

Exploring the absurd through murder and miscommunication in Camus' Le Malentendu

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Abstract

Albert Camus's *Le Malentendu* (or *The Misunderstanding*, or *Cross-Purpose*) foregrounds itself as a magnum opus in the theater of the absurd. Fashioned in the style of a Greek tragedy, it loosely plays with the themes of fate and destiny to assert the inevitability of the tragic reality of the modern man. Bringing forth the motifs of murder, miscommunication, and misunderstanding, Camus creates the microcosm of a dismal world marked by a sense of linguistic rupture. This premise enables Camus to highlight the absurdity and anguish of the human condition. This paper analyzes how Camus uses grotesque imagery, misunderstanding, and silences to promote the narrative intention of creating a claustrophobic atmosphere and if he succeeds in this endeavor.

Keywords: misunderstanding, theatre of the absurd, hubris, modernity, miscommunication

"How I hate a world which wears us down until we scream for salvation! But I shan't kneel." (Martha)

First published in 1943, Camus' *Le Malentendu* (or *The Misunderstanding*, or *Cross-Purpose*) is a pessimistic dramatization of the absurdity of the human condition. Styled in the inevitability of a Greek tragedy, the play brings forth the motif of murder, miscommunication, and misunderstanding, foregrounding the absurdity and anguish that is deeply entrenched in the human condition. Through the tempestuous mode of livelihood followed by Martha and her mother, Camus brings forth the dilemma of whether or not life is worth living. The dilemma is rejected by the two characters, who justify their actions and lack of remorse through the assertion that life is not worth living, "Ours suffered less. We're kinder than life." The theme of the absurd is further explored through the conflicts in language, with most of the characters speaking in a 'strange' language, entirely unconscious of the effect produced through their speech, unable to find the right words. This conflict

produces an ambiguity of the characters revealing both too much and too little, which can be seen in Jan's character, who embodies the theme of "the sauveur masque" who continually fails to "find the right words" to introduce himself to his family.

The play brings to the forefront a dingy and dismal setting marked with manslaughter and misery, occupied by characters who continue to struggle, suffer, and skirmish through their sadness and loneliness in the face of an indifferent world. The characters speak in polished aphorisms, their dialogues cloaked in metaphors, their sentences stifled in the suffocated spaces of their ambiguities, which is further highlighted in the somber and claustrophobic nature of the play. It is the conflict of language that leads to the destruction of the family, who find themselves incapable of talking to each other. This absence of rational cogency and the lack of comprehension further illustrates Camus' philosophy of the Absurd.

Jan's manifestation of the theme of "the sauveur masque" is further both complemented and complicated through his quest for recognition. A carrier of Hegelian hubris- the belief that recognition by his family and his homeland will bring him happiness, Jan attempts to be recognized through a series of indirect half-revelations. Jan is an exile in search of a spiritual homeland, deprived of memories of his mother, sister, and a lost homeland. He dreams of being recognized without having to reveal his name. "They looked, and I looked, but they looked right through me." He often cites his return as that of the prodigal son and hopes to be welcomed back to his home with open arms. His quest for a perfect recognition of his identity and his "nostalgia for unity" renders itself impossible with his insistence on not revealing his identity. The motivation for this insistence seems uncertain, as he fears that announcing himself would incur a rejection from his family. In an absurd display of emotions, he desires to both confront and not confront his family about his identity. He regressively attempts to connect with what he has lost, trying to find moments of coherence and connection in a house he left many years ago, realizing that "perhaps coming home isn't quite as easy as it sounds." Jan's exile, much like that of the absurdist, is without remedy.

Jan's insistence on seeking recognition without having to reveal his original identity is further marked through his language of mystification. He speaks in abashed ambiguities and seems to harbor a dreamlike notion of being recognized simply through this vague mode of communication. This further complements his pronouncement of himself being the prodigal son, wherein he displays both mistrust and over-confidence in the power of words, open dialogue, and communication. Despite the hazy ambiguities present in his speech, he strongly feels that his mother and sister are making an effort to interpret the various mystifying "clues" sent by him. Jan's dialogues are presented as a play of multiple meanings, wherein he attempts to play a kind of practical joke by playing his cards right, asserting that he does so to gain a better understanding of the things that would make his family happy. The verbal ironies in the play alternate at a conscious and an unconscious level. He is further continually reproached by Maria for using strange language, "How on earth can you expect to receive

more of a welcome than any passing stranger when you act just like one." Jan fails to bring redemption to his family; his speech, consisting of parables and enigmatic ambiguities, fails to produce the effect that he desires, leaving him misunderstood till his last breath.

