

Pamela D. Spates

LeTourneau University

CPO# 964

Longview, Texas 75607

[fjpbs@juno.com](mailto:fjpbs@juno.com)

Phone 903 663-6182

The Romantic Self in Albert Camus' "The Guest" and "The Adulterous Woman"

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In the year 1957, only three short years before his untimely death in 1960, Albert Camus published his only set of short stories, *Exile and the Kingdom*. Anne Minor, in "The Short Stories of Albert Camus," writes: "*Exile and the Kingdom*, a collection of short stories toward which critical opinion has been somewhat unjust, seems to me to be one of the key works for an appreciation of Camus' thought and art" (75). Inherent in this thought is Camus' perception of the Self, and one readily observes in the short stories an emerging Self that is varied and complex. The characters defy homogenous description. The stories themselves are vastly different from one another, and while the characters are presented in typical existential terms in some sense and in some scenes, a hint of a romantic Self can be clearly seen. The characters search for fulfillment, as well as a sense of who they are at the core of their being. Against the backdrop of an essentially existential worldview, ultimately described as "the absurd," Camus reveals an affinity for the romantic side of the Self, even though that Self is not always fully realized in his characters.

This assertion that Camus reveals a hint of the romantic Self in his short stories is by no means a radical idea. In his book, *What is Romanticism*, Henri Peyre quotes novelist and

essayist Michel Butor, who asserts that “Camus is certainly a romantic” (ix). Peyre also makes a strong case for the romantic leanings of Camus in his *Historical and Critical Essays*, published in 1968, in the chapter titled “Romanticism and French Literature.” He speaks of “the pervasive romanticism of recent French literature,” especially as seen in the concept of “revolt” (201). He then declares Camus to be the greatest prophet of the new romantic revolt (205). So while Camus is recognized as a leading proponent, at least in the early part of his life, of the more modern concept of Existentialism, hints of a romantic Self, especially as they manifest themselves in a tension between identity and role, are clearly seen in “The Guest” and “The Adulterous Woman.”

“The Guest” is one of the better known of Camus’ short stories. It recounts the tale of a rural French schoolteacher, Daru, who is faced with the unwanted task of taking an Arab prisoner to the next town where the prisoner will be punished for a crime he committed in his Arab village. Daru decides, instead, to go against the orders of the gendarme, Balducci, and to take the prisoner to a crossroads where he allows him to choose for himself which way he will go. The story is undoubtedly a model for a discussion of existential choice. Laurence Perrine, in his essay “Camus’ ‘The Guest’: A Subtle and Difficult Story,” refers to the choice of Daru as a “moral choice” (54). He is certainly correct in asserting that the theme of the story is “...the difficulty, the agony, the complexity, the necessity, the worth, and the thanklessness of moral choice” (54), although one need not necessarily characterize the choice as moral. More important to note is that Daru chooses to let the Arab choose for himself; this is the heart of any existential thought.

On a deeper level, this story is, as Jacob Golomb suggests, about finding authenticity in an existential framework (268, 274-76). According to Charles B. Guignon, for the existentialist,

“Everyday life is characterized by ‘inauthenticity’, and in our ordinary busy-ness and social conformism we are refusing to take responsibility for our own lives. In throwing ourselves into socially approved activities and roles, we disown ourselves and spin a web of self deception in trying to avoid facing up to the truth about what we are” (*REP Online*). Closely connected to this idea of authenticity, and arguably, a main source of its development, is the romantic concept of the self in its dimension of identity versus role. Robert C. Solomon writes in his excellent discussion of the philosophy of the Self: “It would not be too unreasonable to suggest that the culmination of modern Continental philosophy and the transcendental pretence is the position widely known as existentialism” (173). Solomon has defined his term “transcendental pretence.” It is nothing less than the Self that Rousseau discovered and broadcast to the world. As Solomon writes:

What Rousseau discovered---or at any rate raised to the level of first-rate philosophy---was the transcendental pretence....Fully developed, the transcendental pretence has two central components: first, the remarkable inner richness and expanse of the self, ultimately encompassing everything; and secondly, the consequent right to project from the subjective structures of one’s own mind, and ascertain the nature of humanity as such. (1-2)

What Solomon asserts, therefore, is that the particular brand of the Self that Rousseau put forth has found its end point in the philosophy of Existentialism. It is not unreasonable to suggest, then, that the idea of authenticity taken up by the existentialists is, at least in part, an outgrowth of the romantic view of the Self.

