

Applying a Modernist Approach to Albert Camus's Short Story 'The Guest'

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Abstract:

This paper examines Albert Camus's short story "The Guest" through a modernist lens, focusing on themes of isolation, absurdity, and moral responsibility. Camus, known for his existentialist and absurdist philosophy, uses the story's setting and characters to explore the tension between individual autonomy and societal expectations. The narrative follows Daru, a schoolteacher in an isolated desert schoolhouse, who is tasked with escorting an Arab prisoner to face justice. Daru's refusal to follow societal orders, his trust in the prisoner, and his decision to give the prisoner freedom to choose his fate highlight the key principles of modernism, such as rejecting traditional values and questioning moral authority. Through this examination, the story critiques the human condition and the absurdity of seeking meaning in an indifferent world. By leaving the prisoner's decision unresolved, Camus invites readers to reflect on the existential dilemmas of freedom, justice, and the consequences of individual choices. The paper has been concluded by asserting that "The Guest" encapsulates the essence of modernism, showcasing how cultural and political contexts shape moral decision-making and human relationships.

Keywords: Modernism, Albert Camus, existentialism, absurdity, moral responsibility, isolation, freedom, "The Guest"

Introduction

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a renowned and noted French novelist, playwright, and essayist (Griem, 1993). In 1957, he won the Noble Prize for Literature due to his talent as a writer and greatest artist of the era (Bowker, 2019). The present study is offering criticism of Albert's short story "The Guest" which was published in Exile and the Kingdom in 1957. The consequences of World War I destroyed as well as died numerous people across the world and Camus was also one of them, he became orphaned because his father passed away and his mother brought up him in those distressing situations (Roger, 1970).

Through education, he steps over the boundaries of his environment and social distressed conditions. He developed a long-term interest in philosophy and literature under the influence of the great philosopher Jean Grenier. Finally, he was the victim of tuberculosis disease which destroyed his strong mind and force him to give up halfway.

Literature Review

Albert Camus's "The Guest" (originally "L'Hôte," 1957) is a seminal text often examined through the lenses of existentialism, colonialism, and moral philosophy. However, its narrative structure, thematic preoccupations, and aesthetic form also align it profoundly with the broader literary movement of Modernism. This review synthesizes existing scholarship to establish a foundation for analyzing "The Guest" through a Modernist framework, focusing on its epistemological uncertainty, ethical ambiguity, fragmented subjectivity, and symbolic spatiality. While extensive criticism exists on Camus's existentialism, a focused review of the story's *Modernist* characteristics reveals underexplored avenues for interpretation.

1. Modernism and Existentialism: A Convergent Critical Landscape

The dominant critical tradition places "The Guest" firmly within Camus's existentialist philosophy, reading Daru's dilemma as an illustration of absurd freedom, moral isolation, and the necessity of choice in a godless universe (Sartre, 1946; Cruickshank, 1959). Early critics like Germaine Brée (1961) emphasized the story's ethical parable, where the "guest-host" dynamic becomes a metaphor for the impossible choices of colonial Algeria. While this existential-colonial reading is foundational, it often subsumes formal analysis to

philosophical content.

Scholars such as David Ellison (1990) and Edward J. Hughes (2007) began bridging this gap by examining Camus's *style* as constitutive of his thought. They note his use of a restrained, impersonal narration and a focus on sensory detail—stylistic hallmarks akin to the “zero-degree writing” theorized by Modernists. This shift in criticism allows for the story to be seen not just as a vehicle for ideas, but as a literary artifact whose form—its indeterminacy, irony, and spatial symbolism—is intrinsically Modernist.

