The Guest Study Guide

The Guest by Albert Camus

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Introduction

Perhaps the best known and most popular of Camus's short stories, "L'Hote" ("The Guest") was published in 1957 in his first and only story collection, *L'exil et le royaume* (1957; *Exile and the Kingdom*).

Exile and the Kingdom received a mixed reception from critics. Some saw the collection as revitalizing his career and laying the groundwork for future works after the writer had gone for several years without publishing. Others found that it did not live up to expectations. Many felt that there was an unresolved tension between the stories as fiction and as explorations of philosophical ideas. Evoking numerous and sometimes contradictory interpretations, "The Guest" has endured as one of Camus's more important works, with recent critics delving more deeply into the colonial context of the story. It remains a compelling exploration of Camus's moral and philosophical themes and a powerful evocation of colonial relationships. Camus worked on the story mainly from 1952 to 1954, revising it many times, most particularly as the crisis leading to the Algerian War deepened and he wanted to avoid worsening the tensions between French and Arab Algerians with his portrayals. Some of these modifications heightened the ambiguities in the story, particularly with respect to the character and motivations of the prisoner.

"The Guest" tells of an encounter between a French Algerian schoolteacher and an Arab prisoner on the eve of the Algerian uprising. The story emphasizes many of Camus's most characteristic themes: individual alienation, freedom, the value of human life, responsibility, the difficulty of moral choice, and the ambiguity of actions. It gains additional layers of meaning through its incisive portrait of colonial life and the psyches of colonizer and colonized alike.

Author Biography

Albert Camus was born in 1913 in Mondavi, Algeria. His father died in World War I and he was raised in poverty by his mother and grandmother. As a scholarship student he completed secondary school and planned to begin university studies before falling seriously ill at seventeen with tuberculosis, an experience which shaped his understanding of human vulnerability to disease and death. He worked in Algeria as a journalist, co-founded a theater group, and in general became part of the intellectual community in Algeria before World War II. In 1934 he joined the Communist Party, but broke with it a year or two later over the issue of Algerian nationalism. During much of World War II he was in Paris as an active member of the French resistance. He published some of his most important novels, including *L'Etranger* (1942; *The Stranger*) and *La Peste* (1947; *The Plague*) in the 1940s, when his reputation as a writer and an intellectual was at its peak. He remained in Paris after the War and worked as a reader at the publishing company Gallimard.

In 1952 his close friendship with Jean-Paul Sartre was broken when the two men disagreed over the legitimacy of communism in the face of the Soviet purges and labor camps. Camus bore the brunt of Sartre's bitter personal attacks in the public press. His refusal to back any political movement which called for violence or which restricted human freedom drew more criticism from both the Left and the Right political factions in Paris during the Algerian conflict. French government officials and Algerian nationalist leaders both looked to him for support and were frustrated by his refusal to make public endorsements of either side. To some extent, the schoolmaster's reluctance to take sides in "The Guest" may reflect some of Camus' own sense of frustration with the polarized and violent Algerian conflict.

For much of the 1950s Camus suffered writer's block, depression, and ill health. In 1956 he published *La Chute* (1956; *The Fall*) and shortly thereafter, the collection of stories *L'exil et le royaume* (1957; *Exile and the Kingdom*) from which "The Guest" is taken. That same year he won the Nobel Prize for literature.

Plot Summary

Arrival

"The Guest" is a spare tale of Daru, a French Algerian schoolmaster, who is assigned against his will to deliver an Arab prisoner to the nearest city on the eve of the Algerian uprising. Daru was born in the rural area where the schoolhouse and the attached room in which he lives are located. His students come from poor villages nearby and have been suffering from a severe drought. To aid them, Daru has been distributing government-provided food rations. The story takes place just after an unseasonable snowstorm, when classes are suspended and the schoolmaster has spent the last three days alone. Daru first notices two men in the distance, one on horseback, one on foot, approaching the steep hill on which the schoolhouse is situated.

Given the distance, the snow, and the rocky terrain, he knows it will take them a while to reach him.

When the two men are closer, Daru recognizes the horseman as Balducci, a policeman whom he knows. The other, with hands bound, being led by a rope, is marked by his clothing as an Arab. Daru brings them inside to get warm and makes tea for both. After asking Balducci's permission, he unties the prisoner's hands. Once his guests are settled, Daru asks about their destination. When Balducci indicates the schoolhouse, Daru is puzzled and asks if they are staying the night. Balducci replies that he will be leaving and that Daru is to escort the prisoner on the remainder of the journey to Tinguit, the nearest town. Daru at first thinks it is a joke, then protests that it is not his job to transport prisoners. Balducci argues that with the growing unrest, people must be willing to take on additional civic responsibilities. Moreover, he maintains that staff at his headquarters is too small already, and cannot spare him any longer.

Daru shifts the discussion to the prisoner, asking about his crime. Balducci explains that the Arab killed his cousin in some sort of dispute over grain. He had been hidden for a month by his villagers before finally being captured. His immediate transfer to Tinguit is partly owing to the fact that the villagers want to take him back. Daru is disgusted at the petty violence represented by the Arab's crime. He also asks if the Arab is against the French. Balducci doubts it, but comments that one can never be sure.

After some more tea, Balducci prepares to depart. He moves to retie the prisoner, but Daru stops him. Then, disconcerted at the schoolmaster's nonchalance in the face of a possible enemy, he asks if Daru is armed, and insists that he take a pistol, since his only other weapon is a shotgun in storage. Daru begins to argue about his assignment again. While the Arab and his violent crime repel him, he is unwilling to turn him in to the French authorities. Balducci acknowledges Daru's feelings, but reminds him that an order is an order. Daru insists he will not do it. Eventually Balducci decides that he will complete his task of delivering the prisoner to Daru and say nothing more about Daru's refusal to his superiors. Continuing to resist his role in the transfer, Daru initially refuses

to sign the paper acknowledging receipt of the prisoner. Balducci cites the rules once more, and this time Daru gives in and signs. Balducci is insulted by Daru's refusals and leaves gruffly.

Night

Daru orders the prisoner to wait in the schoolroom and goes to his room for a nap. When he gets up, he is half hoping the prisoner will simply have left. Instead, he finds him where he left him. It is now evening, so Daru prepares a meal and a bed for the Arab and they converse for the first time. The Arab asks if Daru is the judge, and why he eats with him. Daru is uncomfortable in the presence of the prisoner. After they eat, they both prepare to sleep, but Daru does not sleep well. During the night, he hears the prisoner get up and leave the room; he hopes it is to make an escape. But the prisoner merely relieves himself and then returns.

Departure

Daru orders the Arab out ahead of him, but the prisoner does not move until Daru insists that he is coming, too. Daru prepares a package of food and they start off. Daru turns back once, again thinking he heard something around the building. They walk for two hours to a fork in the path. Daru gives the package of food and some money to the Arab and offers him two choices. To the east, it is a two hours' walk to the police station in Tinguit. To the south, it is a day's walk to nomadic tribes who will take him in and protect him. The Arab looks panicky and starts to respond, but Daru silences him and turns back toward the schoolhouse. The Arab doesn't move. Daru looks back once, and then again a few minutes later. The Arab still has not moved. Impatient, Daru gives a half wave and continues on his way. Some time later he turns back one more time to see what the Arab has done, and he spots him in the distance, on the road toward the police. When he finally returns to the schoolhouse, there is a message scrawled on the chalkboard: "You handed over our brother. You will pay for this."

Summary

The beginning of "The Guest" introduces readers to the protagonist, a schoolmaster named Daru, whose schoolhouse resides onto of a desert plateau and is isolated from the villages beneath it. The story takes place in winter after a three-day blizzard has just past. In the story's opening, the schoolmaster watches as two men climb up the hillside toward the schoolhouse. One man is on horseback, while the other is on foot. The visitors travel slowly through the snow. Daru can see that one of the men knows the region well because he is able to follow the trail up the hillside even though it is covered in snow. As he watches the two travellers, he estimates that it will still be another half-hour before they reach the schoolhouse. He goes back inside to wait for them. His classroom is empty. The blackboard shows the four rivers of France, which were drawn in colored chalk days before.

The snowfall came suddenly in October after eight months of drought. The twenty pupils who live in the nearby villages have stopped coming to school, but they will return when the weather is better. For three days, Daru is left alone to wait out the blizzard. Luckily, a deliveryman from Tadjad, the nearest village to the south, brought supplies two days before the blizzard began. Many of Daru's students are from poor families who suffered during the drought. He gives them rations of wheat from the supplies delivered to him when they come to school. During the drought, the earth became scorched, and sheep died by the thousands. Some men died as well. Daru's life in the isolated schoolhouse resembles that of a monk, but he is satisfied with the little he has: his white painted walls, small couch, unpainted shelves, a well and weekly supply of water and food. The harsh elements of the desert region are difficult to live in, but Daru was born there and feels exiled anywhere else.

After some time passes, Daru steps onto the terrace at the front of the schoolhouse to see the travellers' progress. Now he recognizes the man on horseback as Balducci, a gendarme for the French National police. An Arab walks behind Balducci with his head lowered and hands bound. Daru wonders who the second man could be. Balducci waves to Daru as they get closer to the schoolhouse. He yells out that they made the three-kilometer trek from El Ameur in one hour. When the men arrive at the terrace, Daru invites them inside. Balducci has a moustache, a tanned forehead and wrinkles around his mouth, as well as dark, deep-set eyes. Daru leads the man's horse into his shed and heats up the classroom for the visitors. Balducci sits down on the couch in Daru's room. The Arab stands near the stove. His hands are still bound. The Arab has large lips, a straight nose and dark eyes that appear to be full of fever. His face has a restless and rebellious look. Daru tells the men to wait in the heated classroom while he makes tea. Balducci says something to the captive man in Arabic and leads him into the classroom.

Daru brings the men tea. Balducci is sitting at a student desk, while the Arab squats against the teacher's platform. Daru tries to hand the Arab tea, but his hands are still bound. Balducci unties him. Daru asks Balducci where they are headed. Balducci says that the schoolhouse is their destination. Daru asks if they intend to stay the night, and

Balducci replies that the Arab is not returning to El Ameur. He says that Daru has been ordered to take the Arab to Tinguit, where he is expected at police headquarters. Daru denies that this could be an order intended for him. Balducci says that in wartime, people do all kinds of jobs. Daru responds that in that case he will wait for a declaration of war. Balducci explains that there is talk of a revolt. There are only twelve workers at El Ameur to patrol the whole territory, so he must return in a hurry. Daru must take the Arab the twenty kilometres to Tinguit before the next night.

Daru looks out the window and sees that the weather is clearing. He asks if the Arab speaks French. Balducci says no. The schoolmaster wants to know what the Arab's crime is. Balducci explains that the Arab killed his cousin over a family squabble. People were hiding the Arab for a month after he committed the crime. Daru feels anger toward the Arab after hearing this. He dislikes men who get carried away with spite and bloodlust. Balducci approaches the Arab to tie his hands again after he finishes his tea. Daru tells him not to bother because he is armed. He has a shotgun in the schoolhouse. Balducci warns him to keep his gun close, saying that if there is an uprising no one is safe. Daru jokes about the schoolhouse's location on the plateau. He says that he can see the enemy coming. Balducci gives Daru an extra gun. Daru doesn't want to take the prisoner to Tinguit. He insists that he will not hand the captive over, and he will deny that the prisoner was ever left with him. Balducci wants Daru to sign a paper that verifies that the prisoner was left with him. Daru signs, and Balducci leaves. Daru has offended him. The schoolmaster watches out the window as Balducci gets on his horse and disappears.

