in Morocco in 1905 when he was twenty.

Jacques' old high school principal, Levesque, told Jacques years ago that he and Henri fought together in the Moroccan war. The enemy killed their comrade, cut off his penis and stuffed it in his mouth. It was a horrid sight. Henri told Levesque that the enemies weren't men to do such a thing. Levesque's story is the most Jacques knows about his father.

Lucie must imagine France, where Jacques lives and her husband died. When Henri went to war, she had to imagine a lot of places. She worked while he was gone. One day, a well-dressed gentleman, the district mayor, came to Lucie and the grandmother's house. He told them Henri died at war and handed them an envelope. The grandmother was upset, but Lucie didn't hear because of her partial deafness. The grandmother told her. Lucie did not open the envelope, and instead went into the bedroom and lay there in a catatonic state.

Jacques finds Henri's postcards from the hospital that he wrote before dying three days later. Parachutists walk by the window. Lucie says they are there for the bandits. It is a



lively Sunday morning. An explosion sounds. People flee the streets. Jacques goes out into the street to see. People start to accuse an innocent Arab man. Jacques pulls him into the store of his friend to protect him. The bomb went off at the trolley stop where many people were standing. Lucie says this is the second bomb this week and she is afraid to leave her house. Jacques says the bombings will stop. She agrees. He asks her to live with him in France. She replies she wants to stay in Algiers.

## **Part 1, Search for the Father, The Father. His Death The War. The Bombing Analysis**

Jacques is not able to tell his mother she is beautiful. Though he examines her face carefully and sees her great beauty, he cannot verbalize this. This is in contrast to Victor, a person whom he says he loves to his face. This displays the strained relationship between mother and son. It is not one that is open and free, like with Victor, but it is a relationship with boundaries and limitations. Jacques' two relationships with extreme boundaries are those of his mother and father. Therefore, Jacques cannot relate to his parents, whether they are dead or alive.

It is only now that Lucie and Jacques discuss Henri. The idea of a father is removed completely from Jacques' life up until the current moment when he visits Henri's grave. Instead, the two people who raise him are women. The grandmother with her male-like behavior serves as a symbol for Jacques' father, as she beats him and takes on the dominating role in the family. It is after the grandmother dies that Lucie opens up to Jacques about Henri. Thus, Lucie has the authority by default to tell Jacques about Henri.

Henri's masculinity is defined by his time as a soldier. That is all Jacques knows of him. Yet, Levesque gives Jacques insight into Henri as a man with upstanding morals and a conscience. Henri starts to become a full man in Jacques' eyes and the reader's eyes because both know so little of him. But this war story defines Henri as a good man and a good soldier. Throughout the war story, Jacques learns more about what it is to be a man, directly from an experience with his father.



# Part 1, Search for the Father, The Family

## Part 1, Search for the Father, The Family Summary

Jacques mentions that he visited Solferino, the village where he was born. He says the doctor who cut his umbilical cord sends his greetings to Lucie. He also says no one in Solferino remembers Henri. Lucie does not understand. Lucie suffered from illness as a child, leaving her partially deaf and mute. Jacques then mentions the time Henri went to see a murderer's execution at the local prison. Henri witnessed the man's head being cut off, came home, vomited and refused to speak about it again. As a child, Jacques is scared he will be executed too. The grandmother tells Jacques he will end up in the gallows.

Jacques explains that his grandmother has a hard life as well, which is why she is so strict. Her father was murdered and she married and had nine children. Only three lived. Her husband died early. She raised Lucie and her siblings in a very strict household. The grandmother left the farm and moved to Algiers, and Lucie and the other children worked as soon as they could.

The grandmother is cheap. She buys Jacques raincoats too big for him as a child. She buys him cheap shoes and forbids him to play soccer at recess so he does not ruin his shoes. But he still plays. When the shoes are visibly ruined, the grandmother whips him.

While growing up, Jacques and the family live in extreme poverty. They do not have a normal stove in their house and must pay a neighbor to heat up their food. They have a hole for a toilet, which floods over and spills onto the stairs.

One day Jacques hides two francs from his grandmother in order to buy a ticket to a soccer game. He lies and tells her he dropped them. He feels guilty hoarding money from the family, but still enjoys the game. He and his brother Henri (named after the father) sing and play violin, respectively, for his grandmother and her guests. Jacques hates it.

Every week the grandmother, Jacques and Henri go to the theater to see a movie. But the movies have subtitles and the grandmother is illiterate. Henri translates for his grandmother, despite the complaints from others around him. The grandmother tells him to speak louder. But he often falls silent. One time, she gets up and leaves during the movie because Jacques will not translate, and he feels guilty for ruining her one pleasure.

## Part 1, Search for the Father, The Family Analysis

In this chapter, the reader can see how Jacques' childhood starts to shape him. He recognizes the grandmother as the strict disciplinarian, and now it is apparent why she is, since Lucie is not only partially deaf, but partially mute as well. Jacques grows up in



extreme poverty, but with a house full of adults who love and care for him. And through this poverty, Jacques realizes how to appreciate the little things in life, such as affording French fries from a street vendor or paying for a game ticket, instead of sneaking in. This family history is a missing part of the explanation for the person Jacques is as a forty-year-old man. Part 1 is named Search for the Father, but in reality, the reader searches not only for Henri, but for an explanation of who Jacques is, especially since forty-year-old Jacques does not have a large part in the novel yet. The reader still waits to hear more from older Jacques; i.e., is he is married, or is he a father? These are questions the reader will hopefully find out later in the novel.