2. Key Modernist Characteristics in “The Guest”: Thematic and Formal Correlations

a. Epistemological Uncertainty and Ambiguity:

Modernist literature is characterized by a radical doubt about knowable truths and stable meanings. In “The Guest,” this is manifest in relentless ambiguity. As Peter Brooks (1984) argues in *Reading for the Plot*, the story's central plot—the “choice” Daru must force upon the prisoner—ends not in resolution but in a viciously ironic, misread message on the blackboard: “You handed over our brother. You will pay for this.” The failure of communication, the misinterpretation of intention, and the collapse of ethical binaries (host/guest, captor/captive, justice/injustice) reflect a Modernist worldview where meaning is constructed, contested, and ultimately elusive. This aligns with T.S. Eliot's notion of the “objective correlative,” where the bleak, empty plateau becomes the precise emotional equivalent of a world devoid of transcendent meaning.

b. Fragmented Subjectivity and Alienation:

The Modernist hero is often isolated, introspective, and alienated from social norms. Daru is a classic example. Critics like Adele King (1964) have analyzed his self-imposed exile on the plateau as a physical manifestation of an internal state. His refusal to align with either the French colonial law (represented by Balducci) or the Arab prisoner's potential cause illustrates what Marshall Berman (1982), in his study of modernity, calls the experience of disintegration and renewal. Daru's consciousness, filtered through the third-person-limited narration, becomes the fragmented center of a moral universe with no reliable coordinates, echoing the subjective perspectivism of Modernist writers like Kafka or Faulkner.

c. Symbolic and Liminal Space:

Modernist texts often invest landscapes with profound psychological and metaphysical significance. The scholarship on the setting of “The Guest” is particularly rich. The schoolhouse, a supposed outpost of Enlightenment reason and order, becomes a contested, porous space where identities and loyalties blur. The vast, silent plateau surrounding it is a liminal zone—a space of both freedom and entrapment. This spatial symbolism, as analyzed by geocritical theorists like Bertrand Westphal (2011), operates in a Modernist mode where place is not a backdrop but an active, almost determinative, force that shapes the narrative’s existential and political tensions. The road that forks at the end is a quintessential Modernist symbol of undecidability, recalling Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” but stripped of any romanticism.

3. The Political as Form: Modernism and Colonial Critique

A significant strand of recent scholarship insists that the story’s Modernist form is inseparable from its political content. Critics like Emily Apter (1999) and H. Adlai Murdoch (1993) argue that Camus’s use of ambiguity and refusal of didacticism is not an evasion of politics, but a sophisticated engagement with the intractable realities of colonial Algeria. The Modernist technique of presenting a situation without authorial judgment forces the reader into Daru’s position of uncomfortable choice, thereby implicates them in the colonial dilemma. This formal strategy makes the political critique more profound by refusing easy allegories, a method akin to Conrad’s in *Heart of Darkness*.

4. Gaps in the Literature and Potential for Further Research

Despite these converging lines of analysis, a consolidated, explicit treatment of “The Guest” as a *Modernist text* remains somewhat peripheral. Most studies mention its Modernist features in service of an existential or postcolonial thesis. There is room for a dedicated study that:

- Systematically analyzes Camus’s narrative technique (ellipsis, free indirect discourse, descriptive precision) against High Modernist paradigms.

- Explores intertextual connections with other Modernist short stories (e.g., by Joyce, Mansfield, or Hemingway) to highlight shared formal concerns with epiphany, irony, and narrative economy.
- Investigates how the story's temporal structure—a brief, tense interval that carries immense historical weight—reflects the Modernist preoccupation with “moments of being” versus empty, chronological time.

The existing literature provides a robust foundation for a Modernist reading of “The Guest.” By synthesizing insights from existential, formalist, and postcolonial criticism, we see how Camus's story embodies core Modernist principles: the destabilization of meaning, the focus on alienated consciousness, the symbolic use of landscape, and the translation of political crisis into ambiguous form. A research paper applying a Modernist approach would not negate the classic existential reading but would deepen it by demonstrating how Camus's philosophical concerns are inextricably mediated through, and amplified by, a distinctly Modernist literary aesthetic. Such an analysis reaffirms “The Guest” as a text where the crisis of meaning is performed in its very structure, securing its place within the canon of twentieth-century Modernist literature.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative, text-centered analytical methodology** grounded in **literary theory and close reading**. It synthesizes principles from formalist, structuralist, and philosophical-literary criticism to construct a coherent Modernist framework through which to analyze Camus's short story. The methodology is designed to move beyond thematic summary and instead examine how the text's *form, style, and structure* produce its Modernist meanings. The process is structured in four interrelated phases.