The Arab stares at Daru, as he tells the prisoner to "wait" in Arabic. Daru puts the revolver that Balducci left him in his pocket and then goes to his room. He lies down on his couch. The silence that filled that schoolhouse in his first days living there was painful for him. Now he enjoys the silence. After the war Daru had requested a post at the base of the foothills but was given a post further north instead. Here he is surrounded by solitude. The region encloses nothing but stones that were harvested for building. When Daru finally gets up, the classroom is quiet. He hopes that the Arab has fled because then he would not have to make a decision. The Arab is lying down in the classroom, staring at the ceiling. Daru motions for the Arab to follow him into the next room. He points out a chair near the window, and the Arab sits down. Daru asks him if he is hungry, and the captive says yes. Daru sets the table, putting out some of his food rations, and begins to cook an omelette. As he is cooking he feels the gun in his pocket and leaves the room to put the gun in his desk, in the classroom. He tells the Arab to begin eating without him. The Arab asks Daru if he is the judge. Daru explains that he is keeping him overnight and bringing him to the police station the next morning.

After the men finish eating, Daru brings blankets and a folding bed into the room for the Arab. Daru sits down on his own bed. He looks at the Arab's face, and he cannot imagine it filled with rage. Daru asks the man why he killed his cousin. The Arab replies that his cousin ran away, and he ran after him. He asks the schoolmaster what will happen to him now, but Daru doesn't answer. Daru asks if he is afraid, and the Arab doesn't answer. The Arab doesn't understand these questions. He wants to know if Daru is coming with him to police headquarters.

Daru has trouble sleeping that night. He stares out the window, at a starless sky. The Arab lies motionless in the cot, but his eyes are open. The wind increases during the night. Daru turns on his side, no longer facing the Arab, and listens to the guest's breathing becoming heavy and regular as he falls asleep. The presence of a stranger in his room bothers Daru, which is odd because he was a solider and should have been used to sharing a room with others. Daru knows that soldiers build alliances when they share rooms together. They become a community, brought together by shared dreams and fatigue. Daru hears the Arab stir, and his body tenses in alert. The Arab lifts himself up, with the motion of a sleepwalker, and sits upright in his bed. Daru doesn't move. He thinks about the gun in the other room. The Arab puts his feet on the ground and stands up slowly. He begins to walk silently across the room. He heads for the door that opens to the shed and lifts the latch carefully. When he walks through the door, he leaves the door slightly ajar.

Daru stays still while this happens. He hopes that the Arab is running away. He hears a faint sound of water from outside the schoolhouse and then sees the Arab in the doorway again. The guest closes the door and gets back into bed without making a sound. Daru turns his back to him and falls asleep. As he sleeps, he thinks he hears footsteps around the schoolhouse, but he doesn't know if he is dreaming them. When Daru wakes up in the morning, the sky is clear. The guest is still asleep. Daru shakes the man to wake him up, and the Arab stares at him with a terrified expression. Daru tells him not to be frightened. The Arab nods at the schoolmaster, agreeing with him. The two men sit together while they drink coffee and eat breakfast. Daru shows the guest to the shed, where he can wash up. Daru tidies up his bedroom and goes out to the terrace. The sun is rising and melting the snow. Daru looks out over the deserted land beyond the plateau. He thinks about Balducci and is regretful that he offended him. He hears the Arab cough, and in a sudden rush of fury, Daru throws pebbles and watches them sink into the snow. He is revolted by the Arab's crime but still does not want to be the one to turn him over to the police. He tells the Arab to come back inside as he walks back into the schoolhouse.

Daru puts a hunting jacket on over his sweater and waits for the Arab to get dressed. He tells the Arab to begin walking ahead of him while he collects some food for the journey. Once Daru is a short distance from the schoolhouse, he thinks he hears a noise and goes back to see what is happening. He traces his steps, but there is nothing there. He starts to walk away from the schoolhouse again. After walking for an hour, the men stop to rest beside a sharp peak of limestone. The snow is melting fast now, clearing the plateau. Daru is awed by the vast expanse of deserted land before him. They continue to walk on, heading south. They reach a level height, made up of crumbling rocks. From there the plateau slopes down in two directions. The eastern direction leads to a low plain with a few trees. The south reveals outcroppings of rocks and a chaotic looking landscape. Daru surveys the two directions, seeing nothing but sky on the horizon. He holds out the package of food to the Arab and tells him to take it. He also offers the man 1,000 francs. The Arab takes the offerings but looks like he doesn't know what to do with them.

Daru points east and explains that it is a two-hour walk east to Tinguit, where the police are waiting for him. Next he points south, to a trail across the plateau. A day's walk south will lead the Arab to pasturelands where nomads reside. The nomads will take the Arab in and shelter him according to their law. The Arab turns to Daru, looking panicked. He begins to speak, but Daru shakes his head to quiet the man and tells him that he is leaving. Daru turns and takes two long steps in the direction of the schoolhouse. He looks back, hesitantly. The Arab is not moving. Daru begins to walk toward the schoolhouse again. For a few minutes, he hears nothing but his own footsteps. When he looks back a second time, he sees the Arab standing at the edge of the hill, staring at him. Daru feels a rise in his throat, but he continues back to the schoolhouse. As he passes a greater distance, he looks back again. The Arab is gone from the edge of the hill where Daru left him.

Daru hesitates. The sun is high now, as he retraces his steps home. He is uncertain at first, but then he is decisive. Bathed in sweat, he climbs a little hill as fast as he can. At the top he stops to catch his breath. In the distant east, he can see the Arab walking slowly toward the prison. Daru is heavy hearted. Later that day, Daru stands before the window of his classroom. He watches the clear light over the surface of the plateau. On the blackboard behind him, among the drawings of the French rivers, the words, "You handed over our brother. You will pay for this," are written in chalk. Daru looks at the sky, the plateau and the vast distance beyond. In this landscape that he loves so much, he is alone.

Analysis

"The Guest," by Albert Camus, is from his short story collection entitled, *Exile and the Kingdom*. "The Guest" is a story about a French Algerian schoolteacher who has been asked to take a captive murderer into his home overnight and deliver him to the police on the following day. In historical reference, the story takes place right before the outbreak of the Algerian war of 1954. Balducci, a gendarme who has been sent out to deliver the Arab captive into the hands of the schoolmaster, is the first to suggest the idea that an outbreak is coming.

One of the most interesting aspects of the story is that the author uses a sort of false foreshadowing to represent the anxiousness of Daru, the protagonist, during the time he spends with the Arab murderer. On the night that the guest stays at the schoolhouse, Daru has trouble sleeping. He stares out the window, at a starless sky, as the Arab lies motionless in his cot with his eyes open. Before the Arab gets out of bed, the wind outside begins to stir, suggesting that something is about to happen. Daru assumes that the Arab will try to escape, but he really goes out to the schoolhouse shed to get some water or go to the bathroom. The imagery of increasing wind causes a sense of anticipation in the reader that mimics Daru's anticipation. The reader soon discovers, along with Daru, that nothing is really happening. The author's technique is clever because it help the reader feel the suspense in the story in a tangible way.

Daru struggles with the decision whether to turn the Arab in to the police. Although he is revolted by the Arab's crime, he is guilt-stricken at the idea that he must be the one to turn him over. It seems that he is angrier at the circumstance that he is thrown into than at the crime the Arab has committed. On the morning of the trip, Daru hears the Arab cough as he cleans up in the shed. In anger, Daru throws pebbles and watches them sink into the snow. This imagery reminds readers of the setting, a deserted landscape where the only resources to harvest are boulders, as well as Daru's predicament. He is a secluded man whose overnight guest is about to be turned over to the law. Furthermore, the action reveals the protagonist's frustration. He is torn between perceiving a man based on the nature of his crimes and seeing him as a part of humanity, as just another man. Camus expresses this paradox when the guest sleeps in the schoolhouse. Daru is uncomfortable with the stranger's presence. As a former soldier, he recalls the way that soldiers build alliances when they share rooms together, implying that they become part of a shared community, as they are brought together by "dreams and fatigue." Daru, in his isolation, is no longer part of a community of men. However, Daru's shared humanity with the stranger is echoed the following morning when Daru shakes the Arab to wake him up. The Arab looks frightened when he is woken. This imagery in itself suggests a common factor shared by both men, fear.

Isolation imagery is prevalent throughout the entirety of the story. The story's opening takes place after a three-day blizzard, in which Daru is trapped alone on the plateau, in his schoolhouse. Later, the narrator confides that Daru's life in the isolated schoolhouse resembles that of a monk, exploring the notion of Daru's lonely, thoughtful, scholarly and solitary existence. This theme is also expressed through the protagonist's subtle actions. For example, as Daru looks out over the deserted land beyond the plateau, the reader gets a sense that he is forlorn. The isolation imagery invokes a tragic element in the story. The brief time shared between Daru and the captive must come to an indefinite end that will cause the end of the Arab's freedom and Daru's simultaneous return to isolation.

Daru meets the morning's journey with hesitation. The prospect of a violent end for the Arab is foreshadowed when Daru puts a hunting jacket on over his sweater before going outside. It is possible that this symbolises the fact that the Arab was hunted down. Since Daru is now the person in charge of the Arab's fate, it is appropriate that he is dressed in such a way that he appears to be the hunter. Nevertheless, Daru offers the Arab his freedom by leaving him at a hilltop that offers two optional directions to take. The eastern direction is described as a low plain with a few trees. This route will take the Arab to the police. The south is described as a chaotic landscape. If the Arab chooses this option, he will be free from the police but subject to nomad law, an uncertain fate.

Daru feels sadness when he sees that the Arab has walked toward Tinguit to turn himself over to the police. This is the fate that the protagonist had hoped the Arab would avoid. Overall, the story expresses the difficulty of moral choices. Unable to make a decision himself, Daru leaves the Arab's fate in his own hands. By allowing the Arab the freedom of this ultimate decision, Daru has disobeyed the orders given to him by Balducci. This conclusion suggests that Daru has determined that the value of human

life is greater than the crimes committed by an individual. Still, the threatening message on the chalkboard when Daru returns to the schoolhouse ignores Daru's thoughtful approach to the decision. Although Daru left the choice to the Arab, he is still held responsible for the final result.

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Characters

Arab

The Arab, who is never given a name in the story, has been arrested in his village by the French police for killing his cousin during a dispute. He is being transferred to police headquarters in a nearby town, Tinguit. Though he is treated reasonably well by Balducci, the Arab is sullen and unresponsive. He does not utter a word until after Balducci has left and Daru offers him a meal and a bed. The Arab's motivation for killing his cousin is unclear. His explanation that "He ran away. . . I ran after him" baffles Daru. Daru's questions about fear and remorse both embarrass and astound the Arab, and as a result he develops a kind of attachment to Daru. The Arab then requests that Daru accompany him and Balducci to Tinguit. He is reluctant to leave the schoolhouse without Daru and appears panicked at having to choose whether or not to escape. In the end, the Arab remains largely an enigma to Daru and, to some extent, the reader.