Lucie's lack of expression of love for Jacques as a child explains why Jacques is able to express his love for her in his adulthood and express love toward his mentor, Victor. He acts the opposite of Lucie when expressing love, and is a sensitive and caring man toward those whom he feels closest. This symbolizes a separation not only from Lucie, but from Henri, a man who is unemotional in the first section of the novel. Jacques breaks the cycle of the inability to emote handed down by his parents, and he establishes himself as a man with feelings.



# Part 1, Search for the Father, Etienne

## Part 1, Search for the Father, Etienne Summary

Uncle Etienne, or Ernest, is Jacques' uncle and Lucie's brother. He is fully deaf, but can make some sounds and form words and short sentences. He is a very handsome man as well, and the people around him love him very much. He tells Jacques that Henri was stubborn, but that is all he tells him.

Uncle Etienne uses his physical sensations to enjoy life. He loves physical activities such as swimming, eating and going to the bathroom. Anything with a physical sensation pleases him. Yet he has an acute sense of smell, but oddly enough, does not smell his stinky dog, Brilliant. As a child, Jacques and Etienne go on hunting trips. They ride the train with Etienne's friends and their dogs. They arrive at the hunting spot, split off into pairs and hunt. They meet back in the early afternoon to see who killed what. Etienne is successful, killing rabbits and hares. He always shares lunch with the other men, who appreciate this gesture very much. Everyone naps and then catches the train back to Algiers. Etienne asks Jacques if he is happy and Jacques does not respond. Etienne laughs and Jacques holds his hand and they walk home together.

Etienne also has a bad temper. He can smell egg on the dinner plates when no one else can. He throws a fit when he smells it, but others do not. He must eat off a new plate, which smells of egg as well, and he sulks. The grandmother is easy on her son because she loves his grace, strength and beauty. Etienne beats up another uncle, who has more money, for seemingly no reason at all. Etienne also grows angry when Lucie dresses in vibrant colors and styles her hair. A man starts to come around. Etienne beats up the man. Lucie goes back to wearing black and gray and being plain.

Jacques visits a wine cask-making factory. He stands up on a bench and falls back on his finger. It is crushed. Etienne picks him up and rushes him to a doctor. The doctor puts staples in his finger.

In present time, as Jacques the adult, Etienne knocks at the door. Jacques opens it. Etienne is still handsome. They discuss family members, who are all dead. Jacques remembers when his Uncle Michel would take him to the horse stables. They would take out the horses and picnic with other family members near the beach. There would be a lot of food and good times.

The few family members who are still alive live happily in poverty and do not want to leave it. He realizes his surviving family members will not give him the information he wants about Henri. This saddens him. Jacques remembers the neighborhood of his childhood with fondness and terror.



## Part 1, Search for the Father, Etienne Analysis

Etienne is a person who represents a duality of emotions. He is good-natured and giving, but he is also angered easily and will physically hurt those people he does not like. He protects the family, according to his own standards; thus, he serves as the family's father figure in instances when the grandmother cannot. He has deep love for Jacques, a child whom he cannot necessarily teach things, but whom he can entertain freely. When it comes to Jacques, Etienne is a caretaker, protector and playmate.

Jacques is sad because his family will not provide any information about his father. Thus, Jacques feels a constant blockage in his life, whether it is his father dying, his disabled mother and uncle or his strict grandmother. He cannot move forward because he cannot receive the information he needs about his past. If Jacques does not find someone who can answer his father questions, he will be blocked emotionally for life. This emotional block may hurt him later on in life, since the discovery of his father comes so recently. Interestingly enough, Jacques will not push the issue on his family, thus his motivation is to receive the information, but not by compromising the comfort level of his relationship with others. All the boundaries set up for Jacques as a child, he respects. The reader receives an insight into Jacques' present-day personality because s/he understands Jacques has a deep respect for his odd family dynamic.



# Part 1, Search for the Father, School

## Part 1, Search for the Father, School Summary

Jacques visits his old elementary school teacher, M. Bernard. Jacques has fond memories of him. He works the children very hard, but he is fair, strict and loving toward all his students. He has a special fondness for those boys who lost their fathers in the war, such as Jacques, because he fought alongside their fathers. As a child, Jacques competes with his friend Pierre in subjects. They are both very smart and they are both at the top of their class. Every morning Jacques and Pierre scare the stray dogs in the neighborhood so they are not caught by the dogcatcher. The dogcatcher then chases them.

Jacques and Pierre love school. It is a way to escape their home lives and to discover new things. M. Bernard reads a war novel to the students and when he finishes, Jacques cries. In the present day, M. Bernard gives Jacques this war novel, and Jacques is deeply touched. Jacques recalls the sugar cane, or the old ruler M. Bernard would beat his students with. Students who act out severely receive the sugar cane. Jacques receives it as well. On one occasion, a boy calls him the teacher's pet. M. Bernard defends Jacques, but Jacques in turn wants to defend M. Bernard. He and the boy get into a physical fight and Jacques wins by punching him out. The boy's mother complains to the school. Jacques is punished both by the principal and by M. Bernard's sugar cane method.

M. Bernard sees potential in Jacques. He recommends him and four other students to take a special exam to enter into lycee, an advanced elementary school. The parents of the other students agree to pay for extra lessons to prepare for the test. But Jacques' grandmother wants him to work next year, not go to school. M. Bernard convinces the grandmother to let Jacques take the lessons free of charge and enter school if he passes the test. The grandmother decides Jacques should receive First Communion, yet they are not a religious family. Instead of the normal two-year course of study, the grandmother convinces the priest to let Jacques study in one month, in case Jacques is accepted into lycee, and receive his Communion after that month. Jacques receives the holy sacrament, and he passes his advanced placement exam.

