



## A Lacanian reading of Caligula by Albert Camus: *Jouissance*

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### Abstract

This article aims to investigate the existing connection between *Jouissance* and its effect on the behavior of Caligula by Albert Camus's. The absurdity in Camus's works has created great and clear ground for the Lacanian studies specially the concept of *Jouissance*. The protagonist of the play, Caligula, is studied in terms of *Jouissance* since he enters a traumatic shock which leads to a bizarre behavioral pattern which is triggered by the death of his sister. An analysis is done in order to find the hidden links between the existence *Jouissance* and its relation to Caligula's extreme actions in accordance to Lacanian psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** Caligula, *Jouissance*, Lacan, Albert Camus

### 1. Introduction

Albert Camus, born on 7th of November 1913, is a well-noted play writer. His writings are mostly addressed as existentialist yet "he refused to accept the label 'existentialist'" (Galens, 2013, p.51) [4]; his life was affected by two world wars which may partly explain his style of writing. One among his plays, Caligula, is the subject of this study. Caligula, first written in 1938, is one of the noted plays in Absurdism. Many characteristics, including a linear plot and mocking traditions is one of many significances of absurd drama; "the term absurd was first used to describe literary works by Albert Camus, in 1961, theater critic Martine Esslin's book Theater of the Absurd named a movement that was already in full swing" (Galens, 2002, p. 60) [4] making him the representing figure. The major factor different between the two movements is how "unlike existential fiction, which focused on the internal straggle for beliefs, drama does not present internal thoughts to the audiences at all, and so can focus its energies on the strange inability of eternal world" (Galens, 2002, p. 60) [4].

On the history of the play, Caligula was inspired by the emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanics. The young Gaius got the nickname, Caligula's literal meaning is little soldier's boot, from his father's soldiers while accompanying him during his battles. Caligula's actions as emperor were described as being exceptionally harsh to the senate eventually, these actions led to several failed conspiracies against Caligula which was controlled by officers within the Praetorian Guard under supervision of Cassius Chaerea succeeded in murdering the emperor. In the historical texts Caligula's behavior are pictured as questionable choices and manners. The character of Caligula in the play is built around the same lunacy that existed in the historical figure.

The story opens as Caligula has entered a traumatic shock by the loss of his sister, Drusilla, who play several roles in Caligula's life, his lover, his sister, and to some measures his objet petit a, as it is explained by as:

But what's come over you? There's no reason for all these

lamentations. We've no ground for assuming he will change. Let's say he loved Drusilla. Only natural; she was his sister. Or say his love for her was something more than brotherly; shocking enough, I grant you. But it's really going too far, setting all Rome in a turmoil because the girl has died. (Camus, 1958, pp.4-5) [1].

It is seen that after this turning point a sudden and great shift appears in his behavior turning him into a cruel and blood thirsty ruler. In the story he keeps asking for the moon. The play is closed as it is implied that Caligula is killed by his angry subjects, guards, courtiers, and his mistress Chaerea. A Lacanian reading is applied to this play in order to study the existence of *Jouissance* and how it relates and justifies the manner of the emperor. Some samples and extracts from the primary source and other Lacanian sources are used in order to reach the final understanding.

### 2. Theoretical framework

Jacques Marie Émile Lacan, well noted French psychologist, same as all before him aimed to find a clear explanation for *Jouissance*, the literal meaning of *Jouissance* is explained as "The French word *Jouissance* means basically 'enjoyment', but it has a sexual connotation lacking in the English word 'enjoyment', and is therefore left untranslated in most English editions of Lacan" (Evans, 2006, p.93) [3]. Later on Lacan used the Hegelian connotation and linked *Jouissance* to the concept of pleasure principle, "It is only in 1960 that Lacan develops his classic opposition between *Jouissance* and pleasure, an opposition which alludes to the Hegelian/Kojevian distinction between Genuß (enjoyment) and Lust (pleasure) (Evans, 2006, p.93) [3]. Such eagerness in one to harm himself has always been an interesting subject matters of many works of fiction. The term *Jouissance* was first used by Sigmund Freud, latter on his term was modified and used by Lacan." (Evans, 2006, p.33) [3].