Balducci

Balducci is the gendarme, or policeman, who delivers the Arab prisoner to Daru before returning to his post. He is brusque but not vicious; he is careful, for example, not to walk his horse too fast when the prisoner is tied behind him. He twice expresses regret or distaste for the harsher aspects of his job. Balducci is truly a man of law and order. He strictly obeys the rules, and is neither unnecessarily cruel nor ambivalent towards prisoners. Balducci is a longtime acquaintance of Daru, but their relationship is strained by their conflicting views toward their responsibility for the Prisoner.

Daru

Daru is the schoolmaster of a rural schoolhouse and is commissioned to escort an Arab prisoner on the second half of his journey to Tinguit. Daru is a native of the region who lives an isolated and monastic existence. He is compassionate toward the poor villagers, especially during this time of famine, and he treats the prisoner as his "guest," with compassion and respect. He is annoyed and frustrated, however, with the prisoner's apparent passivity, and disgusted by the violence of his crime. Ordered to transfer the prisoner to the authorities in Tinguit, Daru resists at every turn. He announces to Balducci that he will not turn the prisoner over to the authorities, and hopes that the prisoner will escape. Daru later attempts to pass the choice on to the prisoner himself by leaving him abruptly at a crossroads with the means to either escape or turn himself in. This decision is an emotional one for Daru and it is misunderstood by the Arab's compatriots, who leave a threatening message for him on the chalkboard at the schoolhouse. The entire experience leaves Daru with a sense of bitterness and isolation.

Gendarme

See Balducci

Prisoner

See Arab

Schoolmaster

See Daru

Themes

Choices

Daru, the rural schoolmaster, is charged, against his will, to take responsibility for an Arab prisoner and transport him to the nearest town. This situation sets up the most powerful theme in the story, that of the difficulty and inevitability of moral choice. Daru would like to remain neutral in a worsening political climate. He acknowledges his French allegiance and suggests that a declared war would make his position clear— he would fight for France. In any case, there is no declared war at the present moment. Moved by his compassion for and knowledge of the Arab villagers of the region, Daru believes that it is wrong and dishonorable to turn the prisoner over to the French authorities. At the same time, he is unwilling or unable to consider either a defense or a challenge to the system. He simply wishes to be relieved of responsibility or participation. He first tries to refuse to accept the Arab from the gendarme who brings him to the schoolhouse. Later he leaves the prisoner untied and hopes more than once that the Arab will simply escape, eliminating his dilemma. In the end, angry and frustrated, he tries to pass the choice along to the Arab by showing him two roads— one to the police headquarters, and one to ostensible freedom and safety among nomadic tribes. In the end, the Arab chooses the road to prison, and Daru is held accountable by the Arab's compatriots. Had the prisoner escaped, Daru would have been held accountable by the French authorities. The ultimate result of Daru's decision is misunderstanding and a profound alienation from the world.

Honor

Underneath Daru's difficulty in deciding what to do about his conflicting responsibilities toward the Arab is his strong sense of honor. In his final exchange with Balducci, Daru makes this explicit: "All this disgusts me, beginning with your fellow here. But I won't hand him over. Fight, yes, if I have to. But not that." Balducci understands and concedes the point, allowing that he feels ashamed of "putting a rope on another man." But he sees it as his unavoidable, if distasteful, duty. Later Daru declares to himself that to turn the prisoner in would be contrary to honor. These European concepts of honor are placed next to the unstated and unexplored concepts of honor in the Arab culture. Honor may have played a role in the killing of the Arab's cousin. It is certainly not honorable to be afraid, and the notion of remorse makes no sense to the Arab, possibly because he views his action as appropriate. The fact that the people of his village protected him may indicate that his action was legitimate according to their moral code.

Absurdism

Another fundamental motif of Camus's is the idea of the Absurd. Generally speaking, absurdism is based on the belief that the universe is irrational and meaningless and that

attempts to find order or meaning will bring the individual into conflict with that absurd universe. For Camus, there is no resolution to this conflict. According to Camus's early writings, each person is like the Greek hero Sisyphus, who must struggle stubbornly to live as if there were a purpose and sense to individual actions. Acceptance of this fundamental condition can militate against nihilism. This is in contrast to many Existentialist thinkers who hold that meaning is created by each individual who has the freedom and, indeed, the responsibility to do so. In his later writings, Camus introduced the idea of revolt against inhumane and unjust conditions or systems: each person must act as an individual in opposition to a common fate or a tyrannical system by refusing to participate. The theme of Absurdism is evoked in many of the descriptions of the natural landscape in the story, which express powerfully what Camus once called the "benign indifference of the world." Daru's attempt to maintain an outsider status in the developing conflict and with respect to the prisoner's crime is an example of an individual rebellion in the style of Camus.

Hospitality

Hospitality is a fundamental part of virtually all cultures. In this story the theme is invoked in the French title: "l'Hote" means both "guest" and "host" in French. Thus the word captures both sides of the hospitality relationship and the reciprocal obligations it traditionally produces. In the story, Daru treats the Arab less like a prisoner and more like a guest. The Arab calls attention to this unexpected behavior in asking why Daru eats with him. Daru's response is somewhat evasive; he states merely that he is hungry. Some critics have suggested that the Arab's unwillingness to escape is a response to the hospitality he has received; having accepted Daru's gesture, he "owes" him, and cannot insult him by escaping. The title is also ironic. While Daru is ostensibly the host and the prisoner the guest, as a descendent of colonial conquerors, Daru is, in effect, a guest in the prisoner's country. There is a final reference to the well-known hospitality of the Berber nomads, who traditionally take in and protect other wanderers in their hostile desert climate.

Style

Point of View

The narrative style in "The Guest" is a classic example of the use of free indirect discourse—essentially an interior monologue told in the third person rather than the first. In contrast to the objective and external viewpoint of the traditional third person narrator, or the clearly subjective viewpoint of a first person narrative, this technique places the character between the author and the reader, diminishing authorial independence and authority. At the same time, the thoughts and feelings of the character may be selectively expressed to serve the purpose of the narrative. In Camus's story, much of the background information about the setting and about Daru is provided through his extended reflections.

Setting

The rich descriptions of the Algerian landscape are weighted with symbolic importance. To begin with, the schoolhouse is located in the desert on a high plateau— an intermediate area that belongs to neither the plains nor the mountains. It is described as being part-way up a steep rise. The physical location of Daru's school and his home comes to symbolize the moral space that Daru wants to find between the French and the Arabs, the "us" and the "them." The unpredictable weather helps to further mark the time and place of the story as unusual. The action of the story takes place between two states of weather. Under normal conditions, the landscape is hot, dry, and harsh. Daru describes it as an "expanse where nothing had any connection with man." The violent storm changes that landscape; it is "cruel" in its suddenness, but it has the effect of softening the landscape. The storm has passed, but the effects of the snow linger. The landscape that Daru knows so well is transformed. There is more light, but it is "dirty" and the snow on the ground moistens it and muffles footsteps that normally sound sharp on the hard soil. Throughout the walk toward Tinguit Daru notices the landscape shifting back as the snow melts and puddles gradually dry up; by the end of their walk to where Daru leaves the Arab, once again "the ground rang under their feet." When Daru has returned to the schoolhouse, the harsh sun bathes the entire plateau in clear light.

Foreshadowing

Like the storm that disrupted the normal routines of classes and grain distribution, the arrival of the prisoner breaks the placid rhythm of Daru's life. It is Balducci who makes this explicit, promising Daru that once he has delivered the prisoner to Tinguit, ". . . all will be over. You'll come back to your pupils and your comfortable life." This claim is ironic, since the experience of meeting the prisoner and the moral choices it forces on him will transform Daru's relationships with Balducci, his fellow Frenchman, the Arabs he lives among, and even the place to which he is so attached. Balducci leaves angrily,

questioning Daru's loyalty, the Arabs hold him responsible for handing over the prisoner, and Daru's connection to the landscape has been ruptured. In the closing line of the story, he uses the past tense, describing the view from his window as the "vast landscape he had loved so much" but from which he is now alienated.

Another instance of ironic foreshadowing draws attention to the ambiguous and ambivalent relationship between the schoolmaster and the prisoner. In response to Daru's kindness and hospitality, the Arab has requested strongly and repeatedly that Daru accompany him to Tinguit. When they are ready to leave the schoolhouse, Daru orders the prisoner out ahead of him, but the Arab does not move. Daru shows an implicit understanding of the prisoner's reluctance, not repeating the order, but assuring him, "I'm coming." This scene is echoed in the final parting. This time the Arab is visibly distressed, and once again he does not move. Daru looks back once, then again to find that the prisoner has not moved. It is only after Daru has definitively left him, waving good-bye, that the Arab makes his choice.

Historical Context

The Algerian War

The encounter depicted in "The Guest" takes place in "mid-October," on the eve of the outbreak of the Algerian War. The revolt, led by the National Liberation Front (FLN) began on October 31, 1954, and lasted until July, 1962, when Algeria achieved independence. There had been scattered uprisings and nationalist movements in Algeria since the first French colonial presence in Africa in 1830. But the nationalist movement had gained considerable strength after World War II. By the time the story takes place, the revolt was imminent, so when Balducci talks of war, he is describing a realistic fear. Likewise, the positions of "us" and "them" refer not just to cultural differences, but to the now clear battle line between settlers of European origin and the Arab rebels and sympathizers. While the events and characters in the story are fictional, Camus drew on his early experience as a court and police reporter for some of the details and context of the story. The devastating effects of the drought, the crushing poverty of the villagers, the monotony of the schoolteacher's life, and the collision between Arab culture and the European justice system were all phenomena he had witnessed at close hand.

Many people describe the Algerian War as "France's Vietnam" and certainly it was as politically controversial and divisive for the French as the Vietnam War was for many people in the United States. As one of France's most distinguished writers, a man who had been active in the French Resistance, and a native Algerian, Camus was looked to for moral and political guidance. He was vehemently criticized by both the Left and the Right political factions in France, and denounced by both officials of the French government and the nationalist leaders for his refusal to take either side in the conflict. Camus believed strongly in the need for democratic reforms and greater rights for the Arab population, but he could not support a break with France and held dearly to the notion of a unified country in which both European and Arab Algerians could hold full citizenship. In connection with the war, his only clear statements sought to protect civilian lives on both sides and supported efforts to achieve a cease fire. While the story is by no means a direct reflection of Camus's views about the Algerian situation, the character of Daru captures Camus's discomfort with the idea of having to choose sides in a violent conflict and his profound humanism and sympathy for any suffering human being.

Colonialism

The Algerian War was the outcome of many years' resistance to French colonial rule. There were similar, if less violent, conflicts in French Tunisia and Morocco as well. And the pattern was repeated for other European powers. In the years following World War II there was a mass movement in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia to de-colonize territories that had been ruled by European countries since the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. Dozens of these former colonies sought democratic reforms and national independence. Because colonial rule had extended over several centuries, both Arabs, like the prisoner, and many European Algerians, like Daru, were natives of the country. (Balducci is a more recent immigrant from Corsica, a French territory in the Mediterranean.) Camus makes ironic reference to the colonial situation in the opening paragraphs of the story where "the four rivers of France" are drawn on the chalkboard. This geographic knowledge would have been of little use to rural Algerian students and is symbolic of a well developed system of colonial education that endeavored to disseminate European culture and traditions throughout the colonial possessions.