M. Bernard brings Jacques over to his house to tell the good news. The grandmother is happy. Jacques feels alone as he sees M. Bernard walk away. Now he must brave school on his own.

## Part 1, Search for the Father, School Analysis

M. Bernard is a representation of Jacques' father, Henri. Yet he is more attentive, warm and loving than Henri. He is a more compassionate version, and Jacques responds to his compassion very well. Jacques becomes a more compassionate boy because of M.





Bernard. The war stories make him cry. He fights to protect his teacher's honor. This is the first time in the novel where Jacques starts to develop emotionally due to the influence of a father figure. Uncle Etienne does help him emote a bit, but it is M. Bernard who gives Jacques an emotional side.

M. Bernard is also like a father because he is strict and fair in punishment. Jacques does not get away with behaving badly just because M. Bernard favors him. He also sees potential in Jacques and wants the best for him. His goal is to remove Jacques from poverty through advanced education. Even though Jacques' own family does not want this for him, M. Bernard does. Thus, M. Bernard symbolizes the ultimate father figure, almost a fairy godfather, or a father seen in fairytales. And as this father figure, M. Bernard shows him the way, but lets Jacques go after Jacques passes the exam. Just like a real father, M. Bernard provides a foundation for life, and it is up to Jacques to build upon it.



# **Part 1, Search for the Father, Mondovi: The Settlement and the Father**

## **Part 1, Search for the Father, Mondovi: The Settlement and the Father Summary**

Present day Jacques visits Solferino, the village where he was born. He goes to the farmhouse where he was born and meets the owner, Mr. Veillard. Veillard is of no help though. He doesn't know anything about Jacques, Henri or his family. Veillard's parents moved to Solferino after the war, but the Arab population became violent and murderous. In protest, Veillard's father mowed down all his crops, poured out his wine and moved to France. Veillard brings Jacques to an Arab farmhand who may have known Henri, but he is of no help either. Veillard says the farmhand is originally reluctant to open his door because the authorities come after the Arabs.

Jacques, the doctor who delivered him and Veillard have lunch. Veillard discusses how the French were promised a land of promise in Algeria after the war. But it was a land of hunger, disease and death. Two thirds of these emigrants died. Arabs attacked Solferino. The doctor says the Arabs have been persecuted for a long time, since Biblical times. They walk through the village after lunch. Jacques thinks of his Spanish ancestors. He thinks of the fighting between the Europeans and the Arabs, and their relations over time. He realizes he will never know his father Henri, and that his gravestone at Saint-Brieuc means nothing to him.

## **Part 1, Search for the Father, Mondovi: The Settlement and the Father Analysis**

This is the first time in the novel an extensive discussion of European-Arab relations arises. It is Mr. Veillard, a stranger, who points out the problems with the Arab community. Jacques listens to Veillard and the old doctor discuss this situation. Jacques does not contribute his opinion. Instead, like the reader, Jacques listens. Albert Camus uses social commentary here to tell the reader about the Arab community and the history throughout the region. The long sentences of dialogue are a device to instruct the reader without realizing s/he is receiving instruction. Fiction writers often use this hidden, didactic device to give readers historical perspective, without infusing personal opinion. Camus does this to give his reader background perspective on a turbulent situation.



## Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Lycee

### Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Lycee Summary

Jacques, as a boy, goes to lycee, or the advanced elementary school. It is a life-altering experience for him, since he must ride the trolley into the downtown. He leaves early in the morning and returns home after dark. He attends on a partial scholarship. Pierre also goes to lycee with him.

On the trolley to and from lycee, and on his walk to and from lycee, Jacques observes many different types of people, both rich and poor. He observes the trolley drivers. He and the other boys make fun of a shop keeper and are chased down by the shop keeper's hired hands. While in lycee, he and Pierre are prepared due to the teaching of M. Bernard. But here, they are alone. They have a different teacher for each subject. Jacques does well in school, but he is not prepared for the class differences among the students. Many of his peers come from well-to-do, French families, a sort of upper middle class. These students have a normal family dynamic, of a mother, father and family history. Jacques does not have this. He feels especially lacking in this when the teacher asks him to get a permission slip signed by his parents. Both Lucie and the grandmother cannot read or write. However, Lucie has learned how to scribble an acceptable signature a while ago. Jacques asks her to sign the slip, but she forgets. The grandmother cannot sign, so Jacques goes to school without a sign permission slip. The teacher asks him for the slip, and he confesses that no one in his household can sign it. The teacher is shocked, not realizing Jacques lives in such extreme poverty. Jacques also feels inadequate when he realizes his mother is a "domestic." She works for other families, not just for Jacques' family, and this bothers him.

Back at home, not much has changed. Jacques still gets whipped by the grandmother for playing soccer at recess and ruining his shoes. The family does not ask him about lycee because they cannot relate. The grandmother occasionally asks if Jacques gets good grades to which he replies yes. It is the grandmother who tells Jacques to go to bed because he must wake up at five a.m. Lucie sits in front of the window watching the trolleys and people pass by.

### Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Lycee Analysis

The lycee represents a class separation for Jacques. Until this point, he is fully immersed in poverty and does not know the world of those with more money than his family. In fact, to travel downtown is another world for him completely. He observes the class differences in his peers both in lycee and the people on the street and the workers surrounding the lycee. Jacques has an awakening to what the world looks like, with all different kinds of people from many walks of life. When he has to write Lucie is a "domestic" on a school form, he realizes that they are truly poor. The lycee is a

microcosm for the world and for Algeria, and Jacques must learn to adapt in order to survive in this new world.

