

# Meta-Existentialism in Albert Camus' *Cross Purpose*: Deconstructing Narrative Layers of Absurdity Concerning Human Choices

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## ABSTRACT:

The present essay intends to look through and into the play *Cross Purpose* (1943) by Albert Camus as an illustration of existential philosophy, looking at how the characters—Jan and Martha in particular—maneuver through the absurdity of life. Echoing Camus' central theme of absurdity, it will examine the futility of pursuing moral clarity in a universe devoid of inherent meaning. The play's criticism of society norms, questioning of accepted morality, and blending elements of dark comedy and tragedy to produce an engaging theatrical experience will also be examined in this paper. By closely analyzing *Cross Purpose*, this paper hopes to add to the larger conversation about existential issues and the search for purpose in life's meaning in an oblivious universe. With a meta-existentialist lens, this essay also aims to evaluate the play and uncover intricate narrative layers that represent the complexities of existential philosophy. Through nuanced structural details and character interactions, it will look at how Camus incorporates the absurd into the narrative and challenges the audience to think about the nature of storytelling and meaning formation.

**Keywords:** *Cross Purpose*, existentialism, absurdity, criticism, meta-existentialism, narrative

Mechanisms of Life!

It tells of existence;

You are not you,

instead the universe having

a human experience.

We are the universe pretending to

be labelled as individuals.

You might know me as someone;

I think of myself as someone;

Sustaining merely as a fallacy,

an ego forming an illusion.

The only thing real is the little drop

inside of us and simultaneously the entire Cosmos

exists within that drop inside us.

That's why we need to check on our ego,

Because you are no better or

worse than any other person.  
We are all absorbed into  
the metaphysical source.  
There is no someone, there is no you,  
there is just the metaphysical source.  
And hence ever since we are born,  
we are told, you are you, and  
not Paris and Helen, Romeo or Juliet,  
Ron and Hermoine.  
Unaware, because we are having different  
experiences in different vessels.  
And the Verity and Sincerity lies in the fact;  
We're all the universe pretending  
to be individuals [see Appendix].

Despite the absence of elements supporting human well-being in this space, man persists in his existence, akin to the ceaseless toil of Sisyphus. He endures an analogy for the ongoing individual effort to confront life's inherent absurdity. *The Myth of Sisyphus* conveys that life's meaning is a construct of our own attribution. By acknowledging the universe's lack of inherent purpose, we liberate ourselves from contrived expectations, allowing us to embrace the absurd (Camus 1942).

Both Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *Cross Purpose* (1943) share intertextuality in their exploration of existential themes. They delve into the human condition, grappling with the absurdity of existence and the pursuit of meaning. While *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) focuses on the individual's struggle and the creation of personal meaning, *Cross Purpose* (1943) may provide a narrative context that reflects similar existential inquiries. The conversation on the human condition and the search for meaning in an apparently meaningless universe is furthered by these two pieces.

*Cross Purpose* unfolds within a realm of existential inquiry, where characters navigate the complexities of life's absurdity. As a master of existentialist philosophy, Camus crafts a narrative that explores the consequences of human choices and the pursuit of meaning in an imperturbable province. Set against a backdrop of moral ambiguity and societal critique, *Cross Purpose* invites the audience into a world where characters grapple with the inherent contradictions of their existence, ultimately posing profound questions about the nature of morality, identity, and the elusive quest for purpose.

Camus, a prominent existentialist, employs *Cross Purpose* to dissect the human condition. The characters, particularly Jan and Martha, exemplify the absurdity of existence as they navigate a web of lies and moral ambiguity. The play delves into the futility of seeking absolute moral clarity in a universe devoid of inherent meaning. The notion of absurdity, a central theme in Camus' philosophy, is palpable in the characters' actions and dilemmas. The absurdity is amplified by the characters' futile pursuit of coherence and order in a chaotic world. The play echoes Camus' belief that individuals must confront the absurd, acknowledging the lack of inherent meaning, yet finding ways to create personal significance. Camus also critiques societal norms and the hypocrisy embedded in conventional morality. The characters' actions challenge established moral standards, inviting the audience to question the validity of societal expectations and norms. Moreover, *Cross Purpose* intertwines elements of tragedy and dark comedy, showcasing Camus' ability to blend profound philosophical themes with theatricality.