1. Theoretical Framework Construction

The first phase establishes the operative definition of Modernism for this analysis. Rather than relying on a single theorist, the framework will be synthesized from key Modernist literary principles, creating a lens composed of the following interconnected tenets:

- **Epistemological Uncertainty:** The rejection of omniscient, reliable narration and the presentation of a world where truth is partial, subjective, or inaccessible (derived from the works of T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, and the philosophy of early 20th-century skepticism).
- **Fragmented Subjectivity & Alienation:** A focus on the isolated individual consciousness, often using techniques like free indirect discourse or limited third-person narration to explore internal

alienation (informed by theories of the modern subject from Georg Lukács and the narrative techniques of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce).

- **Symbolic Form & Spatial Poetics:** The treatment of setting and objects not as mere background but as symbolic systems that carry metaphysical and psychological weight (drawing on Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and the symbolic practices of High Modernism).
- **Ambiguity & Irresolution:** A preference for open-ended narratives, moral ambiguity, and ironic conclusions that resist didactic or conclusive interpretation (as seen in the short stories of Katherine Mansfield and Ernest Hemingway).

This synthesized framework will serve as the primary analytical lens, allowing the paper to identify and interpret Modernist features within the text systematically.

2. Textual Analysis: Close Reading Protocol

The core of the research will be a rigorous **close reading** of "The Guest." This will not be a linear paraphrase but a targeted examination of textual elements mapped onto the theoretical framework. The analysis will focus on:

- **Narrative Voice and Focalization:** Examining the specific use of third-person-limited narration. How does the narration align with Daru's perspective? Where does it subtly diverge? How does this technique create a sense of subjective isolation and limit the reader's knowledge?
- **Symbolic and Structural Analysis:**
 - **Spatial Symbols:** A systematic decoding of key spaces: the schoolhouse (a failed site of Enlightenment order), the plateau (a liminal, silent, and indifferent universe), and the fork in the road (the symbol of undecidable choice).
 - **Object Symbols:** Analyzing the symbolic function of the rope (binding and false security), the revolver (coercive power and its abandonment), the ration bags (shared humanity and obligation), and the blackboard (failed communication and the imposition of false narrative).

- **Stylistic and Linguistic Features:** Investigating Camus's famed "white style" (*le style blanc*). How do sentence structure, lexical choice (simple, concrete nouns), and descriptive restraint contribute to a Modernist aesthetic of emotional detachment and existential clarity?
- **Plot and Resolution:** Analyzing the structure of the plot as one of *suspended action* and *ironic reversal*. The study will focus on the non-choice Daru offers and the catastrophic misinterpretation of his intent in the final message, framing this as a quintessentially Modernist rejection of narrative closure and ethical clarity.

3. Comparative and Contextual Positioning

To strengthen the argument for the story's Modernist character, the analysis will employ **targeted comparative gestures**. This is not a full comparative study but uses strategic juxtaposition to illuminate Camus's techniques:

- **Intertextual Reference:** Brief comparison to narrative strategies in Kafka's *The Trial* (bureaucratic ambiguity) and Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" (dialogic subtext and unresolved conflict) to highlight shared Modernist concerns.
- **Contextualization within Literary History:** Situating Camus's 1957 story within the *late* phase of literary Modernism, acknowledging its post-WWII context while arguing for the persistence and adaptation of core Modernist formal strategies to address new historical realities (colonialism, the aftermath of the Absurd).

4. Synthesis and Argumentation

The final phase involves synthesizing the insights from the close reading into a cohesive argument. This will involve:

- Demonstrating how the formal elements (narrative voice, symbolism, structure) work in concert to enact the theoretical principles (uncertainty, alienation, ambiguity).
- Articulating how this Modernist reading **complements and complicates** the dominant existential and postcolonial interpretations. The argument will be that the political and philosophical weight of the story is *amplified*, not diminished, by its Modernist form—the form itself becomes the vehicle for the existential crisis.