The family history and conventional families of Jacques' peers symbolize what Jacques is not. He is not from a normal family with normal traditions and family stories. He is an outsider in this world, and he even says the others cannot understand the eccentricity of his family dynamic.

As the section ends, Lucie watches the trolleys and people pass by. This symbolizes how the illiterate, lower class people just watch life pass by. Meanwhile, Jacques takes advantage of what is given to him, and he finds a way out of poverty. He will not turn into his mother sitting next to the window. Instead, Jacques fully takes part in life, and amongst those who are richer than he. He takes in all the sights and sounds of downtown, he plays soccer wholeheartedly and he studies very hard. Jacques is a symbol for someone who lifts themselves out of poverty. All of this hard work and vigor for life foreshadow that adult Jacques will succeed. He will not repeat the cycle of poverty.



# **Part 2, The Son or The First Man, The Chicken Coop and Cutting the Hen's Throat**

## **Part 2, The Son or The First Man, The Chicken Coop and Cutting the Hen's Throat Summary**

One day the grandmother asks Uncle Josephin to bring her some hens. Uncle Etienne builds a chicken coop. The grandmother asks Henri, Jacques' older brother, to retrieve a hen, but Henri is too scared. Jacques does it instead and brings it into the kitchen. Jacques does not like doing it, but it puts him in the grandmother's good graces. As a reward, the grandmother has Jacques help her slit the hen's throat. Jacques is sickened, but he does it. The family agrees Jacques is brave and he will go to the chicken coop from now on. Lucie stares out the window, and this makes Jacques sad. Jacques goes to bed, but tries to stay awake until his mother falls asleep.

## **Part 2, The Son or The First Man, The Chicken Coop and Cutting the Hen's Throat Analysis**

Jacques' sensitivity builds in this section. He starts to become a well-rounded man; one who is intelligent, athletic and has a sensitive pull toward his family, especially his mother. The love for his mother runs deep because he realizes she will stay in this situation her entire life. Yet, the reader knows a bit about the future. Lucie mentions that her sons give her money in her old age, thus she is able to retire. Jacques' motivation as a boy is do well by his mother and help her any way he can. These snippets of Lucie sitting by the window motivates Jacques to provide for her in the future and sets the stage for Jacques as a sensitive and caring man with defined goals.



## Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Thursdays and Vacations

### Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Thursdays and Vacations Summary

When Jacques is too wild and vain in school, he receives detention on Thursdays. When he is not in detention, Thursday is a fun day with Pierre. Sunday is the other free day, but he helps out at home. On some Thursdays, he and Pierre visit Pierre's mother's workplace, the veteran hospital for wounded soldiers. The vets are many times in good spirits. They are crippled, but Jacques is used to this sight and it does not faze him. He and Pierre love to play with the medicines and poisons, unbeknown to Pierre's mother. They also play a game in the trees. Other Thursdays, he and Pierre go to the library and take books specified for fifteen year-olds, though they are too young. Jacques devours the books and brings them to the kitchen table with him and falls asleep reading them.

Jacques cannot talk to anyone about his home life. He cannot talk with his family about lycee. The family only comes to lycee once a year for the big award ceremony. Jacques is embarrassed by the grandmother who wears her Spanish mantilla, or black lace veil. He mentions a hat and she says she does not have money to waste and the mantilla keeps her ears warm. Jacques wins many awards and books. He is most excited to go home and read through the books. The grandmother is proud of him and compares his amount of awards to Pierre's amount.

Vacations are for the well-off in Algiers. Nothing changes in poverty. Poor workers only get days off if they are injured. Jacques wanders the streets, reads and plays with Pierre. Algiers is oppressively hot in summer. As Jacques is about to enter his fourth year in lycee, the summer before the grandmother makes him work. The first summer he works in a hardware store. He must promise the owner that he will quit lycee and work for him permanently. He does not want to lie, but his grandmother makes him. He hates working there. There is no view of the sky and he sits at a desk all day. He feels its boring, lifeless work and no physical energy is exerted. When he receives his last payment, he confesses to the owner that he lied, and the owner gets very angry, but pays him. The grandmother wanted him to just leave without saying anything. The next summer he works at a shipyard and likes it. He runs errands all day long and meets international sailors. As he enters his fifth year of lycee, he is a man. He stops the grandmother from beating him. He kisses a girl.



## Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Thursdays and Vacations Analysis

Jacques receives a close-up look at old soldiers on Thursdays. Though he hardly interacts with them, he is not put off by their injuries. Jacques automatically accepts these people for who they are, thus showing an adult display of sensitivity. He also honors his father's memory by feeling at home at the veteran's hospital. He plays with Pierre in the tree, treating the hospital like it is a home. He feels comfortable among the veterans and understands they are just ordinary men.

Jacques is intelligent, but wild and vain. The reader now knows some of his outstanding characteristics as a child. As this section ends, Jacques grows into a man. He works and is a breadwinner for the household. Jacques takes the place of his deceased father. He leaves behind his childhood days to focus on work and study. It is not about pleasing the family anymore, it is about being a man. Even the grandmother sees that he is too old to beat anymore. Slowly but surely, he becomes The First Man.