The subject of study in this paper is to reveal the connection between existence of *Jouissance* and its links the extremes appearing in emperor's behavior including brutality, extreme

requests, and extreme sexual desires. The research takes an interest in the association of *Jouissance* in the presence of emperor's actions.

According to international dictionary of psychoanalysis the concept of *Jouissance* is explained as: "Lacan based *Jouissance* on the law. If *Jouissance* consists in breaking the barrier of the pleasure principle, if it can only be attained through a transgression, then only a prohibition opens the path toward it" (Mijola, 2002, p. 894). The main idea of *Jouissance* is as Lacan addresses it "evil", which means it feeds of ones suffering, whether the self or other individuals. The exact explanation given is as:

Lacan concluded, '*Jouissance* is evil. Because it involves suffering for my neighbor'. Moreover, he noted that love of one's neighbor seemed absurd to Freud. Each time that this Christian ideal is stated, 'we see evoked the presence of that fundamental evil which dwells within this neighbor. But if that is the case, then it also dwells within me. And what is more of a neighbor to me than this heart within which is that of my *Jouissance* and which I don't dare go near?'. (Mijola, 2002, p. 895)

Lacanian perspectives on the *Jouissance*, explains it as the need, will, and urge to break the boundaries go beyond the unprohibited and experience the forbidden even by mean of destruction of himself and others.

### 3. Analysis for Existence of *Jouissance*

The hero, Caligula, enters a shock due to the loss of her beloved sister and lover. As a result we see the presence of *Jouissance* in the behavior of the emperor. This sudden shift in Caligula's character shocks and terrifies the courtiers. The exact definition of *Jouissance* is given with a very close relationship to the pleasure principle as:

The pleasure principle functions as a limit to enjoyment; it is a law which commands the subject to 'enjoy as little as possible'. At the same time, the subject constantly attempts to transgress the prohibitions imposed on his enjoyment, to go 'beyond the pleasure principle'. However, the result of transgressing the pleasure principle is not more pleasure, but pain, since there is only a certain amount of pleasure that the subject can bear. Beyond this limit, pleasure becomes pain, and this 'painful pleasure' is what Lacan calls *Jouissance*; '*Jouissance* is suffering'. The term *Jouissance* thus nicely expresses the paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives from his symptom, or, to put it another way, the suffering that he derives from his own satisfaction (Freud's 'primary gain from illness'). (Evans, 2006, p. 93) [6]

This may be seen clearly in Caligula's harsh and brutal behavior as the following lines imply:

"You will be cruel," Caligula [still striking the gong] says.

"Cruel," Cjesonia [sobbing] replies.

Caligula [still beating the gong] "Cold and ruthless," says.

Cjesoni: "Ruthless", says.

"And you will suffer, too," Caligula answers (Camus, 1958, p. 18) [1].

The exact suffering in which Caligula find a pleasurable pain

by hurting the ones he loves. The evil Lacan describes in *Jouissance*.

Another aspect of Lacanina *Jouissance* may act in a manner which leads to a situation where an enjoyment is taken too far by the individual and may lead to his destruction. The exact quotation of this may be "Insofar as the drives are attempts to break through the pleasure principle in search of *Jouissance*, every drive is a death drive" (Evans, 2006, p. 94) [3]. By this definition the reason that Caligula constantly asks for the moon is also related to the concept of *Jouissance*, breaking the boundaries and the hunger to experience more. The fact that Caligula, at the very beginning of the play, addresses his courtier, Helicon, as:

Caligula: It was hard to find.

Helicon: What was hard to find?

Caligula: What I was after.

Helicon: Meaning?

Caligula [in the same matter-of-fact tone]: The moon.

Helicon: What?

Caligula: Yes, I wanted the moon. (Camus, 1958, p. 7) [1].

Asking for the extremes from beginning to the end of the play may be the sign of *Jouissance* in characters behavior. These extremes are present till the last line of the play.

