



Investigating Absurdity and Authority in Albert Camus' *Caligula*: An Analytical Review

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Abstract:

This paper delves into Albert Camus' play, *Caligula*, exploring themes of absurdity and power from a relatable perspective. By analyzing the protagonist's journey and interactions within the play, it aims to uncover how Camus portrays the human struggle to find meaning in an absurd world. By analyzing the tyranny and madness of the protagonist, the study aims to unveil existential concepts inherent in Camus' work, particularly regarding the absurdity of human existence and the corrupting influence of authority. Mapping upon Camus' philosophical concepts and textual evidence from *Caligula*, this research paper examines the interplay between absurdity, power and moral considerations within Caligula's tyrannical reign. Through this examination, the paper sheds light on the deeper existential questions raised by Camus, offering insights into the human condition and the complexities of wielding authority.

Keywords: Absurdity, Authority, Existentialism, Power, Tyranny

I. Introduction

Albert Camus was born in Algeria in 1913. His powerful play, *Caligula* portrays a monstrous emperor who, in destroying everything around him, destroys men, gods and ultimately himself. Camus' *Caligula* stands as a poignant portrayal of existential turmoil and the search for meaning in a world that is devoid of inherent purpose. Through the protagonist's descent into madness and tyranny, Camus invites audiences to confront the absurdity of human existence and the consequences of unchecked power. At one place in the play, *Caligula* written by Albert Camus, we see Caligula as explaining the need of freedom and power and authority as:

Caligula: Gods! Gods!... I don't need them! I need freedom! I want to free men from their chains! I want to be free myself! But to be

free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it's to be able to surpass the given toward an open future. The existence of man is his freedom.

These lines reflect Caligula's internal struggle with the meaninglessness of life and his desperate search for some form of transcendence or liberation from the constraints of existence. The play captures the existential crisis of a man who grapples with his own mortality and the absurdity of the human condition.

This paper endeavors to explore the existential themes present in *Caligula*, shedding light on the philosophical questions it raises about the nature of life and morality. One instance of Caligula's reflection on mortality is as such:

Caligula: Death is nothing, Helicon. It's living that's terrible.

Helicon: That's how it seems to you now, sire.

Caligula: I used to live.

Helicon: That's true.

Through the character of Caligula, Camus invites readers to confront existential questions about the nature of power and the inherent absurdity of human existence. This study offers an analytical review of *Caligula*, aiming to understand how Camus' portrayal of the central character reflects broader philosophical enquiries about humanity.

Absurdity and Existentialism

Camus' concept of the absurd, as articulated in his philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, serves as a foundational theme in *Caligula*. Throughout the play, we can observe how the absurdity of human existence has been manifested in Caligula's actions and beliefs. From his rejection of societal norms to his pursuit of absolute power, Caligula embodies the existential anguish of confronting a meaningless universe. His quest for significance and control serves as a



poignant illustration of the absurdity inherent in human endeavors.

Power and Corruption

The exploration of power and its corrupting influence is central to *Caligula*. As Caligula ascends to the throne, his initial intentions to defy societal conventions and assert his autonomy gradually give way to a ruthless pursuit of absolute authority. In the play, it has been illustrated how power, once attained, becomes an intoxicating force that distorts one's moral compass. Caligula's descent into tyranny serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked power and its ability to erode morality.

The Tyrant's Dilemma

Albert Camus presents Caligula as a complex figure grappling with the existential dilemma of freedom and responsibility. Despite his authoritarian tendencies, Caligula's actions stem from a desire to break free from the constraints of a world he perceives as absurd. His tyrannical rule can be thus seen as a misguided attempt to impose order upon chaos, albeit through violent means. This portrayal highlights the inherent tension between individual autonomy and the ethical obligations that accompany power.

Moral Implications

Through Caligula's interactions with other characters, including his lover Caesonia and the senator Helicon, Camus explores the moral ramifications of absolute power. The play raises questions about the nature of morality in a world devoid of transcendent meaning. Caligula's disregard for human life and suffering underscores the ethical vacuum created by the absurdity of existence. In doing so, Camus prompts readers to reflect on the implications of moral relativism and the necessity of ethical principles in navigating the complexities of power.

II. Conclusion

In *Caligula*, Albert Camus offers a profound meditation on the interplay between absurdity and power. Through the tragic trajectory of the protagonist, readers are confronted with existential questions about the meaning of human existence and the nature of authority. By exploring the absurdity of Caligula's actions and the corrosive effects of power, Camus invites us to reflect on our own relationship to morality and the responsibilities that come with wielding power. In doing so, *Caligula* emerges as a timeless work that

continues to resonate with audiences, offering insights into the complexities of the human condition

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