## Part 2, The Son or The First Man, A Mystery to Himself

### Part 2, The Son or The First Man, A Mystery to Himself Summary

This is simply how life is for Jacques as a child. This is how life is in poverty. This is how life is in a handicapped and eccentric family. Jacques as a child wants to break free. He is hungry for intellect and knowledge. He has an appetite to learn. His childhood is full of joy, but it is also full of setbacks. Jacques learns to adapt to all of them. He learns to assimilate not by downgrading himself, but by self-assurance that he can achieve anything he wants in life. Nothing is impossible for young Jacques. His childhood serves as preparation to prepare himself live and survive anywhere in the world. Jacques' only hope is to live a life that is happy, free and energetic. He wants to surround himself with goodness, not with bad times.

Jacques wants to ensure that he makes money in a good way. He wants to receive money without seeking it out purposefully or using money to dominate his life. As an adult, Jacques believes he is less of a person than those people around him. And compared to Lucie, he is nothing. His childhood reflects a time of games and playing, but it is also a time without a father and no family traditions. But he finds his father for a year, the year he is forty years old, and he needs him now. Through these life experiences, he creates his own family traditions.

Outwardly, Jacques' childhood looks simple. He plays games, he has a family and he is baptized—all normal childhood experiences. But there is something lurking deep inside Jacques. It is a stirring in him that comes from who knows where. It is a dark fire set inside him. This stirring represents his desires. They are deep, terrible and secret. He yearns to be no one. As a child, Jacques feels the weight of this yearning. He feels tossed into the countryside, like a first conqueror. The land is like a jungle. It is lawless and ruthless. The country people are alluring, yet disturbing at the same time. Jacques cannot enter their houses and talk with them. Their houses are barricaded. They are the Arabs, who are mysterious people. They are exhausted and submissive people. When a fight breaks out between an Arab and a Frenchman, the Arab slowly approaches. This causes a fight. The Frenchman fights and backs up. He confronts both the antagonist and the crowd. He knows that courage gives him the ability to live in the Algerian countryside, so he fights. But the crowd tries to break up the fight and make the Arab leave before the police come and arrest him. The police take away both fighters. Lucie feels badly for them as she sees them pass in front of the window.

Jacques grows up in fear of this violence between the Arab and French community. Yet as an adult, Jacques is one with the countryside and this neighborhood. It is a great place, but a frightening one too. Jacques would tell the history of this neighborhood by





the sights, smells and sounds. He would tell of his classmates and the changing seasons. He would tell of the vivid memories, both good and bad.

A pubescent Jacques loves women's bodies. He is constantly attracted to them, especially at the beach. He is drawn to women like an animal in heat. He desires to enter their radiance. He nearly faints when he touches a woman's hand on the trolley. A woman is the greatest pleasure on earth. He wants this closeness from his mother, but he never receives it. The closest he gets is Uncle Etienne's dog Brilliance, who lies beside Jacques.

Jacques has a passion for living from childhood into adulthood. He feels alive after rediscovering his family and childhood. He is upset that his youth is almost over. It is comparable to a woman he loves. Jacques loves her intensely, with all his heart. They make love and that is true passion for him. He loves her beauty, her open heart and passion. She wants to stay young. But he tells her that is not possible. She cries and says she is in love with love. She is intelligent and remarkable. She goes back to her home country to lay family members to rest. She thinks about her great grandmother and her love for life. Her family compliments her beauty. They are old and were once beautiful themselves. She wants to flee to a country where she will stay beautiful and never grow old or die. She wants a place where life is always exciting and fun. But that place does not exist. She cries to Jacques, and Jacques loves her even more.

Jacques is born in a place without family history. There is finality and no solace in sadness. Jacques is like a sword, shattered by one blow. He has a passion for life while confronting death. He feels alive and youthful. He feels like he is losing people and he cannot hold onto any of them. Yet he was raised in poverty, but experiences generosity. This generosity gives Jacques reason to live, grow old and to die without a fight. Jacques is finally The First Man.

## **Part 2, The Son or The First Man, A Mystery to Himself Analysis**

Jacques realizes that being fatherless is part of his existence. It shapes him into the person he is today, and that person is fine. The character of Jacques is a symbol for the everyman in poverty. He lives a life only explicable to those who endure poverty, and once he escapes he sees that poverty defines him. As an everyman, Jacques has experiences unique unto himself, but that encompass the overall life experience of family and home. Jacques is also a symbol of hope because he survives poverty and succeeds in life, providing a better future for himself and his mother.



# Characters

## Jacques Cormery

Jacques Cormery is the novel version of Albert Camus. He is an Algerian man in search of information about his deceased father. As the book opens in 1913, Jacques is born in a small village in Algeria. His father names him after an Arab woman who helps deliver him. The father dies in war in France when Jacques is less than a year old. Forty years later, Jacques goes on a quest to find out about Henri.

Jacques feels guilty because his father died at twenty-nine, but he is forty years old. This saddens him. Up until this point, he does not feel emotion toward his father. Unlike Henri, Jacques expresses emotion. He tells his dear friend, Victor, that he loves him and that Victor has taught him everything he knows. Jacques also vividly details his childhood throughout the novel. He is a curious child who loves to play games, such as soccer and tennis, with his friends. He does not know the difference between right and wrong, because as a child, he is not taught the difference. He receives many whippings from his grandmother, due to his lies and bad behavior. Growing up in extreme poverty makes Jacques pay special attention to money and each special treat, such as buying French fries from a street vendor or a movie at the movie house, is revered.

Jacques is an extremely intelligent boy, since he passes the exam to enter an advanced elementary school called lycee. He understands that this education is his way out of poverty. He goes to lycee and thrives. As a boy, he learns how to morph himself for each individual situation and act appropriately, since he is among boys who are of a higher caste than he.

Jacques works during summers and goes to school. When he started lycee, he is wild and vain, but as he works and studies, he becomes more serious and sensitive. He is a man by the end of the novel.