Caligula also addresses himself as Venues the goddess of love. The actual myth of narcissism is in association with venues and her beloved whom refuses her love and is doomed, the same pattern occurs in the following passage:

"Now watch with all your eyes. [He draws aside the curtain. Grotesquely attired a Venus," Caligula beams down on them front a Pedestal.]

"I'm Venus today," Caligula [amiably].

"Now, for the adoration bow down," Cjesonia says to Caligula (Camus, 1958, p. 40) [1].

The fact that he believes that he may act as the embodiment of gods shows his extreme opinion, need, and urge to stand beyond the limits and break the boundaries. He also wishes the attention of the others, but unable to place his love on any other individual as he remarks in the following passage how loveless and empty his sexual interactions has been since the death of his beloved sister: "I only know that, if you're with me still, it's because of all those nights we've had together, nights of fierce, joyless pleasure; it's because you alone know me as I am" (Camus, 1958, p. 70) [1]. The extreme sexual desire of Caligula also appears as:

Caligula: Then tell us something about your wife.

And begin by sending her to this place, on my right. [ Mucius' Wife seats herself beside Caligula.]

Well, Mucius? We're waiting.

Mucius [hardly knowing what he says]: My

Wife . . . but . . . I'm very fond of her.

[G eneral laughter.]

Caligula: Why, of course, my friend, of course. (Camus, 1958, p. 26) [1]

The quotation clearly indicates the extremes in Caligula's

behavior which projects his desire of breaking the norms and the joy he feels by the destruction he causes both to himself and others. This broken, undertaken, underestimated pleasure principle feeds his need for joy.

The extreme aggression, which is in close relations with *Jouissance*, also appears in the emperor's behavior to the point where he admits that without this aggression he feels alone as:

How Strange! When I don't kill, I feel Alone. The living don't suffice to people my world  
And dispel my boredom. I have an impression of an Enormous void when you and the others are here,  
And my eyes see nothing but empty air. (Camus, 1958, p.68) <sup>[1]</sup>

These lines clearly show the aggressive, destructive, and the exact *Jouissance* he freely speaks of, he does not hide the truth which exists within his head where as he simply explains how the aggression makes him feel less isolated and how the presence of others bother him.

#### 4. Discussion

The *Jouissance* is a well-known concept in Lacanian studies and is greatly applied to many plays and novels. The concept of *Jouissance* has always been associated with the two concepts of destruction and pleasure both of which appear in a man with *Jouissance*, the individual aims to push his cruelty and his boundaries as far as he may since he experiences a greater loss, and plans to go beyond the "pleasure principle". In the play, *Caligula*, The death of emperor's sister creates an unstable mood within his manner which all the characters find bizarre. This causes his *Jouissance* to activate and creates the will to feed of the joy to forget the pain he feels.

This loss also causes a state of trauma which results in *Jouissance* with in *Caligula's* character, He experiences an inability to place his needs and desires and as a result he is at a state of *Jouissance* which by itself is brutal, evil, and destructive yet in the search of the externs to satisfy its need and hunger. The concept of *Jouissance* is also another working force pushing *Caligula* towards destruction, as it is portrayed the character, he goes beyond all boundaries in order to find pleasure. The repetitive speak of the moon as an object to be possessed, his limitless brutality, and his extreme sexual desire may all be the result of *Jouissance*.

#### 5. Conclusion

This article aimed to uncover the hidden connection between the presences of *Jouissance* according to Lacan's theories and the extremes taken by the hero in the play. The hero of the play, *Caligula*, suffers from a trauma. Since the very existence of the trauma and the uncommon relationship between *Caligula* and his sister reveals a lot on his character. This traumatic experience causes the activation of *Jouissance*.

Such conflicting moment is resolved by the presence of *Jouissance*, the will to go beyond the pleasure principle which may be related to all the drives not only one. This will allows *Caligula* to unconsciously push the environment to destroy him since he is willing to sacrifice all just to reach the pleasure beyond the boundaries. His cruel and brutal actions

create the destruction he seeks and is unable to perform. Such claim has been studied and proven by the usage of example and extracts from the primary source and Lacanian sources which had revealed the existence of *Jouissance* and its connection to the absurd behavior *Caligula*.

#### 5. References

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