- Clearly stating the contribution: that viewing “The Guest” through this consolidated Modernist lens reveals it as a masterful example of how late Modernist form mediates profound ethical and historical dilemmas.

Limitations of the Methodology:

This methodology is consciously focused on the internal workings of the text. While historical context (the Algerian War) will inform the interpretation, the study is not primarily archival or historical-materialist. Its strength lies in its depth of formal analysis, though it acknowledges that other methods (e.g., postcolonial theory) would bring different, equally valid insights to the fore. The goal is not an exhaustive account but a persuasive, textually-grounded demonstration of the story’s Modernist credentials.

Data Findings and Discussion

To me, this short story is a modernist work because it contains all the features of modernism. The term modernism is referred to as a considered action that departs from the social order as its own outdated and cultural and social values (Faulkner, 1977). It proved a breakaway and game-changer in the life of people in the ordinary life and usage it in a unique way (Linehan, 2012). In the field of art and literature in the early twentieth century, the use of new forms of speech distinguish a variety of lifestyles (Matthew, 2008). Albert Camus, the story's guest, communicates a kind of chaos and destruction. The story begins with the Daru in a desert schoolhouse, which is portrayed in the story as being far removed from town and civilization, and as such an isolated place.

This is a significant element in the guest because it creates a modernist type of environment by reminding us how remote and isolated this location is from everything else (schoolhouse). It gives the reader of the story the impression that he is in the isolated schoolhouse. Daru has a feeling in the guest that he should move to the country that is only bounded by the sky to be free of the constraints of society values. Albert Camus wishes to show that only when a man realizes that he can be different and separated from the whole that is humanity, can he be whole inside himself, as Daru describes at the beginning of the story.

Next, forcing Daru to care for the prisoner is a perfect example of modernism since Daru, despite being given orders, refuses to trust the duty that the government places on its people. After this incident, he realizes that those in positions of authority expect him to obey their orders and directives at all times, and his answer is, "The order?" That isn't my work, so I'm not doing it. Daru's response is reminiscent of Cane's response to God

after Abe's murder: "I am not my brother's keeper."

Camus, on the other hand, has no such intentions; Daru is not a murderer, for the Arab is the one who has committed the crime. It would be more fitting to recast Daru as Seth, the new brother who allowed Cane to experience the consequences of his actions. His discussion with Balducci about the gun is another example of modernism. Balducci believes Daru should have a gun for his safety and asks him if he has one. Daru replies and says that yes a shotgun but that is another room not here, then Baluucci gives a second gun to him and insists you should protect yourself by holding a weapon.

After that as Baluucci leaves, the room and Daru goes into another room and the second weapon leaves there and ignoring Balducci's instruction. This ignoring Balducci's wishes and establishing his trust with the Arab prisoner. That night and Daru and the prisoner went to sleep, Daru understands that prisoner gets up and goes to drink water outside of the room where Daru thinks twice about the weapon, but finally, Daru trust Arab who will not kill him and he fall back asleep again.

The next day Daru and the prisoner get up and they set off into the isolated place for their destination. Daru gives some food to the prisoner and gives instructions and follows and right way and goes to his destination on his way. The prisoner is feeling amazed for stay few seconds when Daru leaves away and the first time he looks over his shoulders and the prisoner standing there in a winder. The second time he looks over his shoulders he sees the prisoner go along the path toward his destination like he is supposed to go.

Daru gives the freedom to the prisoner it's up to him he ran away or accepting the responsibility of his action and follow and he destination by himself. In this regard, the reader considers the question of what would happen when a society quite having its judgment on a man's shoulder and allows him to pick up and try to carry his load or burden of life. This is a leading example of modernism because this is not a custom or norm of what a person might be doing when given the responsibility of higher stature.