## Lucie Cormery or Catherine Cormery

Lucie Cormery, also known as Catherine Cormery, is the partially deaf and mute mother of Jacques and widow of Henri. Lucie is a maid or house worker who lives in extreme poverty. She has a hard life, since her husband is dead. She must work all day and take care of two children. She is a quiet woman and does not strongly discipline her children, leaving her mother to whip the children when they are bad. As an older woman, Lucie is fearful, refusing to leave her neighborhood in Algiers. She becomes especially fearful when bombs explode on the street where she lives.

Lucie is at least half Spanish, since her mother is Spanish. Lucie is beautiful, even in her old age. She loves her son Jacques very much, but is shy about expressing it. She expresses her love for him when he comes home to visit as a forty-year-old man. Besides Lucie's deafness, she is also very forgetful and illiterate. She cannot remember



much about Henri or the past in general; thus, she leaves Jacques unsatisfied because she cannot answer questions about his father.

Lucie comes off as a depressed character as well. When she is home, she sits by the window and stares out at the trolley cars and the people in the street. She rarely leaves this position. She has a serious and sad look on her face at all times. This saddens Jacques. Lucie remains in this position for years, even after Jacques grows up, and after she retires because he and his brother Henri support her financially. She is always looking out the window, in sadness.

## Henri Cormery

Henri Cormery is the father of Jacques. He dies in a war in France in 1914. Henri was also a soldier during the war in Morocco in 1905, where he witnessed a horrible tragedy: his comrade left for dead with his genitals stuffed in his mouth. Henri says whoever did this is not a man. Due to the many horrors of war and Henri's natural personality, he is an unemotional character. As his wife gives birth to baby Jacques, the only emotion he shows is by laying his hand atop hers. He is a man of few words. He goes to war illiterate in 1914, but his commander teaches him to read, so Lucie has postcards from him during the war. The reader does not see much of Henri in the novel except for the first chapter because he is already dead. Jacques goes on a search for Henri during the course of the novel, finding out these snippets of who Henri was as a person.

## The Grandmother

The Grandmother is Lucie's mother and Jacques' grandmother. She is a strict disciplinarian, who whips Jacques when he is bad. She is very frugal and has lived her whole life in poverty. She runs the household over Lucie.

## Victor Malan

Victor Malan is Jacques' mentor and long time friend. He is an outstanding man, but not boring. He has a unique way of thinking. Jacques loves and respects him deeply. Victor is sixty-five and believes he will die soon.

## Pierre

Pierre is Jacques' childhood friend and classmate. He is a good athlete, better than Jacques, but he never brags about his abilities. He is intelligent like Jacques and attends lycee with him.



## **Max**

Max is Jacques' childhood friend. He is a terrible athlete, but an excellent street fighter. The neighborhood boys respect him.

## **Levesque**

Levesque is Jacques' former high school principal. He fought in the Moroccan war with Henri and told Jacques a war story. This war story defines Henri's character for Jacques and is the most he knows about his father.

## **Uncle Etienne or Uncle Ernest**

Uncle Etienne is Lucie's brother and Jacques' uncle. He is deaf and almost mute. He loves and protects Jacques and the family. He serves as Jacques' playmate, since he takes him on excursions.

## **Uncle Josephin**

Uncle Josephin is a financially stable uncle. He does not share his wealth and gets into a fight with Uncle Etienne.

## **M. Bernard**

M. Bernard is Jacques' elementary school teacher. He fought in the war with Henri, Jacques' father, and feels sorry for the students in his class who have lost their fathers. He is fair, strict and loving. The students adore him. He helps get Jacques into lycee by tutoring him. He convinces the grandmother to let Jacques go.

## **Mr. Veillard**

Mr. Veillard is the farmer who owns the farmhouse where Jacques is born. When Jacques visits the farmhouse at forty years of age, Veillard cannot help him because he never knew Jacques' father or family. Veillard discusses the plight of European-Arab relations in the country.



# Objects/Places

## Pith helmet

A pith helmet is a derby hat worn by equestrians, or those who ride a horse.

## Burnoose

A burnoose is a long cloak with a hood worn by Arabs in Northern Africa.

## Bric-a-brac

Bric-a-brac are ornaments or show pieces put on mantels in French countries. They include decorated teacups, vases, small statues, etc. To display a bric-a-brac collection is old-fashioned by today's standards.

## Benidor

Benidor is another Spanish word for siesta, or midday nap.

## Canette vinga

Canette vinga is a version of tennis for the poor man. Instead of a tennis ball, it uses a cigar to bat around. Players use racquets to defend a circle, and the object is to keep the cigar from falling onto the circle's ground.

## Cocoses

Cocoses are round, orange fruits that grow in Northern Africa.

## Black mantilla

A black mantilla is a black-colored silk or lace scarf worn over a woman's head and shoulders in the Spanish culture. It is a sign of devotion in Catholicism.

## Jerry can

A jerry can is a steel container made for holding five gallons of a liquid, such as fuel or water.



## **Tarboosh**

A tarboosh is a special hat worn by Muslim men. It has a flat top and no brim. There is often a tassel hanging from the hat.

## **Quinine**

Quinine is a medicine used to treat malaria.

## **Lycee**

Lycee is an advanced elementary school. Students must take exams to enter into lycee.