Golomb posits the theory that Camus’ idea of authentic life is, as established in “The Guest,” a “...basic ‘sense of honour’” (274). Golomb says that Camus considered this “an integral part of our human essence” (274). This sense of honor has to do with how we, as individuals, relate to one another. Golomb writes of Daru’s choice to allow the Arab to go free:

Camus does not give any explanation for Daru's act...Daru has no particularly warm feelings towards the man. Occasionally he even feels "a sudden wrath against the man." Nor is he a racist who hates all Arabs. His is simply a unique act of absurd liberation, one that is completely unjustified...Despite the lack of any reasonable justification, the reader feels Daru performed a highly moral act. Outside the framework of any ethical code or transcendent value system we recognize this as a pure expression of authentic human morality. (274-275)

Golomb goes on to say that this code of honour is "preferable to any ideology" (275). Thus, Daru acts from a deep rooted feeling of common humanity with the Arab.

Certainly, this explanation of authenticity in the structure of Existentialism is valid. The interesting point to note is how it dovetails with the romantic view of the self and how a romantic criticism of "The Guest" is also valid and convincing. Daru is torn between the expectations of others and society, and a sense of being true to his own values and conscience. In a very real sense, Balducci thrusts a role upon Daru: jailor or guard. Perrine insists that to interpret the main conflict of the story as a conflict between conscience and society is an error in interpretation (54). Certainly, as has been noted, the main theme of this story is existential choice. It would be an injustice to Camus and the story to claim otherwise. There does exist in this story, however, a very definite conflict between the conscience of an individual and the dictates of one in authority in that individual's society. One cannot ignore the fact that Camus has chosen to use a source of authority in Daru's life as the catalyst for his choice. The role Balducci assumes for Daru is the impetus for all choices Daru then makes. Daru reacts against the role of jailor or guard, not because he harbors ill feelings for the gendarme; at one point in the story, we are told he does not wish to hurt Balducci's feelings. He responds negatively to the order because it goes against who he is as a person. Daru resents being forced into a role which

he does not wish to participate in, and which, more importantly, obscures his identity as one who, at his essence, feels a common humanity with those around him.

The dialog between Balducci and Daru reveals a relevant point. Balducci asks Daru to sign a paper for him before he leaves the prisoner with Daru. Daru has already stated emphatically more than once that he has no intention of handing the Arab over to be prosecuted. Daru says there is no reason for him to sign the paper: “There’s no need. I’ll not deny that you left him with me” (Camus 95). Balducci replies: “Don’t be mean with me. I know you’ll tell the truth. You’re from hereabouts and you are a man” (Camus 96). In Balducci’s mind, there is at least one essential characteristic of the men of that parts: they are truthful. And so Daru is truthful. He is truthful with Balducci in insisting that he will not turn the prisoner over, but more importantly, he is truthful with himself. He rejects the compulsory role of jailer and listens to the essence of his conscience. Daru is an example of the romantic spirit which has broken strongly with the Greek and Roman traditions. The romantics acknowledged, long before Daru, that the strictures of society can actually be in opposition to the best interests of a man. “The Guest” superbly illustrates the tensions between expected roles in society and the dictates of the individual conscience as it depicts the choice of one man to go against the dictums of those in authority to follow what he knows to be right in his heart.

“The Adulterous Woman,” the first story in Camus’ collection, strikes a decided balance between the romantic and existential views of the Self. It relates the tale of a French woman named Janine who travels on business with her merchant husband to sell directly to the Arabs. She is tired and longs for something beyond her present existence. She is mesmerized and drawn to the sight of the nomadic peoples in the desert whom she sees from a distance. Her act of adultery consists in her leaving her husband in the night and encountering a tremendous

emotional and aesthetic experience after climbing to the pinnacle of a fort to stand on a terrace and gaze at the lights of the nomadic peoples below.

Both Minor and Michel Benamou have documented the romantic style Camus employs in the short stories. Minor nowhere uses the term romantic, but she does point out the poetic style of Camus' writing and refers to the "refinement of language and mastery of the sentence and its internal rhythms..." (76). Benamou specifically claims "...the comparison of Janine to a plant receiving sap from the earth...strikes a Romantic note..." (49). I think he is correct in this assertion. More important to note, however, is that the story begins in what can only be considered realistic prose and progresses to a more romantic style as Janine herself moves closer to her romantic encounter on the terrace and to the actualization of what the reader knows she is missing in her life. Camus begins: "A housefly had been circling for the last few minutes in the bus, though the windows were closed. An odd sight here, it had been silently flying back and forth on tired wings. Janine lost track of it, then saw it light on her husband's motionless hand. The weather was cold" (3). One finds no romantic poetry here; all is stark realism. Camus paints a picture of Janine, also, in stark existential terms as he describes her thoughts on her relationship to her husband: "By so often making her aware that she existed for him he made her exist in reality" (6). The reader is made aware in other ways that Janine simply exists. Nothing in her life has turned out as she had thought that it would (7). One could say in the strictest existential terms that Janine has not lived an authentic life; she has allowed another to make meaning of her life and not lived it as she has seen fit. Janine, however, makes the decision to begin her authentic living at the time she both literally and figuratively leaves the bed of her husband and goes out into the night to climb to the terrace once again. It is at this juncture, too, that the romantic in the story takes hold. Camus employs the romantic images that come close to

poetry, personifying nature and allowing Janine to become one with nature, in a sense. Minor describes Janine's experience as "...an instant of deliverance, a break with her own past, its 'boredom' and 'habit'" (76). But if the experience is an instant in time, Minor is also correct in her realization that "the woman did not attain to this revelation suddenly..." (77). Janine realizes specifically that she has lost her true longings in the confines of her present life and the expectations of her husband. She recognizes that the role of submissive wife, while freely chosen, nonetheless serves as the chief cause of her loss of identity. One feels intuitively that Janine discovers something about the essence of her life on the terrace in the night. Camus writes:

