

“The Guest” by Albert Camus

Literary Analysis: Setting and Theme

The **setting**—the time, place, and culture in which a work of literature takes place—often shapes the plot and the emotions of the characters in a story. In this way, setting helps to communicate the **theme**, the idea about life that the story expresses through its various components. For example, setting a story in a prison could be a good way of expressing ideas about freedom, about crime and punishment, or about how people behave in the grittiest circumstances. Setting a story in a terrible storm or shipwreck is a way of saying something about how people rise to the occasion—or not—when they are in mortal danger.

When you read a story in which the setting is not simply a backdrop but clearly affects the characters’ behavior, expect that the setting is helping to convey an idea about life. Look at both the physical setting (the time of day and year, the physical location) and the cultural setting (the historical and social environment). “The Guest” takes place in a distinctive physical and cultural setting. The physical setting is a high, snow-covered plateau in Algeria, in northern Africa, a lonely landscape in which people struggle to survive. It is a cruel but starkly beautiful place. The cultural setting is a society made up of colonial French authorities and oppressed Arabs during the strife-filled time leading up to Algerian independence.

DIRECTIONS: Explain how each of the following passages from “The Guest” helps create the physical and/or cultural setting. Then, answer the question connecting the setting to the story’s theme. Finally, answer the question about Camus’s use of this setting to convey ideas about human life.

Passage	Impression of Physical and/or Cultural Setting	Question About Theme	Answer to Question
1. “They were toiling onward, making slow progress in the snow, among the stones, on the vast expanse of the high, deserted plateau.”		What becomes important when you live in such a world, and what becomes unimportant?	
2. “There’s only a dozen of us at El Ameur to patrol throughout the whole territory . . . and I must get back in a hurry. I was told to hand this guy over to you. . . . His village was beginning to stir; they wanted to take him back.”		What dangers does the setting pose for Balducci and Daru?	

3. What ideas about the colonial system does Camus suggest in his cultural setting? What ideas about human life does he suggest by creating the physical setting of “The Guest”?