# Themes

## Passion for Life

One overriding theme of the novel is the passion for life. Jacques shows an incredible passion for life from his childhood into his adulthood. For example, as a child, Jacques wants to experience everything in the world and as much as possible. This is despite the fact he lives in poverty. At school, he plays soccer wholeheartedly and loves every second of it. He also studies very hard, and in fact, cries in class due to incredible emotion as his teacher reads the students a war novel. With his friends, he plays passionately in every game they invent or choose to play. He devours books and reads them with great fervor. He loves his family with intense feelings.

As an adult, Jacques has passion for finding his father's memory, including going on an endless search in two countries, France and Algeria, to find information about him. He loves a woman with great passion, and he loves her for this passion. He seems to have learned this passion for life from Uncle Etienne who, despite his handicap, has an equal passion for life. Though Uncle Etienne is handicapped and simple, he has zest for all physical sensations, like eating and going to the bathroom. He has passion for his hunting trips, his dog and his friends. He also has a passion of hatred, and will protect his family with any means necessary. This passion is passed on from Uncle Etienne to Jacques. And Jacques uses this passion to sustain him on his life journey.

## Search for a Father Figure

As Jacques goes on a quest to find his deceased father's memory, he also goes on a quest for a father figure, whether he realizes it or not. Through his childhood memories, he arouses feelings of fatherly love toward men who are not his father. For example, his Uncle Etienne acts a sort of father figure to him. Etienne does not teach him much, but what he does teach him is fatherly. For example, they go on hunting trips, where Etienne teaches him how to stalk prey and kill an animal. He serves as a playmate for Jacques in that way, almost acting like a big kid, yet he is an older, male figure who acts protective of Jacques. When Jacques gets hurt in the wine cask factory, it is Etienne who takes him into his arms and delivers him to a doctor.

Another male figure Jacques finds on his search is M. Bernard. He is the person who teaches Jacques and takes the role of a father figure. He treats Jacques lovingly, but also fairly. If Jacques does something bad, he must face a beating like the rest of his classmates. M. Bernard also sees potential in Jacques, like a father, and gets him into lycee. M. Bernard is the one who convinces the grandmother that Jacques should go to lycee, thus he expresses his authority over her, just like a real father would. M. Bernard is such an ideal father figure, he is almost like a fairytale godfather. And like a real father, he lets Jacques go to lycee and find his way without him.



## Loss of Innocence

Jacques slowly loses his innocence throughout the novel. Though he has a young spirit during most of his childhood, his innocence is stripped away by his life circumstances. Jacques grows up in poverty, and he does not experience a middle class or upper middle childhood, like his classmates at lycee. He has no traditions to learn from or family stories. His family is illiterate, so they cannot read bedtime stories to him. His father died before he turned one year of age, so Jacques has experienced this loss of innocence since he was a baby. He never has had the genuine, familial experience of a mother, father and children. While living in poverty, he does not have family vacations or luxuries either. It is work all the time for the grandmother, mother and uncle. Jacques lives the life of a poor, almost latch-key kid, or a child who must take care of himself.

Jacques continues to lose his innocence as he enters lycee. He sees the people on the street and notices the class separation is wide in Algiers. There is a trolley car for the rich and one for the poor. His classmates have money and he does not. Instead of playing children's games, he works for two summers doing grown-up, boring work. He notices that his mother is sad all the time, and he knows he wants to take care of her in her old age. Jacques' final loss of innocence is when he stops his grandmother from beating him and he kisses a girl. Jacques is now a man, without childhood innocence, and must move on.





# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of the novel is third person. The point of view ranges from a tight, very close third person to an omniscient third person. The author writes in close third person when Jacques' inner most thoughts are displayed. For example, Jacques has inner monologues about himself as a forty-year-old man and about himself as a child. The reader literally feels like s/he is in Jacques' head, reading his most private thoughts, and it almost sounds like first person. This tight third person occurs when Jacques is passionate or emotional about a situation or a person. He emotes through this close third person. For instance, when Jacques thinks about his father Henri, he explores his complex feelings about his father when he is at Henri's gravesite. He feels unemotional at first, but then he feels sad for his father, a man who died so young. The reader gains insight into this switch of emotion as the author brings her/him closer and deeper into Jacques' feelings with this close third person.

On the other hand, there is an omniscient third person point of view. This occurs when the author wants to describe the setting or scenery around the characters. For example, this point of view describes the poor Algiers neighborhood, the countryside of Solferino and the busy and eclectic streets of downtown Algiers. It also describes Jacques' family dynamic from a wide angle. For example, the reader sees Jacques' childhood home with the mother sitting in the window and the family sitting down for dinner. The omniscient third person gives the reader these wide shots of perspective, which is necessary to see the setting and family dynamics of the story, without a character who injects her/his opinions.

## Setting

The setting of the novel takes place in three places. The first place is in the village of Solferino, where Jacques is born. The village is almost like the American west, a pioneering countryside. It is hot and desert-like, and it is only a very small village where Arabs and Frenchmen seem to live in peace. The next setting is Saint Brieuc. This is the cemetery in France where Henri is laid to rest. It is an ordinary cemetery. Henri's gravestone is well-maintained and there are fresh flowers atop his grave.