Critical Overview

The Guest appeared in Camus's 1957 collection of stories entitled *Exile and the Kingdom.* The stories received a mixed but generally positive reception. Camus's writing career had been largely stalled for many years owing to writer's block and personal difficulties. Thus some critics saw in the stories a renewed energy that bode well for his next major work of fiction. Some specifically saw these stories as short explorations of themes and situations that he would explore at novel length. Many found, however, that Camus had not successfully mastered the distinction between philosophy and fiction. As Irving Howe wrote in *The New Republic:* "Camus still seems torn between the impulse to offer testimony (which means to reduce his fiction to mere examples) and the impulse to tell stories and create characters. . . . The result is a curious mixture of the threadbare and the obscure. . .". His untimely death three years later foreclosed the possibility of further development and "The Guest" became his last published work. In general, while they were not regarded as on a level with his best previous fiction, his short stories were understood as an important contribution to his oeuvre. Camus himself had been reluctant to declare them finished, revising them throughout 1956 and 1957 and extending the publication date until late that year. "The Guest" is often regarded as one of the strongest stories in the collection and it has been widely anthologized.

Early interpretations placed the story easily within a philosophical framework similar to that of Camus, finding in Daru's action his self-realization as a moral human being, with the necessary sense of alienation that comes from acting in an absurd world. Others noted and analyzed the ambiguity the story forces on its readers. Balducci's uncertainty about the prisoner's crime, Daru's inability to understand the Arab's explanation, and, at their parting, Daru's unwillingness to listen to the prisoner's plea, or to fully examine his own feelings, all ensure that the story will be read as a bit of a puzzle. More recently critics have been influenced by a growing awareness of different cultural perspectives and have paid more detailed attention to the Arab. Often critical of those who judge the Arab too quickly as slow or evil, they have pointed to unexamined aspects of Arab culture and Islamic law that can make the prisoner a fuller, more comprehensible character, and have suggested that European cultural biases made it easy for critics to perceive the Arab as primitive or animalistic.

Camus's story stands as a masterful example of the short story genre and the use of free indirect discourse. In addition, it illuminates some of the profound literary and cultural ideas of the mid-twentieth century (such as existentialism and absurdism) and it offers a powerful representation of colonialism and colonial relationships.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Burch has taught at Southeastern Louisiana University and at the University of Michigan. In the following essay, she examines "The Guest" in relation to Camus's philosophical ideas and with reference to postcolonial criticism.

Camus best-known short story, "The Guest" is also notoriously subject to conflicting interpretations. Virtually all critics recognize the tale as obscure and enigmatic. Some of this is certainly part of Camus' artistic intent. He worked on the story for at least two years, and continued to revise it right up until the publication date. Some, including perhaps Camus himself have regarded the stories in *Exile and the Kingdom* as transitional works, or explorations of themes to be treated more fully in novels to come. Certainly Camus' philosophy and political thought were still developing, and he never lived to see or make sense of the end of the Algerian War and the establishment of an independent Algeria. While *Exile and the Kingdom* was completed in his lifetime and stands as Camus' last published work, part of the interpretive difficulty a story like "The Guest" poses may be due to the fact that Camus' life and thought were works in progress, interrupted and unfinished by his untimely death. However, there are a number of established frameworks which can go a long way to grounding different interpretations. The first is Camus' own philosophy as he had articulated it. The second is the related philosophy of existentialism, which Camus steadfastly disavowed. Finally, there is the discourse of postcolonialism, which would not have been fully available to Camus in his lifetime, but which now seems essential to understanding the world which he described.

If we try to make sense of "The Guest" in terms of Camus' own philosophy, we can see Daru as a moral man confronting an absurd and indifferent world, symbolized especially by the landscape. He manages his existential feelings of alienation by living near the place where he was born and carrying out his duties with compassion. Like Sisyphus in Camus' early essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," Daru lives stubbornly "as if" existence were not meaningless and the world not absurd. The arrival of Balducci and his prisoner presents a moral quandary. Daru must confront the fact that his world is not just absurd — meaningless— but also unjust and violent. His basic position is clear from the start; while he cannot condone, and indeed is disgusted by, the Prisoner's internecine violence, to turn him in to face French law would be dishonorable and unjust. Moreover, his conversations with Balducci make it clear that the transporting of the Prisoner takes place in and depends on a context of "us" and "them." With a rebellion brewing, this divide represents not just a cultural conflict, but two extreme political positions, both willing to back their beliefs with violence and force. Daru's heroism then, comes from being a rebel of the sort Camus described in *L'Homme Revolte* (*The Rebel*), the individual who acts against unjust ideologies-in this case, of both the French colonial government and the Arab nationalists. His solution is both a refusal to take sides and a humanist stand against extremism and violence. For Camus, to make the right moral choice, is a necessarily isolating act. It is staking out a position as an individual, and while it is the appropriate decision and the route to Camusian self-realization, there is no expectation that it will provide a coherence or sense of meaning in an absurd

universe. As Alfred Noyer-Weidner puts it: "Daru's final loneliness is a loneliness of tragedy and not of human weakness. . . . For Daru . . . to have remained true to the absolute respect for that which is human, up until the final moment of isolation, seems to be a condition of the Camusian 'kingdom'." If such a conclusion seems hard to accept, it indicates perhaps less a misreading of the story than an argument with the Camusian philosophy on which this interpretation depends.

One major position from which to argue with Camus is that of Existentialism, since Existentialism was fundamental to the political and philosophical milieu in Paris when Camus came to prominence, and because existentialist were among his sharpest philosophical critics. Not everyone sees Daru as successful or a hero. Many do indeed see Daru's isolation at the end as a "loneliness of weakness" or a predictable result of his failure to fully accept his responsibility for the Prisoner. One doesn't have to be an Existentialist to offer such interpretations, but they can certainly be grounded and elucidated in an Existentialist framework. While Camus insisted that there was no way to make sense of the absurd, many existentialists saw this activity as a fundamental responsibility and freedom of each individual. Each person must constantly make him or herself through and in actions, striving for an authentic existence; this is not an easy path; at best, people will struggle with reactions such as despair (at the meaninglessness of the universe) and anxiety (over the choices which must be made in an authentic existence), at worst, they will avoid this responsibility, living passively, letting others determine choices and actions, and living unauthentically with what Sartre called "bad faith" or self-deception. This second course leads to progressively worsening estrangement from what one can be, and ultimately a profound sense of nothingness, an existential crisis.

It's not hard to see how some of this might apply to Daru. While it has been convincingly argued that it is too simple to say that Daru fails to act or make a decision, there are any number of problems with both the decision he makes, and the way he makes it. His refusal to turn the Arab in is clear from the start. But in taking charge of the Prisoner, he hedges. One authentic choice might have been to refuse to accept the Prisoner altogether, and, more importantly, refuse to sign for him, accepting fully and freely Balducci's anger and whatever reprisals came after. Once Daru has made the decision to honor his friendship with Balducci by signing the receipt, he struggles with unwanted responsibility. Daru's repeated hope that the Prisoner will simply escape, thereby freeing him of his dilemma, points to a certain level of self-deception and an unwillingness to face the implications of his accepting responsibility for the Prisoner. Similarly, the plan to escort the Prisoner halfway and then invite him to make his own choice reveals a desire on Daru's part to have it both ways— i.e. at some level not to choose. In Existentialist terms this can only be a kind of bad faith, a self-deception about one's motives and actions, and an unwillingness to shoulder the responsibility of one's freedom to forge an authentic existence. From this perspective, Daru's bitter estrangement form the world and landscape he had felt connected to is a predictable result of his bad faith and lapse into unauthentic existence. One can read some bad faith in Daru's interactions with the Prisoner as well. On the one hand Daru offers him compassion and hospitality, yet he rejects the "strange brotherhood" he feels forming and can scarcely bring himself to look

at the Arab. When finally leaving the Arab, Daru behaves brusquely and ignores his own mixed feelings.

Part of the complexity of Daru's relationship with the Arab cannot be fully examined without considering the colonial context which has brought them together. Thus far, in interpreting the story in terms of Camus' ideas or the competing philosophy of existentialism the characters and conflicts have been treated as universal. While the events take place in a specific location and at a specific time, the philosophical themes of moral or individual choice in a meaningless universe are not limited in their significance to that setting. But many critics would argue with the very notion of universal themes or representative characters and events. In particular, critics adopting a postcolonial perspective would look at the way in which Algeria in the 1950s created a very particular set of experiences that need to be understood and analyzed on their own. While there were certainly critics of the colonial empires during their heyday, the term postcolonial refers generally to the period since independence was gained by many former colonies; thus it is post (after) the end of colonialism as a widespread political system. As a critical orientation, postcolonialism can encompass many modes of analysis. But central to all postcolonial critiques is a tendency to reveal the "universal" as specific to a European or Western cultural viewpoint, and to pay much more attention to heretofore ignored cultures and philosophies from outside the Western tradition. To analyze "The Guest" from this perspective raises new questions, especially about the portrayal and traditional interpretations of the Arab. The basic portrait of the Arab draws on two traditional colonial perceptions of non-Europeans. The first has been called Orientalist, in which the non-European is seen as silent, mysterious, and often alluring. The second views indigenous peoples as uncivilized and animalistic. Both of these views are at work in Daru's descriptions of the Prisoner. His lips and mouth are described as "Negroid" and "animal"; he is seen as "feverish" and "vacant and listless." At the same time, he speaks and interacts little, and what he does say is largely incomprehensible to Daru. Certainly his choice of the road to prison is an enigma.

Daru may be sensitive and humane enough to care about the poverty and hunger of the his students and their families and to treat the Arab prisoner gently and hospitably, but he remains clearly allied with the French and the colonial system: he is a civil servant and he knows that in a war he would defend the French. His position as a colonizer creates a blind spot for him in his perception of and relation to the Arab. He feels disgust at the Arab's killing on two counts— its violence and the apparent weakness that let him be captured. But certainly such internecine violence is not limited to Arabs or indigenous peoples, and the Arab did hide in his village for a month before he was finally captured and taken away. In the central conversation between the two men, Daru maintains his position of power by deflecting or refusing to respond to the Arab's questions, and when they part in the desert, Daru refuses to listen at all to the Arab's protest. Part of this is to protect himself from knowledge or intimacy that would deepen his conflicted feelings; part of it is an exercise of his authority; part of it comes from a colonial expectation that the Arab will have little to say— ultimately he is not and cannot be an equal. The result of this is that Daru, and hence the reader, knows very little of what the Arab believes and feels. Many recent critics have tried to close this knowledge gap by drawing on ethnography and trying to understand the Prisoner from the perspective of Arab culture

and law. A number of salient points arise in these kinds of analyses. To begin with, the details of the Prisoner's crime are fuzzy at best. Balducci relates the little he knows with a series of tentative and speculative statements. From within Arab culture, the Prisoner may have been acting appropriately, defending a point of honor. The fact that his village was willing to protect and defend him suggests strongly that from their perspective he had not committed a crime. Similarly, the fact that he makes no effort to escape or choose the road to freedom may be a point of honor for him; having been charged, he must face his accusers. What he wants from Daru is that he accompany him, as he recognizes Daru's fairness and believes that he can aid him in the alien French legal system. There are other reasons he might choose not to escape, the most powerful being that he comes from a strong village culture. His entire life and sense of identity are connected to his village and tribe. Freedom among the Berbers could well be meaningless for him. Finally, with a rebellion about to break out, he could well fear that his escape could bring reprisals to his village, again making escape a dishonorable and unconscionable action.