Jan's inability to communicate, however, does not completely suggest a complete breakdown of the power of linguistic capabilities; rather, it only proclaims the ethical necessity of an open dialogue. The misunderstanding, in this manner, turns to a simple account of miscommunication, mostly based on Jan's inability to find the right words, the mother's indifference, and Martha's annoyance at Jan's continual efforts at making a communal experience. Jan's gambit is further, not something destined, despite what the inevitable nature of this modern Greek tragedy suggests. Jan fails to recognize his own free will and believes himself to have no choice. He imagines that his choices are a necessary consequence of things that are outside of the self. It is perhaps this miscommunication with the self about desire and free will that causes the overall misunderstanding of the play. The absurdity here lies in Jan's actions being determined by a lack of free will, which does not exist in the first place.

Not only does he miscommunicate himself about the notion of free will, but also about his desires. He refuses to announce his own identity, asserting it to be due to the lack of the right words. He further represses his own needs with the family: "It wasn't that I needed them. I just knew without asking that they must be in need of me."; veiling his desires under this notion of duty. "Men have their obligations, too. Mine was to find my mother and my country. To be where I belong again." It is also possible that Jan's sense of duty arises from the discordant connection shared by his mother and himself. He recalls, "My mother never came to kiss me goodbye. I remember that at the time, I didn't care." The mother's indifference is further at the core of the play, felt both by Martha and Jan, who have both grown as exiles.

This miscommunication further gives rise to a realization of the absurd in both Martha and the mother. Upon realizing that she has been an accomplice in killing her son, the mother finds herself disconnected and purposeless. "When a mother fails to know her son, her function in this life has come to an end." Her gradual weariness and tiredness, a longing to rest throughout the play, meets its inevitable end in suicide. While Martha attempts to dissuade her, the mother finds herself at the point of vacuity and nothingness, at the crossroads of the dilemma of whether life is worth living or not, and ultimately chooses the latter. Camus asserts in the essay 'An Absurd Reasoning' (from 'The Myth of Sisyphus'), "We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking." Throughout the play, the mother's exhaustion at the face of human existence is apparent, and she asserts time and again that her action is based on habit, which "gains its strength from time." The great deadener of habit finally weakens its force when the mother is presented with the absurdity of her situation, the blood of her son in her hands.

For Martha, too, Jan's murder brings in a tragic realization, puncturing her illusion that her mother would never desert her. Her entire life of loneliness and lovelessness spirals in her

mind as she, too, feels a sense of disconnection when her mother chooses to die with Jan rather than live with Martha. An embodiment of the homo homini lupus, who lives in exile from her paradise of the sea and the sun, Martha, too, fails to find any meaning in her life, and realizing the absurdity of her situation, and finds herself all alone, without a mother for the first time, she too, decides to take her own life. Martha's strangeness and coldness in conversation further dissuade Jan from speaking. It is Jan's violation of the language conventions that she continually dictates that further provokes her into killing him. Jan's attempt at appealing to her humanity to gain some sympathy further reminds her of her relentless desire to escape from her prison to a paradise, "The only thing I share with the rest of the human race is my determination to get what I want. To shatter and destroy absolutely anything that stands in my way." This moment destroys the moment of communion and connection between the two as they share their adoration for the beauty of Africa. She shudders at the idea of human kindness and hopes to escape it. She feels no remorse, and unlike her mother, there is no redemption arc waiting for Martha.

The motif of murder, too, brings forth into the play Camus' philosophy of the absurd. The grim means of survival, too, has one dilemma in the center: *Shall thou kill or shall thou not kill?* The notion of butchering for their survival and sustenance seems like an irrational and deviant idea and a sense of disconnection with humanity as a whole. The absurdity of the situation is further marked by the contrast in the character's action of murder, of robbing someone of their life, to reach their motivations, the one of a better life, of paradise, marked by the sound of seagulls, the sun and the sea. The lack of remorse and guilt further highlights the two characters' awareness of the tragic nature of the human condition, one marked with absurdity, ambiguity, anguish, and ambivalence. Martha and her mother get involved in, as Camus calls it, the 'act of eluding,' wherein they hope for another life that is more "deserving" and meaningful, "the sea I have dreamed of for so many years!"

Camus' philosophy of the absurd, thus, permeates through the fabric of the play, with the different characters attempting to confront the "unreasonable silence of the world." The tragic nature of the play further finds its full course through Martha's attempt at curing Maria of hope. She asserts the futility of life and love, having been deprived of any chances at both, and urges Maria to come to terms with the final revelation of the inevitable end of human existence, of the futility of Maria's tears and suffering, and to pray to God to turn her into a stone; to pay no heed to human vanity and voices, and to be "deaf to all cries." The murder, the miscommunication, and the misunderstanding finally end in a rather grotesque tragedy, with the last survivor of the play making an expectant call of a plea, only to be denied the same by the old man.

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