These examples that Albert Camus uses in the story *The Guest* makes sure and help the readers to get the views of modernism by how he elaborates the entire scenario of the story. Such as his behavior towards taking prisoner, take the decision not to use the weapon, and finally trusting the prisoner to leaves on his own and gives him the freedom to set his destination. These are associated with modernism by setting an example of the truth that cannot generally be there using different societies' sets of laws. This story perceived that going against society and blindly trusting whatever you realize is the right thing to do.

Albert Camus attempts to show the main objective in the guest was expresses Daru as neglected or ruined

from society and to reveal that not everyone who challenges the norm and custom gets hurt by it, but might benefit from it practicing their general scenes and judgments. Furthermore, Daru takes action to not goes the Arab to the city of Tinguit and he did not finish his end of the ideal. That is why he was making this story an isolated story because isolation is a National policy of the nonparticipation of foreign affairs. Cultural values have been influenced by modernism as Albert Camus realizes, Daru realizes the emotional isolation of being caught between two different cultures.

As Daru wished to do what Balducci told him to do, but at the same time the Arab has done nothing to him. He let him go into the city by himself because he didn't wish to take the prisoner to the city. But it's not like Balducci couldn't know the truth or not. It shows the uncertainty of modernism era human conditions towards the truth. Moral values were being questioned in the modern period. This a great example of modernism when Daru discusses bringing the Arab to Tinguit and rushes into a state of moral despair at the end of the narrative when he feels that the Arab has preferred certain imprisonment.

Balducci is the first who first speaks of a revolt and argues about the duty of a person who faces during the war. Ha wants a peaceful retirement, but he resigned to his duties. It's a depiction of modernism were people sick of war and violence. Power and control are also featuring modernism, Camus revealed that the Arab is being controlled by Balducci and walks during the gendarme rides a horse and his hands are completely tied. It's perceived in the Guest he is nervous and fearful throughout the narrative and even he does not attempt to escape although he has many opportunities.

Finally, at the end of the story, he decides to walk towards imprisonment, in this regard, it symbolizes the despair and absurdity of the Human conditions in modernism. This accurately represents the most modernism itself. The writer also belongs to the innovator of modernism, Albert Camus worked for absurdist literature the most. His contributions are highly remarkable and noted so this is a very important aspect to be studied. The Guest also explores the philosophical and existential issues of whether freedom and Justice, loneliness, and solidarity would ever be well matched. Most critics remark the Guest is to be an examination of a person's moral sense of responsibility for the destiny of his fellow man and man's cruelty or inhumanity to the mane in the name of obligations and honor. The change in entering between Daru and prisoner is traced, critics noticed that an imprisonment captor relationship turns into the Guest host relationship.

The Guest is reviewed by many critics as a philosophical story about the human conditions in the post-modernism era, and one of Camus's most mysterious fictional literary works. Many critics have focused on

the uncomfortable conclusion of the Guest that up to the reader to defects on the Daru moral conflict with the prisoner and what it would have cost him in the end of the tale.

On the other hand, many critics have analyzed the unsolved decision of the prisoner to turn himself in instead of runaway to the south. Most critics insist that the lack of visions into the prisoner's motives and the confusing ending depends on the secret of the story. Some commentators also discussed autobiographical features of the guest Albert Camus was a French Algerian, who had compassion for Arab Algerians, and involved in the intellectual arguments over French Algerians conflict.

Few critics viewed the story in the light of the ritual of hospitality, which is described in Arab culture. The title of the story means both guest and host, waving the ambiguous shape of power in the guest-host relationship in the colonial situation. In the guest, Albert explores the condition of humans, by hypothesizing that despair is a Haman state rather than a particular act, and despair develops from isolation. It tracks Daru's deep reversion towards indecision against the background of his loneliness. Daru's isolation is clear from the starting of the story, and he is alone on a hill and watching the housebound rider and his struggling prisoner. The main foundation of the story is the introduction of the cultural and political current scenario of the Algerian uprising against the French. Camus discussed the cultural tension between Arab and elite French create distress in the guest. The European Algerian and the Arabs share the same harsh climate, the cultural and political conflict between them avoids any feelings of friendship.

