

# The futility of existence in albert camus's "l'hote"



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“ He who despairs of the human condition is a coward, but he who has hope for it is a fool” (Wyatt). As this quote by Albert Camus suggests, he was not a very optimistic writer. His gloomy look on life itself can be seen all too clearly in “ The Guest”. The story itself deals with Camus’s idea of the futility of human existence: the only rational thing anyone can expect is death. Camus’s underlying philosophy is revealed from the very beginning of the story. The French title, “ L’hote”, translates to mean both “ guest” and “ host” simultaneously, which implies that the mutually respectful relationship between the main characters in the story should be applied to mankind everywhere. The story begins on an auspicious note with the introduction of Daru, a teacher who chooses to work in an isolated school in the Algerian desert to embrace an ascetic life. Daru is content with a simplistic, rural lifestyle. Undoubtedly, Camus wrote this story out of affection for his teacher, Jean Grenier. Without Grenier, Camus would never have developed his political and philosophical ideas. In the story, Daru is an idealistic teacher who believes in just causes and free will, and is most likely a representation of Camus’s past teachers. In contrast, a soldier in the French army named Balducci first appears with an Arab prisoner trailing behind him. When Balducci orders Daru to lead the prisoner to the Tinguit jail, a clear distinction between their attitudes is revealed. Balducci is one to follow his orders, neither questioning nor disapproving of any decision by the authorities. Daru, on the other hand, is torn by his own conscience; he will be sentencing a man to his death if he follows orders. The Arab prisoner appears to be reserved; it seems that either he does not understand the questions posed by Daru, or he feels insulted by the comments. When Daru asks the prisoner whether he was afraid, he replies by turning his eyes away.

When Daru asks whether he is sorry for the crime he has committed, the Arab stares at him as if he does not comprehend the words. However, he understands completely the situation that he is in, thus showing that it is Daru who cannot comprehend why the Arab has murdered his cousin. The history of this racial conflict dates back to when the French first colonized Algeria. Algeria has undergone many years of ethnic strife; the French, though they are the minority, dominate the large Arab population. This clash is further exacerbated by the lack of cultural understanding between the two groups. Daru cannot fathom a plausible reason for murdering a cousin over a debt of grain. Upon hearing of the crime, he feels “ a sudden wrath against the man, against all men with their rotten spite, their tireless hates, their blood lusts.” What he has not taken into account is that it may be perfectly acceptable to the Arab to kill a relative rather than lose his honor (Thody). Islamic law leaves private [family] matters alone, but the French view their system as innately superior. Growing up in post-colonized Algeria, Camus was heavily influenced by the conflict between the Europeans and the Arabs. He was torn within himself: he sympathized with the Muslim population, yet was unable to forgo his ties to the French. Though he supported pacifism as an end to racially-driven conflicts, he could not imagine an Algeria without France. His love for Algeria as a greater part of France can be seen in “ The Guest” in moments such as when Daru is teaching French geography even in a country that seems too distant to have a connection with the Europeans. This is one of the major reasons conflicts occurred in colonized Algeria: the lack of cross-cultural understanding. The Arab’s cultural identity is evident not only in his crime, but in his actions later that night. Daru believes that the prisoner has run away from the school, and silently hopes that this will

free his conscience: “ He was amazed at the unmixed joy that he derived from the mere thought that the Arab might have fled and that he would be alone with no decision to make.” The Arab, however, has only gone out to use the outhouse, and returns immediately. The critic Eberhard Griem said, “ It would be highly dishonorable, and very likely to provoke drastic responses, for a person to run away from a conflict of the kind in question, instead of facing his responsibility.” Arabic society has taught the prisoner that running away would not only be a cowardly act, but also a disgraceful one. Honor is thus one of the most important themes in the story. As a soldier, Balducci follows the code prescribed to him by the authorities: he is indifferent about whether a prisoner lives or dies. Daru, on the other hand, cannot betray his own upbringing, and feels that it is unthinkable to sentence a man to his death. In the end, although each character ultimately tries to make the best choice in the harsh situation he finds himself in, the results are not what they expect. Balducci becomes a slave to the colonial state, performing deeds that are not morally upright. Even when given a choice to run away or face a trial that will likely result in his death, the Arab decides to face the police. The ultimate irony, however, happens to Daru, who is only trying to free himself of his guilt. He believes that he has made the right choice in giving the prisoner control over his own fate. It was the righteous thing to do, even though the Arab was intent on accepting his punishment. As he enters the classroom, he notices the words hastily written on the chalkboard: “ You handed over our brother. You will pay for this.” Despite all his efforts to not become involved, he is ultimately doomed. In the beginning of the story, Daru could not imagine a place that fit him better, but now “ in this vast landscape he had loved so much, he was alone.” To understand Camus’s <https://assignbuster.com/the-futility-of-existence-in-albert-camus-lhote/>