Source: Julia Burch, "Overview of 'The Guest'," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Griem examines the Arab's character in Camus's "The Guest," and contends that he is acting in accordance with his own cultural norms and codes.

Interpretations of Albert Camus's short story "The Guest" so far have had a tendency to make rather little of the prisoner, typically treating him as a primitive, brutalized, somewhat dull or even dim-witted character. In an influential early reading, Laurence Perrine helped establish this view, claiming that "his incomprehension . . . is emphasized" [*Studies in Short Fiction,* 1, 1963-64]. His comments in the *Instructor's Manual* accompanying his widely used textbook *Story and Structure* [1988] reinforce the view: "From the beginning the Arab is pictured as passive, uncomprehending, a little stupid." Nor does John K. Simon's reply to the original article in [*Studies in Short Fiction*] contradict this general view when he states, for example, "Having always lived under French law and authority, with no education or independence, the Arab can follow only the negative dictate of inertia and passivity" [*Studies in Short Fiction,* 1, 1963-64]. More recently, Elwyn F. Sterling, while allowing the Arab some measure of moral awareness ("aware that the act of murder has set him apart from men" [*French Review,* 54, 1981]), again endorses the view that he doesn't know very clearly why he committed the murder: "As a reason for killing his cousin, he can only answer, 'il s'est sauve. J'ai couru derrière lui'." And again, as recently as 1988, Diana FestaMcCormick repeats the claim that the Arab "hardly knows why he had killed ('He ran away, I ran after him')." [*Critical Essays on Albert Camus,* 1988].

A close study of the way in which the story deals with the Arab's act of killing his cousin will throw a different light on his character. The question of his motives arises twice. First, in the course of the discussion between Daru and Balducci, the policeman offers this information: "A family squabble, I think. One owed grain to the other, it seems. It's not at all clear." What is remarkable here is Balducci's great uncertainty, emphasized in each of the three short successive sentences. Obviously his is not a very definitive version of the story; the reader is alerted to watch out for further clues. For the time being, Daru's response is not very helpful in that it merely expresses strong feelings against a barbaric deed: "Daru felt a sudden wrath against the man, against all men with their rotten spite, their tireless hates, their blood lust." He generalizes and is clearly not aware of a need to investigate further and to penetrate Balducci's uncertainties.

The question comes up again when Daru and the prisoner are alone and have shared a meal, i.e., Daru's kindness has earned him the Arab's deep respect. Struggling with his own feelings of hostility, possibly in the hope of finding the prisoner a contrite sinner, Daru asks him: "Why did you kill him?," only to elicit the response that so many critics have construed as being less than clear or plausible: "He ran away. I ran after him." But what can we make of this reply if we try to take it seriously? Could it be that the cousin's act of running away, instead of taking full responsibility in the family squabble over a debt of grain, constitutes the complete loss of his honor, and a severe injury to the family honor as well, in his own indigenous culture? And could it be that the prisoner, in running after him (possibly because he was the first to notice, or the one with the best

starting position as pursuer), and then killing him, was merely acting in accordance with his own tribal custom?

The assumption that the prisoner's own cultural norms play a crucial part in the matter has a number of interesting ramifications. It certainly helps to explain his body language in the passage in question. The fact that he "looked away" in giving his reply may well indicate some doubt as to whether Daru the French colonist will be able to appreciate what he says. His wordless response to Daru's next question, "Are you afraid?" is to stiffen, which strongly suggests a proud rejection of such an insinuation; at the same time he repeats the gesture of "turning his eyes away," as if once again appealing to those who could appreciate him better. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, when Daru asks, "Are you sorry?" the prisoner "stared at him open-mouthed. Obviously he did not understand." Surely he is not being stupid; rather, he does not see the relevance of the question. Why, indeed, should he feel sorry about the killing if it was the honorable thing to do? To him, under the circumstances, regret is a perfectly incongruous, meaningless kind of response.

Yet, in spite of such signals of Daru's limited understanding of his plight, the Arab has developed an almost compulsive trust in Daru, in response, no doubt, to Daru's earlier kindness, the significance of which lies not merely in Daru's humane and compassionate behavior, but in his acceptance of the Arab as an honorable man who deserves all the privileges of a guest. That is not easy for the Arab to grasp, so that he asks, "Why do you eat with me?" Encouraged by such honorable treatment, he hopefully asks next, "Are you the judge?" And upon hearing the negative reply, he still urges Daru twice to come with him to Tinguit, presumably in the hope that Daru will secure him a fair and honorable trial.

The view that the Arab's indigenous culture plays a key role in the story finds additional support in certain historical and systematic features of Islamic law. In pre-revolutionary Algeria, the substitution of the French legal system for Islamic law, extending even to the local level and to rural areas, was particularly offensive to the Arabs because of the religious foundation of their traditional system, and was one of the motives behind the incipient rebellion. The two legal conflicts the prisoner is involved in, the family squabble over a debt of grain and even the homicide, are matters that can both, under Islamic law, be settled privately, unless one of the parties seeks a trial before the local judge, the *kadi.* In either case, enforcement of the terms of the settlement or judgment is left up to the plaintiff, for "No sharp distinction is made between execution and self-help" [Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law,* 1964]. On the basis of these observations it seems understandable (a) that the Arab man "punished" his cousin through self-help, (b) that his community hid him for a month from the French authorities, as someone who was not culpable unless a complaint was raised against him in his own tribe, and (c) that he worries in "woeful interrogation" about what the French authorities will do to him.

An interesting consequence of this view of the Arab's motivation for the killing is the light it throws on his behavior when Daru, toward the end of the story, provides him with the means to regain his freedom instead of handing him over to the authorities. The fact

that he chooses to face his trial is perfectly consistent with the notion, presumably a part of his cultural identity, that one cannot run away from an accusation without losing one's honor. In spite of the hostility between the Arabs and their French colonial oppressors in general, Daru's hospitable, honorable treatment of the prisoner seems to have struck a chord in him so that his indigenous code of honor asserts itself in an automatic response, despite Daru's lack of understanding of other parts of his cultural identity.

A further interesting consequence of this view of the prisoner lies in the fact that his final choice, to face his trial, creates an ironic existentialist impasse very similar to that of Daru. Both men have acted according to the dictates of their different moral codes, and yet both are threatened with annihilation, in a system that does not recognize their respective merits. Daru has given the prisoner his freedom of choice, but is threatened by the man's Arab brothers with punishment for allegedly handing him over to the authorities. The prisoner, following his moral code, chooses to face his trial; yet he will most certainly not be judged on the basis of that code, but must expect lifetime imprisonment or, worse, a death sentence. That the French intellectual and the Arab tribesman are aligned in this existentialist dilemma seems to me to add significantly to the poignancy of the story's resolution.

Source: Eberhard Griem, "Albert Camus's 'The Guest': A New Look at the Prisoner," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 30, no. 1, Winter, 1993, pp. 95-8.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Tarrow offers an interpretation of Camus' "The Guest," particularly in regard to the motifs of Colonialism and the character of Daru. Tarrow also examines Camus' use of imagery.

Daru, the protagonist of "The Guest" [is a misfit in the landscape]. The ambiguity of the title word, *l'hote,* meaning both "guest" and "host," and of which meaning should be applied to which character, is resolved by the landscape. Paul Fortier has shown how the landscape and its changing aspects offer an interpretation of historical events and of moral values ("Decor," pp. 535-42). Daru believes himself in harmony with the natural world around him. But it is an illusion. The sun is dominant during the drought, "the plateaus charred month after month, the earth gradually shrivelling, literally scorched." The snowfall represents a brief reprieve, a temporary truce before hostility is renewed. When the sun shines again, Daru feels a kind of exaltation, but it is as if the sun were in league with the rocks against him, quickly drying out the puddles of melting snow and returning the landscape to its former rockiness. Now the sun becomes destructive, and "began to devour his brow . . . sweat trickled down it."

The physical attack portends the human violence with which the teacher is threatened on his return to the school. The wind "lurking" around the school building parallels the activities of the rebels who are following his movements. And the precise location of Daru's school, on an isolated plateau, an intermediate stage between the coastal plain and the mountains, reflects the moral stance of neutrality and isolation maintained by the schoolteacher (Fortier, *Une Lecture,* p. 29). The Arab prisoner, as Fortier points out, resembles the desert, "his skin sunburnt but slightly discolored by the cold." He fears what the Frenchmen may do to him, but he does not fear the desert. Of course in reality the natural world is hostile to the Arabs too: Daru is well aware that "in the desert, all men, both he and his guest, were nothing." But Camus's landscapes are never innocent. A welcoming environment can become inimical and can inflict pain and even death on the unwary individual. . . .

The opinions Camus expressed in a political context are apparently contradicted by the fictional worlds of these short stories. Camus opposed independence because it would lead to the expulsion of his own people. Yet the European characters he places in an Algerian setting are uncomfortable strangers in a country they regard as theirs. In "The Guest," for example, despite the sympathetic portrayal of characters, it is clear that Daru's position is untenable. Warm human bonds between individuals are not enough to assure a peaceful settlement of struggle in the political arena.

Daru fits in with Albert Memmi's portrait of the left-wing colonizer. He "refuses to become a part of his group of fellow citizens. At the same time it is impossible for him to identify his future with that of the colonized. Politically, who is he? Is he not an expression of himself, of a negligible force in the varied conflicts within colonialism?" (*The Colonizer,* p. 41). Daru has isolated himself from his fellow Europeans, and lives alone on a barren plateau in the foothills. As a schoolteacher he is obviously committed

to the welfare and education of his pupils, and sympathetic towards their impoverished and ill-nourished condition. He feels at home: "Daru had been born there. Anywhere else he felt an exile." In earlier versions of the manuscript, Daru was a disenchanted businessman from the coast, who had given up his old life and become a teacher. In the final version, Camus stresses Daru's roots in this harsh landscape; yet his origins continue to separate him from the indigenous population: "Faced with this wretchedness [Daru], who lived almost like a monk in this isolated school, yet was happy with the little he had and with this simple life, had felt like a lord." Colonialist rule is symbolized by the drawing on the school blackboard of the four rivers of France: the local schoolchildren follow the same curriculum as children in metropolitan France, even though it may be irrelevant to their culture and their needs. The colonial administration uses the schools as distribution centers for emergency supplies of food during the drought, so that children have to come to school to receive their allocation. Daru is thus placed in the position of an overlord, separate from "that army of ragged ghosts." The word *army* evokes a sense of hostility and violence which runs through the whole narrative and explodes across the map of France at the end of the story.