The absurd refers to ambiguity between human trend to wish to get meaning and the alike inability to get any, Albert's philosophy of absurd takes part in the theme of freedom, and it is concerned with the subject of Balducci and Daru's arguments. Daru knows his ability to make decisions instead of following Balducci's orders as Balducci's choice honor. In fact, in the story, Daru has made his choice as to Arab freedom such he gives hands to the Arab and serves tea to the prisoner.

As the Arab prisoner went outside of the house and returns soon, on this connection a critic Elberhard Griem said, "it would be highly disgraceful and going to aggregate extreme replies, instead of facing responsibility who can run away the worst situation is questionable". In Arabic culture to flee from a prisoner is a kind of coward act as well as a dishonorable one. Camus discussed honor as an important theme of the story.

However, happens to Daru, the ultimate satire in the story is only attempts to free himself of his guilt, and Daru believes that his action gives freedom of choice to the prisoner right one who can decide his fate. It is perceived as a righteous thing to do, even the prisoner was intending to accept his sentence. After that, as he

enters the classroom and sees the words written on the blackboard: "You handed over our brother. You will pay for this". Although he tries to not be involved, he is ultimately ruined.

On the other hand, the most significant idea in Albert Camus's work the guest will be existentialism, a concept of existentialism found in the literary work of many authors across history. For instance, Franz Kafka's *The Trials* gave in-depth details on existentialist conditions where a man has been arrested for a crime but that's never involved to him, not even at his implementation. He accepts his condition and finally, he is offered a trial. A connection would be made between Kafka's and Albert Camus's guest. Both story from a world where the legal system without logic and an absurd form of justice (Wyatt).

When Daru argues Balducci's command to deliver the prisoner to the police, Balducci tries to convince him by saying, "After that, all will be over. You will come back to your pupils and your comfortable life" (2576). The roughness of the land that energies Daru's student's poverty gets dominant by political motivations. When Balducci orders Daru to take Arab prisoner that time Daru asks, "Is the Arab against us?" And Balducci replies, "I don't think so. But you can never be sure"(2576). The land is used as a setting for social and political divisions that affect Daru's relationship with it and also put him to examine the cultural conflict and tensions around him.

According to Daru (2580), the human linking is undeniable as the two sharing a space leads to the progress of a strange Union. The Arab attempts to help Daru avoid, but the two exemplify tries if not more at kindness across culture (2852). 'He turned towards Arab, who was looking at him blankly '(Camus, 1991, p.107). When Daru gave the Arab money and food, the latter kept his hand, like he didn't know what to do with and what was being given him'(p.107).

'When Daru leaves a choice to the prisoner, the prisoner has now turned toward Daru and fear and feeling frightening was appeared in his expression' (p.108). The prisoner does not understand the existential choice that challenges him'(Aronson, 2004). Balducci says, "I do not like it either. You do not get used to putting a rope on a man even after years of it, and you even dishonored, yes, ashamed' (Camus, 1991, p. 95). At the same time, he realizes a duty to maintain a sense of order, adding: ' but you cannot let them get their own way'(p.95). These words are not expressed with uncontrolled anger, but with care and thought.

Conclusion

Individuals are more interested in Modernists than culture. Modernist authors, such as Albert Camus, we're intrigued by how people adapted to changing circumstances. In certain cases, the person overcame challenges. For the most part, writers portrayed the world or culture as a threat to their characters' morality.

The Guest, Camus discusses different kind's features through characters that indicated modernism like power (order and obey), absurdity, and sense of responsibility, isolation, human conditions, and the relationship and trust of the era. The arguments among prisoner, Daru, and Balducci is an embodiment example of modernism. Camus, on the other hand, has no such plans; Daru is not a murderer because the Arab is the one who has done the deed. Recasting Daru as Seth, the new brother who allowed Cane to feel the consequences of his acts, would be more fitting. Another indication of modernism is his conversation with Balducci about the weapons.

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