philosophy, it is essential to first comprehend his political beliefs. Though he fervently denied this claim, many critics have nonetheless labeled him an existentialist. This philosophy, first coined by Jean-Paul Sartre in his early works, is a difficult concept to comprehend. Sartre argues that “there is no reality except in action...humans are nothing more than the ensemble of their acts.” In essence, existentialism states that though humans have free will and are ultimately responsible for their actions, their innate nature will always lead to futility. It is a mistake, however, to limit Camus to that category. Camus’s philosophy was, in fact, better known as “absurdity”; he did not view life as useless and without purpose, but rather felt that there was a lack of logic in the universe. Unlike existentialism, absurdism holds that there is meaning in life, because people are still in control of their destinies. As Camus wrote, “If something worth living for is worth dying for, what about something not worth dying for?” It is only when mankind tries to create logic out of an incomprehensible world that conflict will occur. This philosophy first begins to develop in Camus’s earlier works, such as *The Stranger*, and is later formalized in “*The Guest*” and *The Plague*. Camus’s theory of existentialism had two phases: the first involved his widely-read novel *The Stranger*. Mersault, the hero of the story, is entangled in the accidental murder of an Arab: an event that later leads to his execution. He was not so much sentenced to death for killing the Arab, because they were discriminated against and were deemed to be of less importance (similar to the Arab prisoner in “*The Guest*”), but because he admits that he does not believe in God, and is indifferent to his mother’s death. This event furthers Camus’s notion of life’s absurdity. Mersault begins to realize that the world is indifferent to him, as well as to everybody else; it does not matter whether

he is sentenced to die or whether he goes on with his boring life. Thus, this view, which was based on the events of Europe at that time, became the basis for Camus's later works. Beginning in his late twenties, Camus began his second phase. His theory of existentialism held that life was still absurd, but " he believed that values could be constructed out of rebellion against the predicament" (Royal). His novel *The Plague* tells of a plague entering a city in Algeria and the events that occur during a quarantine of the city. Though this plot does not seem to relate to existentialism, Tarrou, one of the main characters of the story, sums up a major theme when he says, " I refuse everything which, for good reasons or bad, leads to death or putting someone to death." Tarrou's situation in the novel involves the execution of infected patients, which is similar to the conflict in " *The Guest*". Ironically, Tarrou dies at the end of the story, despite his efforts to make right in a harsh world – recalling how Daru is threatened by the Arabs. The difference between Tarrou and Daru's situation and that experienced by Mersault is crucial to an understanding of these three works. Mersault does not care if he is executed or if there is a God; life is meaningless for him because the only rational thing he can expect is death. Camus's new idea of existentialism holds that life has meaning and is worth living, even if it is revealed as absurd in the end. Thus, both Tarrou and Daru live their lives and try to succeed to the best of their abilities, while Mersault has already given up on life at the very beginning. In both of his phases, Camus includes his attachment to Algeria and his fervent belief that it should not be separated from France. The setting plays an even more important part than the characters themselves: both *The Stranger* and *The Plague* take place in his birthplace of Oran and describe the scenery as vividly as Camus

remembers it. His works have a sense of attachment, a reverence for the conflicted land; Camus writes in “ The Guest”: “ This is the way the region was, cruel to live in, even without men...But Daru had been born here. Everywhere else, he felt exiled.” However, as John Erickson writes, “ those same traits that made Camus a ‘ colonizer who refuses’... served as the model for the very problematic he explored – the state of the outsider” (Knatt). Behind the setting lies the ubiquitous – if sometimes indirect – theme of war and conflict. Camus’s life was heavily impacted by both world wars and conflicts between the French and the Arab populations. In “ The Guest” and The Stranger, the persistent hatred between the Europeans and the non-Europeans is evident from the hostility between cultures. In The Plague, not only is the quarantine of the city meant to represent the Nazi occupation of France during World War II but, as Germaine Bree put it, “[It] takes us back directly to Camus’s main preoccupation: his need to rethink the fundamental problems of life” (Hodgkin). Camus’s works always contain events from his own life: disease in The Plague (his bouts with tuberculosis), the conflict with the Arabs in The Stranger (his involvement in a fight with Arabs in Oran), and his opposition to the Nazi occupation of France. However, the most important idea in Camus’s works will always be existentialism, a concept that is found in the works of numerous authors throughout history. For example, Franz Kafka’s The Trial details an existentialist situation where a man is suddenly arrested for a crime that is never revealed to him, not even at his execution. He accepts his situation, and does not even plead innocent when he finally is offered a trial. Instead, he endures what others give him, regardless of how undesirable their offerings may be. A connection can be made between Kafka’s work and Camus’s “ The Guest”; both stories take place in a world

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with an “ absurd form of justice – a legal system without logic” (Wyatt).

There is no reason for the man to be executed, and yet he accepts his fate just as the Arab prisoner accepts his. Like Kafka’s character, Daru is punished for a crime that is not really his, and one that he has no control over. Kafka, however, uses a different form of existentialism than Camus: “ Kafka arouses pity and affection on the part of his readers...but no modern writer that I can think of, except Camus, has aroused love” (Royal). Post-Camus writers still value the notion of existentialism, though a different concept is used because of the horrific experiences that our world went through in the late 20th Century. In Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, Billy Pilgrim goes through the horrendous firebombing of Dresden and survives, an indication of the absurdity of war in an illogical world. His cataclysmic description of a naïve soldier almost mirrors Daru’s situation in “ *The Guest*”. Daru realizes in the end what Billy has known all along: life has no beginning, no end, no purpose; his response to any incident, bad or good, is “ So it goes...” (Vonnegut). Modern writers have been profoundly affected by Camus’s writings, even forty years after he died in a car crash. Today, Camus is still highly praised for the works that he deemed “ unworthy” of a Nobel Prize. Diana Festa-McCormick comments that “ *The Guest*” “ remains one of the most widely read and anthologized...a quarter of the century after the Algerian war and the fierce debates that it aroused in the French intelligentsia, it stands as one of the most deeply touching literary pieces on that war” (Knapp). Camus’s legacy is admired by both Arabs and French, a goal he would have been overjoyed to see realized.