
The Absurdity Of The Misunderstanding By Albert Camus

This paper will analyze the title 'The Misunderstanding'* based on Camus's existentialist ideas of Absurdism. 'The Misunderstanding' enfolds the whole universe of this play in it. On reading the text, one realizes how a 'misunderstanding' can change the course of our lives. Our actions and instincts are all governed by how we understand things. This play, re enforces, just that, our quality of 'understanding'.

The characters in the inn are all placed with different types of discerning qualities. The Mother represents an old woman of wisdom, who now longs for peace and stability in life. The daughter, Martha is a young mind, with hasty decisions and aggressive reactions. The absurdity of a simple 'misunderstanding', it's consequences and repercussions faced by the characters in this play, all attribute to a larger framework of 'Absurdism'. The seminal text, The Myth of Sisyphus has Camus saying, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." This is an idea that is restored in the last act of this play. Upon the murder of her own son due to a 'misunderstanding', the mother says in Scene I, Act III:

"I've lived too long, longer than my son. I didn't know who he was and so I killed him. The only thing left to do is join him, at the bottom of the river, where the weeds are winding round his face. . . I was his mother. And when a mother fails to know her son, her function in this life has come to an end."

She resorts to a suicide simply because she wants to make sense of the crime that has been committed by her. The mother believes that her union with the son in death, will somehow atone for the murder she has committed. And hence, she chooses to kill herself as well. The inability to recognize her son makes her feel dejected and purpose-less in life, the lack of which leads her to suicide.

When Camus says that the 'serious philosophical problem' is suicide, he problematizes the existence of life, and questions the obligation of finding a purpose. He reinforces that suicide is freedom from this submission of living, hence achievement of success. He throws light upon the absurdity of the 'illusion' that humans create for themselves, so that they can have meaning in their life, by having the character of The Old Man in the play. A prominent display of this absurdity is visible in the last Scene IV, Act III :

"OLD MAN (in a firm, clear voice) Were you calling for me?"

MARIA (turning to him) Oh, no. Perhaps. I don't know. But help me, please. Someone must help. Have pity on me! I need your help. Please help me!

OLD MAN (in the same, clear voice) No."

This reestablishes that Man is self responsible for all actions. The presence of God may provide a comfort, but help can only come from within. Maria, despite calling out for help in the previous Scene III, does not recognize it when it comes from outside. She calls out to God, yet does not have an image of him. Her absurdity is evident in her 'belief' in a superior force, which she is

unable to comprehend. Camus grapples with the question of existence by ending the play on a note where the man who is supposed to help, refuses. This forces the reader to look inwards for their purpose of existence.

The 'misunderstanding' of this play is not only in Mother and Martha's fate, but also Jan. He fails to give precedence to any contemptuous thoughts. The hosts' behavior, the old man's actions, as well as his wife's pleading, are all meant to alarm the character to a fatal end. Yet, Jan chooses to overlook all the aspects and stays at the inn. His consistent faith in his own 'purpose' and its fulfillment is also shown as an absurd idea in the play. His 'leap of faith' provides a terrific end in Camus's text, disagreeing with Kierkegaard's theory on the presence of a belief system.

Geographical locations in the play also provide a larger 'misunderstanding' of the characters. In Act I, Scene I it is ironic how Martha yearns for

"a land where the sun kills questions. . . . the sea I have dreamed of for so many years!"

Here, she is so obsessed with the idea of a world where the sun and the sea are going to provide her happiness. At the same time her brother Jan, who has been living in such a place for the past twenty years comes back to this dark land, justifying to his wife in Act I, Scene II:

"Men have their obligations, too. Mine was to find my mother, and my country. To be where I belong again..."

It is ironic how, Martha's brother yearns to fulfill the same obligations that his sister is too exhausted over. The siblings are shown to have a deep 'misunderstanding' of what life would be like in each other's physical locale. The presence of the sun and sea around Jan, does not stop him from coming back, his yearning for familial relationships persists even after twenty years. In the same place, fulfilling the obligation of sustaining her family, Martha despises the place and situation of her life, disregarding the sentimental comfort of familial intimacy. In trying to interchange their places, Martha and Jan cause a disruption to the present state of their fate, without receiving any restoration. Jan is never able to fulfill his obligations, neither is Martha able to escape her misery.

The heated exchange between Martha and Maria has the two women expressing completely different emotions with respect to the loss of their beloveds. Maria, who is shown as an 'understanding' character in the play, blames the two women for her husband's loss. She prays to God for peace. Yet, Martha does not blame anyone, instead thrusts the reality of the situation in Scene III, Act III:

". . . Reality has us all firmly in its grip. It's time you understood that this waits for all of us. None of us, in life or in death, finds any peace. There is no land where we can feel at home. . . ."

This exclamation reveals not only Camus's preoccupation with existentialism but also the immersion of the absurdist ideology. Martha's psychology of alienating herself from her social condition reverberates ideas of Mersault, the protagonist in Camus's *The Stranger*.

In conclusion, the paper emphasizes that Camus has managed to create 'The Misunderstanding' of this play not only in the death of Jan, but also the reader's inability to

comprehend reality.

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