French-Algérien philosopher and author Albert Camus lived in the middle of the 20th century. After receiving the 1957 Nobel Prize in literature, he passed away at the age of 46. His publisher Michelle Gallimard accidentally murdered him when his Facel Vega sports car collided with a tree. Camus is one of many intellectuals, including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, who grapple with the terrifying realization that life has no purpose and that we are only biological stuff revolving smoothly on a small rock in a distant corner of an uncaring world. Though he acknowledges that all of our lives are illogical in the larger scheme of things, Albert Camus—a child of depressing modernity—ends up resisting complete hopelessness or nihilism, in contrast to some other philosophers. He contends that even though we must accept the fact that most of our efforts will be in vain, that our lives will be forgotten quickly, and that our species is violent and corrupt beyond redemption, we must continue to live.

Despite receiving enormous praise during his lifetime, Camus was viewed with great suspicion by the Parisian intellectual community. He was never a Parisian aristocrat; rather, he was a working-class Pied Noir, a person of European descent born in Algeria whose mother worked as a cleaner and whose father had died from war wounds when he was a small child. It is no coincidence that Camus looked up to Montaigne, another very grounded Frenchman, as his favourite philosopher; after all, this is what philosophy is all about. Some Anglo-American scholars, such as Paul Berman, Michael Walzer, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, frequently bring up the battles historical intellectuals had with totalitarianism and terrorism in their discussions of the "War against Terror." Albert Camus, renowned for his role in the French Resistance and as an agonized Algerian settler, is frequently cited. These scholars emphasize Camus as a symbol of resistance against extremism and nihilism, urging the public to reject these threats. However, this focus tends to overlook Camus' complex identity as an Algerian settler and neglects a central theme in his work: the artist's duty not only to represent but actively shape society. Contrary to a romanticized view, Camus believed in the socially constitutive role of art and drew on Antonin Artaud's dramaturgy, including an aesthetic of terror, to contribute to societal regeneration.

*The Misunderstanding*, by Albert Camus in 1943 and titled *Le Malentendu*, has been translated into English by Graham Ley. The storyline revolves around a man who, after leaving his mother and sister for two decades, returns as a lodging guest. Unbeknownst to them, the mother and sister, now widowed, sustain themselves by murdering their guests. Tragically, they fail to recognize the returning man and unwittingly end his life, mistaking him for an ordinary guest. Rejecting absolute dogmatism, Camus is a distinctive voice in the anxious Europe of 1940s, embodying a philosophy of the absurd. As a way to relate to other people's suffering, he instead embraces moderation and humanism. In response to the surge of nihilism in the early 20th century, Camus endeavours to address the shortcomings of humanism and discover human dignity and hope. His exploration of Dostoevsky's works at various points in his career reflects a profound engagement with the Russian writer's ideas.

The play illustrates the impact of concealing and revealing truths on life and death. The tragedy of the play stems from the deliberate withholding of crucial information about Jan's identity. Many critics draw parallels between the play and the Greek tragedy tradition. Some perspectives emphasize that the female characters in the play have endured more suffering than Jan. As an exemplar of the absurd, the play portrays a breakdown in communication as the fundamental cause for the peculiar sequence of events. Here, it is asserted that the absurdity lies not in the world itself but in the human condition. According to M.H. Abrams absurd literature is defined as the belief that human nature is essentially nonsensical, and its adequate portrayal necessitates literary works that embody absurdity

(Abrams 2001). In the realm of Albert Camus's creations, the focal point is the intricate circumstances entangling human existence. Abrams further posits that post-World War II in France saw the emergence of such literary works as a resistance opposed to the core principles and ideals of conventional literature and culture (Abrams 2001). Wars historically exert a profound influence on both art and writing, prompting a deeper exploration of philosophy in the wake of trauma and the pervasive spectre of mortality.

The body of work by Albert Camus supports the idea that the human condition is firmly anchored in a world characterized by suffering. The use of murder for financial gain is depicted in the play *The Misunderstanding* as both horrifying and torturous. This decision sparks the audience's curiosity and causes them to question why such a horrible deed was necessary. It is portrayed as revolting, aberrant, redundant, and illogical to resort to slaughter for sustenance in spite of the abundance of "normal" means of subsistence. As such, the theme not only grabs attention but also merits further study due to the philosophical insights it provides regarding human existence. This circumstance has parallels in the modern world where people turn to thievery and murder in order to make money. As such a lifestyle is by no means inventive. The eventual consequences of these acts may include death by court order. Interestingly, however, there are people who find this way of life to be sly, carefree, and even seductive.