The advent of Balducci and his Arab prisoner brings the reality of the current situation into Daru's monastic retreat, brings movement into a static world, and forces him to take a position. "Commitment comes like a guest who does not want to leave" (Cryle, *Bilan critique,* p. 142). It is his failure to choose in a positive way that leaves him helpless to affect the course of events. His attitude toward Balducci and the Arab is entirely laudable: Balducci is a tough but sympathetic Corsican who dislikes mistreating an Arab, but who believes in discipline, while the Arab, despite his act of violence, is nevertheless a man who deserves to be treated with human dignity. By refusing to take the Arab to prison, Daru offends Balducci personally; by allowing the Arab a choice he does not understand, he alienates himself from the local people. His actions are misunderstood by the groups represented by the two individuals, just as Daru fails to recognize the political reality behind those two people.

On a personal level, ambiguity and humanitarian instincts are possible; but on a political level, actions cannot bear any nuance without being misconstrued. Thus the colonial administration will view Daru's refusal as a treacherous act, while the Arabs interpret the result of his inaction as a betrayal too: "You have handed over our brother. You will pay." The words "hand over" recall mockingly Daru's thrice-repeated "I will not hand him over"; Camus obviously had some biblical references in mind, for in an earlier version of the story, the teacher's name is Pierre (Peter), and at one time he considered "Cain" as a title. Daru's future in Algeria is precarious, and the use of the pluperfect in the final sentence bears out this sense of finality. "Daru looked at the sky, the plateau, and beyond it the invisible landscape that stretched out to the sea. In this vast country he had loved so much, he was alone." The reference to the sea indicates the direction in which Daru will now have to travel, into his exile.

The individual's viewpoint cannot be reduced to a single vision, and yet circumstances often demand it. By refusing to commit himself to one side or the other, Daru loses all. He deplores the Arab's resigned decision to accept his fate, and yet his own indecisiveness allows him also to be swept away by events; he is no better than the

Arab at choosing his own future. The text clearly shows that Daru's behavior is understandable but sterile. In a polarized situation, one must choose between black and white and put aside all the shades of gray that intervene, if one is to have any impact on the situation. . . .

The stories of *Exile and the Kingdom* reveal the impasse in which Camus found himself with regard to the Algerian situation. His existence as a writer depended on his identity as a Frenchman, yet his experience as an Algerian made liberty his foremost social ideal. There was no political solution to his personal dilemma. Had he lived, he would doubtless have accepted the inevitable tide of events, just as Daru did. But his vision of the trends in society, of the triumph of violence over dialogue, of the state over the individual, is now generally recognized as a relevant indictment of the modern world.

Source: Susan Tarrow, in *Exile from the Kingdom: A Political Rereading of Albert Camus,* The University of Alabama Press, 1985, pp. 173-93.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, which originally appeared in the French Review in February 1973, Fortier assesses the symbolic value of Camus's descriptions of nature in "The Guest."

Camus situates this short story in the North African desert at a time when revolutionary violence is about to break out. There are three characters: the schoolmaster Daru, a policeman, and an Arab. Because of the extraordinary circumstances, the policeman hands the Arab prisoner over to Daru, telling him that he is to take the prisoner to the jail in the neighboring town. Finding this task odious, Daru takes the prisoner to a crossroads, gives him food and money, then leaves him, after showing him the road that leads to prison, and the one that will permit him to escape. This gesture is misunderstood by the Arab, who goes off docilely to prison, and by his compatriots who announce that they will take vengeance on the man who has turned in their brother. This story is of interest especially because of the moral and political questions that it raises. This article will attempt to define the role of the numerous descriptions of nature which are also an important element in the story.

In this third person narrative, everything is presented from the point of view of the protagonist. Certain passages allow us to see how, in general, he perceives the country in which he lives, while others deal with the precise settings for the action. These two series of descriptions constitute the essential elements in the creation of a decor which, in our opinion, produces an additional level of meaning and suggests an interpretation which, perhaps, goes beyond the strictly historical framework. In order to identify this level of meaning and arrive at this interpretation, a careful reading of the descriptive passages is essential.

Daru is meditating on the normal appearance of the desert where his school is located: "In the beginning, the solitude and the silence had been hard for him on these wastelands peopled only by stones." . . . Man has little place in this "ungrateful" and completely mineral country. The "silence" characteristic of an uninhabited region prolongs the notion of "solitude" reinforced by the word "only." However harsh the country may be, Daru affirms that it is the only place where he can "really live."

The evocations of the seasons associate several new themes with these dominant traits of the countryside:

It would be hard to forget that poverty, that army of ragged ghosts wandering in the sunlight, the plateaux burned to a cinder month after month, the earth shriveled up little by little, literally scorched, every stone bursting into dust under one's foot. The sheep had died then by thousands and even a few men, here and there, sometimes without anyone's knowing. . . . And suddenly this snow, without warning, without the foretaste of rain. This is the way the region was, cruel to live in, even without men— who didn't help matters either. But Daru had been born here. Everywhere else he felt exiled.

Snow had suddenly fallen in mid-October after eight months of drought without the transition of rain. . . . [One had to wait for fair weather.]

When all the snow was melted, the sun would take over again and once more would burn the fields of stone. For days, still, the unchanging sky would shed its dry light on the solitary expanse where nothing had any connection with man. . . .

"Stone," "dust" and "dry" recall the mineral aspect of the countryside. "Army," "bursting," "died," blow, "without warning," without . . . respite, "cruel," brutally, "without . . . transition" and "would burn" introduce the theme of violence; in summer as in winter, the desert is a country of violence.

The image of the sun is surrounded by a constellation of secondary themes. "Burned to a cinder," "shriveled up . . . literally scorched," "would burn," would pour: a violent entity, the sun, moreover, acts with an excessive force on the countryside. It "takes over," and makes the sky "unchanging." The text underscores the persistence of the sun's domination: "again," "once more," "still," "for days," "month after month." The sun creates a type of eternity. The countryside appears like a limitless expanse; the domination of the sun also evokes, it seems, the theme of immensity. The vision of thousands of sheep during the period of intense heat, and the metaphorical transformation of men into "ragged ghosts wandering in the sunlight" associate the desert under the sun with a world of death. Although he evokes a countryside which is not only "solitary," but actively hostile to man, Daru insists for a second time that he loves this world.

The descriptions of the desert create a decor characterized by the following elements: mineral countryside, silence, solitude, inhumanity, violence, sun, excess, eternity, immensity, death. Daru feels bound to this inhuman desert by strong sentimental attachments. When he describes the Arab— "his weathered skin now rather discolored by the cold" —the schoolmaster establishes, probably without being aware of it, a parallel between his guest and the desert, which is also being weathered and discolored by the cold snow.

Daru is plunged into a very particular environment when the policeman arrives with the prisoner:

The schoolmaster was watching the two men climb toward him. . . . They had not yet tackled the abrupt rise leading to the schoolhouse built on the hillside. They were toiling onward, making slow progress in the snow, among the stones, on the vast expanse of the high, deserted plateau. . . . They were following the trail although it had disappeared days ago under a layer of dirty white snow. The schoolmaster calculated that it would take them half an hour to get onto the hill.

They were no longer visible. Hence they must have tackled the rise. The sky was not so dark, for the snow had stopped falling during the night. The morning had opened with a dirty light which had scarcely become brighter as the ceiling of clouds lifted. At two in

the afternoon it seemed as if the day was merely beginning. But still this was better than those three days when the thick snow was falling amidst unbroken darkness.

He stepped out onto the terrace in front of the schoolhouse. The two men were now halfway up the slope.... He watched them climb. . . . "Hello," said Daru when they got up onto the terrace. "Come in and warm up."

Daru was looking out the window. Decidedly, the weather was clearing and light was increasing over the snowy plateau. When all the snow was melted, the sun would take over again and once more burn the fields of stone . . . .

Daru is on the "high plateau" of the Sahara. The word "plateau" appears sixteen times in the twelve pages of this short story. A plateau, flat like a plain and raised like a mountain is however neither one nor the other: it is an intermediate region. A series of verbs underscores the position of the schoolmaster relative to the plateau: "[to] climb," "had not yet tackled the abrupt rise," "tackled the rise," "were now halfway up the slope," "got up onto." The school where he lives, although "on the plateau itself" is located on a "hill," not on the summit, but on the "hillside." The schoolmaster finds himself in an intermediate position on the hill which separates him from yet another intermediate position, the plateau. The school itself is built on a "terrace," i.e. on a little plateau. In the text, then, two closely related notions describe the geographical situation of the protagonist: separation, intermediate zone.

The description of the weather contributes to the creation of a particular atmosphere. The sky is less dark, the light is dirty, the ceiling of clouds lifts, the weather is clearing, the light is increasing, the snow will be melted: the protagonist is between two climatic conditions. The scene is linked, in Daru's mind, to the past as well as to the future. The evocation of this moment of detente between two extreme types of weather recalls for a second time the themes of separation and of intermediate zone already implicit in the description of the school's location. The violence normally associated with the decor has been suspended during the period of transition: the only allusion to this theme—attacked— relates to the men and not the countryside.

The snow which hides the trail is described as a "dirty white layer" neither perfectly clean nor completely transformed by the desert. It is present but about to disappear. The snow changes the nature of the countryside; for example: "His steps were muffled by the snow . . . . A big stone could be heard rolling softly." The snow mutes the sharp sound of boots on rocky ground as it attenuates the harshness of the stone which, because of it, rolls "softly." For the moment, the snow neutralizes the countryside's mineral hardness, a fundamental element of the universe of the desert.

The descriptions of the school's location, of the weather and of the snow all point out the moral situation of the protagonist. An unwilling guardian of the Arab prisoner, Daru is caught between two loyalties. He must decide between solidarity with the threatened European community, or with the broader human fraternity which motivates him to free the Arab. The themes of neutrality and of separation inherent in the description of the setting, and reinforced by the evocation of ambivalent weather, reflect the neutrality and

isolation of a mind which has not yet made a decision. The snow softens the hardness of the countryside; the violence of the blizzard is now at an end, and the sun's has not yet begun again. Everything is undecided.

The schoolmaster daydreams a little during the day without deciding anything. Then the night comes:

When Daru turned out the light, the darkness seemed to coagulate all of a sudden. Little by little, the night came back to life in the window where the starless sky was stirring gently. . . . A faint wind was prowling around the schoolhouse. Perhaps it would drive away the clouds.... During the night, the wind increased....

Blow, "was prowling" and "would drive away" suggest violence; but "little by little" and "gently"

are opposed to this suggestion. Each evocation of violence is attenuated: *"seemed* to coagulate all of a sudden," "a *faint* wind was prowling," " *perhaps* . . . would drive away." The night's atmosphere, like the day's, is neutral. However, the wind, associated with violence, is increasing. The neutrality and indecision are not permanent.

The next morning, Daru is contemplating the countryside before leaving with the Arab:

When he awoke, the sky was clear; the loose window let in a cold, pure air. . . . Then he went through the classroom and out onto the terrace. The sun was already riding in the blue sky; a soft, bright light was bathing the deserted plateau. On the ridge the snow was melting in spots. The stones were about to reappear. . . .

