

# Brecht's mother courage and her children and camus' the plague

Literature



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In Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children* and Camus' *The Plague*, the authors use characterization to develop their emphasis on the ability of man to survive in desperate situations. Throughout both novels the characters manipulate their situations for their own benefit, disregard the death and atrocities around them, and go so far as to ironically support the causes of their eventual downfalls. These processes allow them to endure their wretched conditions.

In *Mother Courage* and *The Plague*, all the characters involved are facing grave circumstances. In *The Plague*, the characters are battling a mysterious disease that is brutally killing off thousands of citizens in the small port town of Oran. In *Mother Courage*, the characters are involved in literal battles, as this play is set in the 30 years war. In the first few scenes of *The Plague* the readers meet Cottard, a washed up criminal. Up until the breakout of the plague the authorities were chasing him. He attempted suicide in the opening segments of the chronicle because he couldn't "bear the idea... of being torn from [his] home habits and every one [he] knows" (159).

In Brecht's play, *Mother Courage* has three children and her only source of income is the profit she gets from selling the wares she carries on her wagon. Her children do what they can to help the old woman in her constant struggle for financial stability.

MC and Cottard manipulate their terrible conditions for their own personal gain. Cottard is pacified by the plague because the police are not in pursuit of him anymore. His leech-like behavior turns into a parasitic need for the plague. Without it he would again be surrounded with the grief, worry, and

despair that initially led him to attempt to take his own life. Tarrou, a friend of Cottard, is keeping a journal of his interactions with people during this troubling time and confronts Cottard with the notion that he is exploiting the plague for his own purpose. Tarrou exclaims, " Why, of course, I was forgetting... If it wasn't for [the plague], you'd be arrested" (158). This comment makes Cottard extremely upset because he is sensitive to the fact that his new friends know he is in trouble with the law. But he doesn't argue the point with Tarrou, because he knows that he would be under surveillance if the plague was not so widespread. Camus presents Cottard as needful to the plague. Cottard uses the preoccupation of the authorities to his full advantage and lives a quite happy-go-lucky life during the reign of the horrible plague.

Mother Courage exploits her situation in much the same way. Around her people are dying in great numbers due to the war, but MC is engrossed in her extreme need for financial security. During the war MC's business does very well. Anxious people are willing to pay her for items they can find nowhere else. Without the war MC has no real source for income, and she uses it to provide for herself and her family. Like Cottard, she has found a way to manipulate the grim circumstances around her and use them to benefit.

The authors have developed these characters in a way that they profit from what others are dying from. The plague is Cottard's salvation and MC uses the war to support herself and her family. In their desperate situations they have found ways to not only survive, but thrive on the misfortune of others.

The war around MC is claiming lives constantly. She is virtually oblivious to the loss of life and violence surrounding her. She wishes the war would continue and even claims that wartime is good for the people. She spouts, "Destroys the weak, does it? Well what does peace do for 'em, huh? War feeds its people better" (82). This statement totally disregards that all around her people are starving and dying. She thanks God after she learns that the prospect for peace was merely a rumor and that the war is continuing. This behavior, although seemingly despicable, allows MC to endure the war. She lives without even the slightest essence of guilt, although she is prospering while others are perishing.

Cottard enjoys his own personal advantages from the plague even though his fellow citizens are dying disgusting and horrific deaths. He doesn't see that what's going on is horrendous, he merely sees that he is protected from the ominous threat of the authorities. Tarrou studies Cottard and notices that he appears to believe that he is not at risk of dying from the plague. In his journal Tarrou writes, "He's in the same peril of death as everyone else... and I'm pretty sure he doesn't seriously think he runs much personal risk" (195). The aid Cottard receives from the plague has blinded him to the obvious negatives of the plague. The ever-present and looming threat of death hangs over everyone in the city, but Cottard pays no heed to this. He continues on with his life as if everything was under control.

MC and Cottard ignore the appalling phenomena that encircle them and see only the "positive" rewards their situations bestow upon them. Both are

unconcerned with the detrimental effects their circumstances will have on themselves and others.

Mother Courage is so obsessed with making a profit and haggling that she doesn't see that the war is claiming the lives of her children one by one. She supports the very war that takes the lives of each of the children she is trying to save. Her son Eilif is executed without her knowledge, and she falsely asserts, " He'll never change. And the war couldn't get him, he's bright" (93). MC never realizes that her and her family are in the same danger as the others, and the same fate will befall them eventually. Cottard and MC both possess this character flaw that progresses them closer and closer to their ultimate respective downfalls.

Ironically, MC and Cottard support the causes that bring their demise. Mother Courage sings songs that are designed to entice people to join the war efforts. She makes an effort to recruit soldiers by singing, " A war needs human beings too. /Report today to your headquarters! /If its to last, this war needs you!" (94). Little does she know, she is actually contributing to the fall of her family. Due to the war all three of her children lose their lives and leave MC disillusioned and alone.

Similarly, Cottard was given the chance to try to redeem himself and combat the plague, but he refused to do so. Once the plague has come to an end, Cottard is again stricken by the fear and anxiety he possessed in the opening scenes of the novel. He begins shooting at people rejoicing in the street. His newly found confidence was destroyed by the conclusion of the epidemic, and he causes what he feared the most: he is violently apprehended by the

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police due to his outburst. Both characters believe they are untouchable during their hard times, but both are thrown into the situations they tried to prevent.

At the closing of each text, the respective characters discussed are left with basically nothing because of their actions. Mother Courage is left with no children and only a delusion of hope in the form of her wagon and the thought that Eilif is still alive. This glimmer of false hope is enough to drive MC, and all the reader knows at the conclusion of the play is that she will try to remain in business and search for Eilif. However, Cottard gives up all his hopes and takes to gunning down innocent people in the street. He hits rock bottom when the police throw him to the ground and begin to quite brutally subdue him. His greatest fear has come true and his story ends in tragedy as well.

Camus skillfully builds up Cottard's need for the continuance of the plague as does Brecht for MC's need for the war. Both feed off their tragic situations and turn their backs on the calamities befalling the masses at their feet. They both contribute greatly, through their flaws in character to their own failures, and both their accounts end in sadness and loneliness. Their powerful examples show how it is possible to survive these awful conditions, but their lives may still be ruined.