The overarching objective behind the orchestrated murders is to secure financial means for the two women, who perceive no other satisfactory and, notably, easy avenue for survival. One of the play's initial questions is what might have happened if Jan had told the women he visited decades earlier who he really was. However, such revelation would have disrupted the absurdity meticulously crafted in the play, diverging from the specific theatrical design of the absurd. The intricate forms and the shapes in the play not only encapsulate moments of absurdity but also serve as illuminating facets of Camus's conception of the human condition, portraying a profound feeling of agony and despair. The essence of the storyline revolves around Jan's desire to spring a surprise on his mother and sister, whom he hasn't seen in more than two decades. The two women operate a lodge as a means of sustenance. However, upon Jan's return to unravel their circumstances and discover the keys to their happiness, he is met with an unusual and perplexing mode of communication. Jan specifically notes the peculiarity in his sister Martha's choice of words, openly expressing, "I find your choice of words very strange" (Camus, as cited in Ley, 29).

The delineation of the boundary – "even for murderers" (Camus, as cited in Ley, 42) – is uniquely applicable to Jan, primarily due to his familial ties with the mother. If someone else had occupied Jan's position, the event would have been inconsequential, leaving no impact on the mother. Initially, the manner in which the two women conducted their murders had already transcended all humane boundaries. However, the realization of the need to establish limits on their murderous methods only surfaces in Jan's case. Martha explicitly underscores that their primary motive is financial gain, devoid of drawing lines or selecting their victims. In Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, a character bemoans the fact that "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (Beckett 2006). This sense of anguish and desperation is reminiscent of that. In contrast to Beckett's play, *Le Malentendu's* Jan character creates a paradoxical situation by hiding his identity, which adds an element of awfulness.

Eugene Ionesco, the French dramatist, asserts, "People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque; their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision" (Abrams 2002). In certain conversations

between the mother and the daughter, there is a clear disdain and mockery of life and death. "Derision" is also embodied in Jan's ostensibly innocent act of hiding his identity from his mother and sister (Abrams 2001). In Martha's poignant appeal, she endeavours to highlight the futility of comprehending mistakes. The catastrophic episode, stemming from a lack of communication, lacked substance in their lives already deprived of both love and money. Martha's perspective teeters on irrationality, emphasizing their essential focus on survival, a pursuit rendered hollow. The palpable sense of disconnection is evident and, to some extent, justifiable. However, extending sympathy becomes challenging due to the unspeakable atrociousness of the numerous murders committed.

What is confusing is why the mother and daughter did not choose to use traditional methods of feeding themselves. The absence of sensitivity to the immense suffering inflicted upon the bereaved families raises questions. Perhaps, if they had been more attuned to the repercussions of their actions, they might have refrained from leading a life of murder. The singular character worthy of audience/reader sympathy is Maria, an unwitting victim with no fault of her own. Despite her attempts to persuade her husband to reveal his identity, he dismisses her, seemingly resigned to a fate of a fatal demise. The play employs disconnected dots to create dramatic, absurd moments that emphasize how a lack of communication leads to an unrepairable tragedy.

To conclude, the play, *Cross Purpose* by Camus seamlessly demonstrates the complex layers of absurdity surrounding human choices while navigating the intricate web of meta-existentialism. Characters struggle with life's meaninglessness, and Camus deftly deconstructs the traditional storylines to reveal the core of existential anguish. The play turns into a looking glass that reflects society's search for meaning and purpose and compels the readers to face the inherent stillness of the choices made. Through his examination of the human condition, Camus challenges the readers to accept life's turmoil and find meaning in the exact absurdity that shapes our decisions. This leads to a profound reflection which may say that *Cross Purpose* is a philosophical investigation of the riddles of existence as well as a play.

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**Appendix:**

At the beginning of the essay, the researcher has used one of her self composed poems, roughly titled, “Mechanisms of Life”. The aim has been to highlight what the essay has tried to depict in reference to the play, *Cross Purpose* by Albert Camus. Because this composition is in tune with what Camus deeply tried to examine throughout his play. In other words, this composition indicates that human beings are manifestations of the universe, with each person acting as a vessel for a cosmic experience, rather than being limited to personal identities.