"Terrace," "plateau," "ridge" and "snow" evoke the neutral decor of the preceding night. But the sky is not "clear." The light floods the scene: it is already excessive. The snow is melting in a short while, dominated by the rising sun, the countryside will be completely mineral once again. Daru is contemplating a world which is in the process of returning to its normal state: mineral, dominated by the sun, excessive and implicitly— thanks to the associations already established— violent and human. The time of transition is coming to an end. But the air is "pure," the sky "blue," the light "soft and bright." The countryside that is reappearing is the one Daru loves; he sees no threat in it.

At this point, the protagonist decides to refuse all solidarity, both with the Europeans and with the Arab. But the latter has been integrated into the desert by means of two characteristics they have in common: both are weathered and discolored. At the moment that Daru makes his decision, he "threw a pebble that whistled through the air before sinking into the snow." . . . The plateau is composed exclusively of stone. Symbolically, and certainly without being aware of the meaning implicit in his action, Daru thus rejects the countryside he loves.

Daru leaves the school with the prisoner, then, resting after an hour's walk, glances at the surrounding countryside:

The snow was melting faster and faster and the sun was drinking up the puddles at once, rapidly cleaning the plateau, which gradually dried and vibrated like the air itself. When they resumed walking, the ground rang under their feet. From time to time a bird rent the space in front of them with a joyful cry. Daru breathed in deeply the fresh morning light. He felt a sort of rapture before the vast, familiar expanse, now almost entirely yellow under its dome of blue sky. . . .

The sun— which is melting the snow, drinking up the puddles, and spreading its light— is beginning to dominate again. The snow is no longer masking the mineral countryside, which is once again "yellow," "dry" and hard — suggested by "vibrated" and "rang." The air too is hard: it "vibrate[s]"; the birds "ren[d]" it. The countryside is assuming "faster and faster," "rapidly," "at once" the appearance of the inhuman desert.

Daru recognizes that this mineral and solar decor is "familiar." He breathes in the light; he unites himself by deep breaths with the countryside that he loves. From this union comes his "rapture." When he describes the bird's cry as joyful," he is probably expressing his own feeling. But he has already noted that the countryside is indifferent to men. Now, it seems to him that a gratuitous happiness in the natural world corresponds to his own joy. Daru believes that he is being united with the countryside without anything in the text suggesting that the countryside is being united with him. The two joys are essentially parallel; the union between Daru and the decor thus established could well be the product of the schoolmaster's imagination.

The two men finally stop on a flat hill. There, Daru shows the Arab the road leading to prison, then the one leading to freedom. Leaving the choice up to the prisoner, he starts to return to the school:

Daru hesitated. The sun was rather high in the sky and was beginning to beat down on his head. The schoolmaster retraced his steps, at first somewhat uncertainly, then with decision. When he reached the little hill, he was bathed in sweat. He climbed it as fast as he could and stopped, out of breath, at the top. The rock-fields to the south stood out sharply against the blue sky, but on the plain to the east a steamy heat was already rising. And in that slight haze, Daru, with heavy heart, made out the Arab walking slowly on the road to prison. . . .

"Rock," "sun" and "heat" point out that the desert has become mineral and inhuman again. The violence of the decor is now directed against Daru: the sun "beat[s] down on his head" and makes him sweat profusely. The unevenness of the terrain impedes his movements: when he arrives at the top of the hill, he is "out of breath." At the moment when he sees that the Arab has misunderstood him, Daru finds himself in a world which is both familiar and hostile.

When, a little later, the protagonist learns that he is threatened with revenge, the countryside takes on another aspect:

The schoolmaster was watching the clear light bathing the whole surface of the plateau, but he hardly saw it. . . . Daru looked at the sky, the plateau, and, beyond, the invisible

lands stretching all the way to the sea. In this vast landscape he had loved so much, he was alone. . . .

This countryside is the normal decor of the protagonist. All the elements are there: the sun suggested by "light," the mineral landscape evoked by "plateau." Heights, "sky" . . . , "the whole surface," "stretching out" and "vast" underscore the immensity of the decor. The image of a "young light" which "leaps" evokes joy. But Daru, who is looking at the countryside without seeing it, does not share in this joy nor in the immense panorama which stretches out before him. The countryside is no longer hostile; it is indifferent. Henceforth, Daru will be an exile in it.

Daru, who loved the desert, identified it with life: only there "could [he] have really lived." . . . He believed, it seems, that the countryside could resolve the problem which confronted him. The freedom that he gives the Arab is presented in the form of a choice between two human solidarities which intervene between him and the countryside. Daru manifests a tendency which Camus had noted in his *Notebooks* in May, 1937: "In our youth, we attach ourselves better to a landscape than to a man."

Attached to the desert, Daru was not able to see his situation clearly. The descriptions of the school's location, of the weather and of the snow have a symbolic value. They show that, as long as the Arab remained with him, the schoolmaster enjoyed a certain freedom of action. But that indecision could not continue. A choice was necessary: Daru had to join with either his threatened community or with a broader and more wretched humanity, represented by the Arab. He refuses to choose, daydreams about the countryside that he loves, and does nothing. Finally, the next morning, he rejects both the European community and the Arab. The similarity between his guest and the countryside plays a prophetic role; because of his refusal to join with the Arab, Daru loses the countryside. Even the gesture which accompanies the decision, the throwing of the stone, indicates that he has set in motion a mechanism which, in the end, exiles him from the country he loves.

The choice imposed on Daru orients the short story toward an underlying theme, the necessity for action. His indecision, when confronted with the need for action, exiles Daru from the comforting state of harmony with an indifferent nature which had satisfied him to that point. In all probability, he will be a victim of the quite human conflict which he could not escape. Whatever the outcome, Daru, a human being, a moral being, could not, without serious consequences for himself, deny his responsibility by identifying himself with a countryside.

The structure of the short story increases the value of the motif of inhumanity inherent in the presentation of the decor. Joy emanates from nature when Daru is joyful, but it also emanates from it when he is profoundly unhappy, overwhelmed by solitude. Daru has gambled on nature instead of on men. He has lost the help which human solidarity offers. The feeling of perfect union with the desert, a countryside after his own heart, has proven to be an illusion. From a certain point of view, this short story, published in 1957, states in esthetic terms one of the essential ideas concerning Camus's vision of

nature, an idea which he formulated as early as 1937 in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side:* nature, an independent entity, does not lend itself to the schemes of man.

Source: Paul Fortier, "The Symbolic Decor of 'The Guest'," translated by Joseph G. Morello, in *Essays on Camus's Exile and the Kingdom,* Romance Monographs, Inc., 1980, pp. 203-15.

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Perrine gives an overview of Camus' "The Guest" and discusses common misinterpretations of the story.

When I entered the classroom that morning, I was just in time to catch the class wag writing some "clumsily chalked up words" on the blackboard: "You have handed us a difficult assignment. You will pay for this." She was absolutely right. When I read the papers my students had written defining the theme of Camus' short story "The Guest," I found that, though they had sped their arrows bravely, none, in my opinion, had nicked the center of the target. The assignment was more difficult than I had anticipated. I paid by having to write lengthy notes in margins. Yet they were bright students, a selected group, not the usual cross-section of mediocrity. Although there were scattered unique mistakes (e.g. Daru is an Arab schoolmaster), the misreadings clustered in four areas. I wish to examine these major misinterpretations. But first I must shoot my own arrow. Arab children in the middle of the bleak Algerian plateau where he was born and which he loves. Into his solitude during a spell of bad weather comes the gendarme Balducci, leading an Arab who has killed his cousin in a dispute over some grain. Balducci insists on handing the prisoner over to Daru for delivery to police headquarters at a village some four hours distant. Daru protests that this is not his job; but Balducci, citing police short handedness in the face of an incipient Arab revolt, makes Daru sign for receipt of the prisoner, and departs.

A sensitive, humane, and compassionate man, Daru treats his hostage as a human being rather than as a member of a subject race, as a guest rather than as a prisoner. He unties the Arab's wrists so that he can drink his hot tea; he refuses to put the rope back on him afterwards; he eats his supper beside the Arab, much to the latter's surprise, for the Arab is not used to being treated as an equal by a French-man; he neglects to keep a pistol near his bed that night, though he has given the Arab a cot in the same room. Even though he is a French civil servant, he rebels against the notion of handing the Arab over to French authorities for trial.

The story centers around Daru's dilemma. Should he do what Balducci would consider his duty, obey orders, and deliver the prisoner? Or should he follow his own human impulse and give the Arab his freedom? On the one hand, Daru is responsible for the prisoner; he has been given an order; he has signed a receipt. In addition, he is a Frenchman; he will fight against the Arabs if war is declared; for him, as for Balducci, the French are "us" and the Arabs are "they." Moreover, the Arab is a murderer; and Daru, a peaceable man, cannot repress his wrath against all men who wantonly kill, motivated by hate, spite, or blood lust. But then, on the other hand, the Arab is a human being, and it offends Daru's "honor" to treat him, however guilty, with anything less than human dignity. Such treatment demands that the Arab should be judged by his own people, not by alien French masters. It also demands that the Arab shall be treated as a "guest" while under Daru's roof. But this very treatment introduces an additional complication into Daru's dilemma, and one that is morally irrelevant. The stranger's presence in his room that night

imposed on him a sort of brotherhood he refused to accept in the present circumstances; yet he was familiar with it. Men who share the same rooms, soldiers or prisoners, develop a strange alliance as if, having cast off their armor with their clothing, they fraternized every evening, over and above their differences, in the ancient community of dream and fatigue.

A guest, even an unwanted guest, exercises a rationally unjustifiable claim on one's loyalties.

The necessity of moral choice can be an almost intolerable burden, and Daru several times wishes he were free of it. In the afternoon, when he awakes from his nap, Daru is "amazed at the unmixed joy he derived from the mere thought the Arab might have fled and that he would be alone with no decision to make." During the night, when the Arab gets up to urinate, Daru at first thinks, "He is running away. Good riddance!" In the morning the Arab's continued presence irks him. "He simultaneously cursed his own people who had sent him this Arab and the Arab who had dared to kill and not managed to get away." But the decision must be made.

Daru solves his dilemma by taking the Arab a two hours' journey across the plateau to where two ways divide. Giving him a thousand francs and enough food to last for two days, he first points out the way to prison, a two-hour walk, and then the way to freedom, a day's journey to the pastures where the nomads will take him in and shelter him according to their law. When Daru looks back, later, he sees "with heavy heart" the Arab walking slowly on the road to prison. Still later, back in the classroom, he finds "clumsily chalked up" on the blackboard the words, "You have handed over our brother. You will pay for this."

Camus' story is about the difficulty, the agony, the complexity, the necessity, the worth, and the thanklessness of moral choice. It tells us that moral choice may be difficult and complex, with no clear distinction between good and evil, and with both rational and irrational, selfish and unselfish claims justifying each course of conduct. It tells us that moral choice is a burden which man would willingly avoid if he could, but also that it is part of the human condition which man cannot evade and remain man. It shows us that man defines himself by moral choice, for Daru makes the choice which the reader wants him to make, and establishes his moral worth thereby. But the story also shows that moral decision has no ulterior meaning, for the universe does not reward it. Not only does the Arab fail to take the freedom offered him, but ironically the Arab's tribesmen misinterpret Daru's action and threaten revenge.