Janine could not tear herself away from contemplating those drifting flares. She was turning with them, and the apparently stationary progress little by little identified her with the core of her being, where cold and desire were now vying with each other....After so many years of mad, aimless fleeing from fear, she had come to a stop at last. At the same time, she seemed to recover her roots and the sap again rose in her body, which had ceased trembling. (Camus 32-33)

The description of Janine identifying with the core of her own being assumes a central essence or value within Janine that has been stifled and is nothing less than the romantic experience postulated by David Morse in his *Perspectives on Romanticism*. His general comments elucidate the romantic position on identity versus role in the individual and serve to illuminate the ways in which Camus' Janine demonstrates romantic tendencies in her thoughts and actions. Morse succinctly documents the romantic mindset as it posits the conflict between the role a person must play in society and the nature of that person's identity. He writes:

The discourse of Romanticism postulates two selves within the individual: a deep, authentic self and a social self. The contradiction between these two selves produces insincerity and inauthenticity, but this has to be overcome by a psychic movement that will bring them once more into alignment....Initially, the social self---which is to say the preformed, ready-made identity of social existence---overlays the deeper self, simultaneously

producing within the individual a sense of hypocrisy and a sense of powerlessness; the mind is an inner chaos struggling towards clarification and expression. (35-36)

Morse is strictly speaking in this section of his book on the writings of Romanticism, but the application is the same whether one speaks of the formal writings of the romantics or the romantics' theory of the Self. One recognizes immediately that the struggle Morse describes is Janine's struggle. She is trapped in a role that, while not entirely odious in itself, prevents her from grasping completely the freedom she longs to experience. Note Morse's use of the word "inauthenticity;" this is the same word used by Guignon in describing the problem confronted by the existentialist who fails to take charge of his own life (*REP Online*). While one must acknowledge that certain differences concerning the concept of "essence" in an individual divide, at least to some degree, the romantic and existential views of the self, the tension the romantic feels between the role he must play in society and the dictates of his true inner self do indeed find a counterpart in the existentialist's notion of an authentic versus an inauthentic life.

In describing the state of the individual who longs to break free from the role he is playing in society in order to understand the deeper self within, Morse writes:

With a rupture from his social environment in contact with nature and spiritual isolation the individual ecstatically discovers 'himself' in a moment of wonder and rapture; he identifies thoughts, moods, feelings, sensations that can only be his own; he becomes overwhelmed by the sheer presence of his own being. (36)

This is precisely what Janine experiences. She is truly immersed in a romantic experience. The supreme sadness comes at the end of the story when the reader realizes Janine will go on as she always has; no real change is initiated. As Morse argues: "The moment of rupture can only be validated by a moment of return in which the individual...reestablishes contact with the



world....Self discovery is necessary but so is the discovery of others, and such is the programme both of Romantic writing and of Romantic literature, the sharing of experience” (36). This is the heart of the romantic thought on identity, role, and the individual. Janine is unable to validate her experience; she tells her husband nothing (Camus 33). Camus allows Janine a moment of romantic realization, but in his absurd world, the experience is meaningless. It affects no change in Janine; her romantic experience falls short.

For years to come, wherever Camus’ thought and works are discussed and debated, the question of whether he was or was not truly an existentialist will form a part of the discourse. To be sure, he broke with Sartre in some points, but the tenets of Existentialism are obvious in his writings; this certainly holds true for “The Guest” and “The Adulterous Woman.” It is also true, however, that the basic theory of the Self, as postulated by the romantics, especially in its insistence on the conflict between role and identity, is ever apparent in these two short works by Camus. Romanticism was a turning point in the view of the Self. Since Rousseau and the great German Romantics of the latter half of the eighteenth century, the Self has been in a process of change, with Romanticism at the core of this metamorphosis. As Solomon asserts, the romantic view of the self is “in many ways inescapable” (4). The question regarding Camus remains: To what extent does he show an affinity for the tenets of Romanticism in his writing? In both “The Guest” and “The Adulterous Woman,” Camus reveals within his existential framework a decided bent toward a romantic outlook, placing characters in positions of role playing to the detriment of their true identities, and exploring what it means to long for something at the core of one’s being that can only be discovered by breaking free from a role dictated from without.

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