The main setting of the novel is Algiers, the capital of Algeria. Jacques' neighborhood in Algiers is set far away from the downtown. It is poverty-stricken. In his house, he does not have a gas stove and the toilet is only a hole that overflows onto the stairs. All the family members share rooms to sleep. The neighborhood is incredibly hot in the summer and only has a rainy season for its winter. In the streets of the neighborhood, trolley cars go by, stray dogs run loose and children play in the road. Downtown Algiers is where lycee is situated. It is more affluent and very busy, like a normal city. There are shopkeepers, both Arabs and Frenchmen. They sell all types of goods and services. At



the bazaar, vendors sell items to citizens and to tourists. People of all socio-economic classes walk on the streets and go to work and school. There are two main trolley cars, one for the poor and one for the rich. Jacques likes going into downtown because this setting is a new world for him mixed of all sorts of people and things. It is a nice change to that of the poverty-stricken neighborhood.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is informal. Albert Camus mixes exposition with dialogue. The exposition discusses the overall setting and family dynamic of Jacques' family. It also discusses the inner-most thoughts of Jacques. When Camus wants the reader to see Jacques' private thoughts, he writes in long paragraphs of exposition that thoroughly detail Jacques' emotional journey. The exposition is written in a very informal way, except for a few passages when Camus constructs sentences in a very formal, literary tone. This occurs most notably in the last section of the novel. The exposition becomes dense and harder to decipher its meaning. On the other hand, the characters speak in dialogue in a very straightforward, understandable way. The only switch in character speech is from Uncle Etienne, who does not have a good command of grammar, yet he hardly speaks.

The language overall is tight and well-constructed. Throughout the novel, the language is not without rules as the author writes in a grammatically perfect way. The sentences follow grammar rules and complex rules of literature. Descriptions can be quite detailed at some points when describing the different facial features between an Arab and a Frenchman. Camus also describes beauty of both people and places with long, descriptive sentences. He also uses description to describe a new setting so the reader feels completely immersed in that setting. Camus does this for the Western reader to understand the world of Algiers and Northern Africa so s/he can imagine them with the appropriate details.

## Structure

The novel is made up of sections, which are not called chapters. Each section has a name, with the exception of the first section which is unnamed. Sections range from 6.5 pages long to nearly fifty pages long. The novel's pace is normal and moves moderately. It is neither fast-paced nor slow. It is the right speed for a modern day reader. It is a moderate read with some difficult vocabulary interspersed throughout the story. Only in a few long passages of exposition is the pace weighed down by complex descriptions and sentences. Yet this rarely happens in the novel.

The structure of the novel is not linear. The first section is in 1913 and it is the only section in this time period. Henri is alive and this is the only time one sees him alive in the novel. Jacques is born. Then the next section skips to more than forty years later, in 1954. Henri has been dead for nearly forty years and Jacques is forty years old. The novel then moves in between present-day adult Jacques as he visits his mother, family

and old friends in Algiers to search for answers about his deceased father Henri to his childhood in Algiers. Within the sections, the text is mostly about Jacques' childhood, yet Camus pulls the reader back into the present with Jacques' present day story of his Algiers visit. Camus does a good job of weaving between the past and present. The reader can easily decipher where it is adult Jacques' story or child Jacques' story.



## Quotes

"No more need for you, Doctor. It happened by itself."  
Part 1, Search for the Father, first section (unnamed), p. 16

"We never know anyone."  
Part 1, Search for the Father, Saint Briec and Malan (J.G.), p. 31

"For poverty is not a choice one makes, but a poor person can protect himself."  
Part 1, Search for the Father, The Father. His Death The War. The Bombing, p. 66

"Life in its entirety was a misfortune you could not struggle against but could only endure."  
Part 1, Search for the Father. His Death The War. The Bombing, p. 76

"No, school did not just provide them an escape from family life. At least in M. Bernard's class, it fed a hunger in them more basic even to the child than the man, and that is the hunger for discovery."  
Part 1, Search for the Father, School, p. 146

"The Mediterranean separates two worlds in me, one where memories and names are preserved in measured space, the other where the wind and sand erases all trace of men on the open ranges."  
Part 1, Search for the Father, Mondovi: The Settlement and the Father Analysis, p. 196

"A child is nothing by himself; it is his parents who represent him."  
Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Lycee, p. 204

"They were from somewhere else, that was all."  
Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Lycee, p. 223

"But summer had lost what used to transfigure it, its sky, its open spaces, its clamor."  
Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Thursdays and Vacations, p. 265

"You can't go on without doing anything."  
Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Thursdays and Vacations, p. 267

"Although he had lived till then in poverty, it was in this office that Jacques discovered the mundane, and he wept for the light he had lost."  
Part 2, The Son or The First Man, Thursdays and Vacations, p. 268

"As it had with endless generosity given him reason to live, it would also give him reason to grow old and die without rebellion."  
Part 2, The Son or The First Man, A Mystery to Himself, p. 284



## Topics for Discussion

Is Jacques successful on his quest for his father? Even though he does not find Henri, what does he find? Do his findings make him a better person? Explain why or not.

Where does Jacques fit in Algeria in regards to his culture and identity? Is he African or European? How does the Spanish culture dominate his identity? Does he identify more or less with the Spanish side of his family? Explain why or why not.

How do the Arabs fit into the Algerian community? How do the Europeans feel toward the Arabs? What about Jacques? How do the Arabs fit into the European community of North Africa today?

Who is Jacques' most positive and influential father figure? Is it Victor Malan, who is hardly in the novel? Or is it Uncle Etienne or M. Bernard? Are there any other male figures who have shaped Jacques?

What are the roles of women in the novel? Lucie's role contrasts sharply with the grandmother's role. Which role does each one take? How does Jacques learn and react to these roles, and how do they shape him as a man?

How does Jacques succeed in leaving poverty? Give specific examples. How has poverty made him a successful person? In the novel, we do not know Jacques' profession. What do you think Jacques does for a living and why?

Do you think Jacques has taken a full journey to become a man? What details do you think are purposely left out of his journey? Do you think Albert Camus left these details out for a certain reason, since the novel is autobiographical? If you wrote an autobiographical novel about yourself, what details would you include?