In large terms, Daru is representative of moral man, and the desert is representative of the world. Daru is essentially alone in this world, which is "cruel to live in," and life in it has no overarching or transcendental meaning.

This is the way it was: bare rock covered three quarters of the region. Towns sprang up, flourished, then disappeared; men came by, loved one another or fought bitterly, then died. No one in this desert, neither he nor his guest, mattered.

In Camus' world man lives alone, makes his moral decisions alone, suffers alone, and dies alone. At the end of the story, in consequence of the very action by which Daru has affirmed his selfhood, he has cut himself off from those he had tried to aid. "In this vast landscape he had loved so much, he was alone." His loneliness is both literal and symbolic.

This account is doubtless incomplete, but it provides a context for discussing the major misinterpretations to which the story seems peculiarly subject. These are as follows:

1. *The main conflict is between conscience and society.* Daru must choose between doing what he himself believes right and what is expected of him. He must decide between his own standards and society's.

This interpretation is not so much wrong as it is an oversimplification. It is true that Balducci, the gendarme, is the voice of society, and that by Balducci's standards Daru's duty is clear and unequivocal. It is true also that Daru's immediate human impulse, his individual inner direction, is opposed to Balducci's concept. But the story is not a fictional counterpart of Emerson's *Self-Reliance* or Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience,* with individual right opposed to social wrong. Actually Daru's conscience is divided: it is on both sides of this conflict, and so are his loyalties. He does consider it contrary to honor and humanity to hand the prisoner over; but he is also revolted by the Arab's "stupid crime," which deserves trial and punishment. He does feel loyalty to the Arab as a member of the human race, but he also feels loyalty to his countrymen, with whom he will fight if war breaks out. What is required of Daru is not simply the courage to resist the pressures of society and do what is right, it is the courage to make a moral decision between alternatives neither of which is right. Balducci is not the representative of shallow social convention, nor is his request unreasonable: it makes sense in terms of ordinary"justice" and in terms of the national danger. Balducci, it must be noticed, is not portrayed unsympathetically. Though not so quickly sensitive as Daru, he is a fundamentally decent and kindly man, careful not to ride too fast and hurt the Arab, quick to approve of removing the bonds from the Arab's wrists, still ashamed, when he thinks of it, of putting a rope on another man. Fond of Daru as he is of his own son, he will not denounce Daru and he trusts Daru to tell the truth. He is representative, moreover, as is Daru, of a government which has tried to educate the Arabs and which provides wheat in times of drought. Daru is reluctant to hurt such a man, and feels remorse when he has done so. Conscience, that is, is on Balducci's side as well as on the Arab's.

2. *The story concerns the impossibility of isolating oneself from society and from human responsibility.* Though a man cannot accept the world, he is inevitably a part of the world. However hard he tries to escape it, the world will break in upon him and compel him to acknowledge its claims.

If my students had not made occasional references to the characters and plot, I would have sworn that some of them were describing Conrad's *Victory.* According to this interpretation Daru, like Conrad's Heyst, disgusted by mankind, feeling wrath "against all men with their rotten spite, their tireless hates, their blood lust," has disclaimed

human involvements. He thus lives "almost like a monk" in the middle of a bleak plain far from humanity.

Again, this statement of theme is not so much wrong as it is an oversimplification. The story does show the impossibility of escaping human involvement. But Daru has fled neither responsibility nor mankind. He is an employee of the French government. He is engaged in the responsible task of education. In times of drought he distributes wheat, and deals not only with his pupils but with their fathers. If war comes, he will be a soldier, as he has been before, not a deserter. He has chosen this isolated region to live in because he loves it, not because he hates mankind. "Daru had been born here. Everywhere else, he felt exiled." This is the place where he is rooted, not one that he has fled to. If his schoolhouse is remote from human habitation, it is probably so in order to serve all the neighboring villages equally. Moreover, he "had requested a post in the little town at the base of the foothills"; it was not his own choice that had assigned him to this more isolated spot, where at first he had found "the solitude and the silence" hard to bear.

3. *Daru evades making a decision.* Taking the easy way out, he shifts the entire responsibility for decision to the Arab. By thus refusing to become involved in the affairs of men, he rejects their brotherhood, and the consequences of his failure to act are worse than either of the alternative choices would have been.

It is true that Daru several times wishes he might be relieved of the necessity of choice. It is true also, as one perceptive student wrote, that Daru in pointing out the two ways to the Arab, "was trying to transfer some of the weight of decision from himself to the Arab." *Some* of the weight—precisely. For Daru is not paralyzed by inaction. He does not simply wait in indecision till the authorities or the Arabs crash in on him. By putting the Arab two hours on his way, by giving him a thousand francs and enough food to last two days, Daru takes positive action. The decision to let the Arab make his own decision is itself a decision. In effect, moreover, Daru is presenting the Arab with his freedom, if he will only take it. That the Arab does not take it leaves Daru with a "heavy heart," and is an ironical reward for all his trouble and agitation. He needn't have troubled himself. Except that, by troubling himself, he defines himself as a man, however little the action means to the total cosmos. He has not, like Pilate, washed his hands of evil; rather, in allowing the Arab to make his own choice, he has given the Arab the ultimate freedom—the only real freedom, Camus might say, that men have.

4. *The Arab chooses the road to prison* because *of Daru's kindness.* Responding to Daru's humane treatment, he feels that it would be dishonorable to violate Daru's trust. Like Daru he has a moral decision to make for right or wrong, and, like Daru, he chooses right. This decision is a point of honor to him.

If this interpretation is correct, then Daru's decision has indeed made some impact on the outer world, has meaning, however ironical, beyond a meaning for Daru himself. For this reason the reader who is repulsed by Camus' bleak portrayal of life is tempted to accept it. But it rests on too little evidence. From the beginning the Arab is pictured as passive, uncomprehending, a little stupid. Though his face has "a restless and

rebellious look," he at no point makes any motion toward attempting to escape. When Daru asks Balducci, "Is he against us?" Balducci replies, "I don't think so." A prior attempt to escape, or an act of rebellion, would be necessary to establish a change of attitude on the Arab's part after Daru's decision. Instead, his passivity is stressed from the beginning of the story. He first appears, following Balducci, hands bound and head lowered, and the point is made that he not once raises his head. In the schoolroom he squats "motionless in the same spot" and "without stirring." During the night he makes no attempt to get away or to seize Daru's pistol, though he might easily have done so. His incomprehension also is emphasized. When Daru asks him why he killed the cousin, he gives an almost inconsequential answer. When Daru asks, "Are you sorry?" the Arab stares at him openmouthed. "Obviously he did not understand." He sleeps with "his mouth open"; the next morning his expression is "vacant and listless"; when Daru returns, after the journey has begun, to investigate a noise, the Arab watches "without seeming to understand"; when Daru gives him the food and money, he acts "as if he didn't know what to do with what was being given him." The Arab *is,* of course, anxious about his fate at the same time that he seems resigned to it. He wants to know whether Daru is the judge, and whether the gendarme is coming back the next day. He is also warmed by Daru's humanity; but his response is that he wants Daru to accompany him and Balducci to the police headquarters. Exactly what he is trying to communicate to Daru when Daru finally leaves him is of course a matter of speculation.

The Arab had now turned toward Daru, and a sort of panic was visible in his expression. "Listen," he said.

But a good guess is that he is trying to repeat his earlier request, "Come with us." He doesn't want to be left alone in a hostile world. He wants the man to come with him who has treated him as a human being.

Camus' "The Guest" is a subtle and complex story. At one level it tells us about the French situation in Algeria between World War II and the Algerian War, a situation as difficult as Daru's, where also no choices were right ones. But primarily it is less about a political situation than about the human situation. It is about the difficulty, the complexity, the futility, and the glory of human choice.

Source: Laurence Perrine, "Camus' 'The Guest': A Subtle and Difficult Story," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 11, no. 1,Fall, 1963, pp. 52-8.

Topics for Further Study

Outline the history of the Algerian War and connect that history to allusions in the story. What kinds of events would have led to Balducci's and Daru's questions about the Prisoner's loyalties and talk of impending war? Who might have written the threatening note on the chalkboard?

Research the basic principles of Islamic law. Under what circumstances would the Prisoner have been guilty of a crime for killing his cousin? Under what circumstances might the action have been justifiable? Use your knowledge to prepare a defense of the Prisoner in the French legal system.

Study the geography of Algeria and match it to places and events described in the story. What does the area Camus described look like on a map? What kind of climate conditions lead to severe drought? What kinds of government policies have contributed to, or prevented droughts like the one described in the story?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Revolt against French rule in Algeria begins in 1954 and is led by the Front de Liberation (FLN).

1990s: After the FLN separates from the government in the late 1980s, Algerian voters approve a multiparty political system. The first multiparty elections are held in 1991. In 1992, government authorities cancel a general election in which radical Muslims were gaining a strong lead. In 1996, a referendum approves reforms which prevent the use of Islam as a political platform. In 1997, more than 1,000 civilians are killed by Muslim rebels. A cease-fire is declared in October. In November, Algeria implements an international civil and political rights treaty.

1950s: With FLN terrorist activity on the rise, the French Parliament votes Premier Bourges-Mannoury special powers in 1956 to suppress the group. Charles de Gaulle is voted Premier in 1957 as the Algerian crisis threatens civil war.

1990s: Algerian President Chadli Benejedid resigns in January of 1991 after Islamic fundamentalists triumph in national elections. Former FLN rebel Mohammed Boudiaf returns from 27 years of exile and is sworn in as President. He is assassinated in June of 1991.

1950s: Muslims comprise approximately 88 percent of the population of French Algeria.

1990s: About 99 percent of Algeria's population is Muslim.

What Do I Read Next?

The Stranger, Camus's first novel from 1942. Mersault, the protagonist, is on trial for the senseless shooting of an Arab. He is condemned as much for his social alienation and indifference as for his crime. Provides an introduction to Camus's themes of absurdism and alienation.

The Plague, Camus's second novel, published in 1947. It tells the story of several men confronting a plague in the Algerian city of Oran. Introduces the theme of revolt.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist novel *Nausea*, published in 1938, treats a number of Sartre's philosophical themes, including meaninglessness and the responsibility of each individual to achieve an authentic existence.

"Zaabalawi" is a well known story by the Nobel Prize winning Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz. Published in 1963, the story tells of a quest to find a holy man who will provide a physical cure and spiritual salvation for the ailing narrator. Mahfouz uses some Absurdist techniques and focuses on individual experience in a social rather than alienated context.

Further Study

Howe, Irving. "Between Fact and Fable" Review in *The New Republic,* March 31, 1958, pp. 17-18.

Early, mostly favorable review that discusses the tension between Camus as a man of ideas and a creative artist.

Hurley, D. F. "Looking for the Arab: Reading the Readings of Camus's 'The Guest.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 30, No. 1, (Winter 1993): 79-93.

An analysis of why many critics have been quick accept or further the negative portrayal of the Arab. Examines the use of early (unpublished) drafts of the story and biases on the part of critics.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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