

THE ABSURD IN 20TH-CENTURY LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** The concept of the absurd occupies a central place in twentieth-century philosophical and literary thought. Emerging from existential philosophy and shaped by historical crises, absurdism reflects the conflict between humanity's search for meaning and the silent, indifferent universe. This article explores the theoretical foundations of the absurd, its philosophical origins, and its artistic embodiment in literature. Special attention is given to prominent representatives of absurd literature, including Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Franz Kafka. The study analyzes how absurdity manifests in themes, characters, narrative structures, and dramatic techniques.

**Key words:** Absurd, absurdism, existentialism, meaninglessness, alienation, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Franz Kafka, Theatre of the Absurd, modernism, postmodernism.

The concept of the absurd became one of the most influential intellectual and artistic phenomena of the twentieth century. It emerged from a historical period marked by wars, political instability, technological transformations, and deep moral crises. The devastation of the First and Second World Wars shattered traditional religious, philosophical, and social certainties. Humanity found itself in a world where long-established values seemed unreliable, and rational explanations failed to justify suffering, violence, and death. In such a context, the notion of the absurd developed as a response to the tension between human longing for clarity and the chaotic nature of existence.

Philosophically, absurdism is closely associated with existentialism, although the two are not identical. Existentialist thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche laid the groundwork by questioning objective meaning and emphasizing individual responsibility. However, the concept of the absurd reached systematic articulation in the works of Albert Camus. In his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus defines the absurd as the confrontation between the human desire for meaning and the unreasonable silence of the universe. According to him, the absurd does not exist in either the individual or the world alone; it arises from their interaction. Human beings constantly seek order, logic, and purpose, yet the universe offers no clear answers. This contradiction produces the experience of absurdity.

Camus rejects both suicide and philosophical escape as solutions to the absurd. Instead, he proposes revolt as a conscious response. To live with awareness of the absurd and yet continue to struggle constitutes authentic human dignity. This idea is vividly illustrated in his novel *The Stranger*, where the protagonist Meursault confronts the indifference of society and the inevitability of death without resorting to false consolation. Through emotional detachment and acceptance of fate, Meursault embodies the absurd hero who refuses to fabricate meaning but persists in living.

While Camus approached absurdity philosophically and narratively, dramatists such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco developed it theatrically. The term "Theatre of the Absurd," introduced by critic Martin Esslin in 1961, describes a group of playwrights whose works reflect existential disillusionment and the breakdown of communication. These dramatists rejected traditional plot structures, logical dialogue, and realistic characterization. Instead, they



emphasized circular action, repetitive speech, and fragmented language to convey the irrationality of human existence.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is perhaps the most iconic example of absurd drama. The play presents two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait endlessly for someone named Godot, who never arrives. The narrative lacks conventional progression; events repeat, conversations become meaningless, and time appears stagnant. This structure mirrors the existential condition of waiting for purpose or salvation that may never come. The absence of resolution forces the audience to confront uncertainty and emptiness. Beckett's minimalistic staging and sparse language intensify the sense of isolation and futility.

Similarly, Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* undermines logical communication by presenting dialogues that dissolve into nonsensical exchanges. Language, which traditionally serves as a tool for understanding, becomes a source of confusion and alienation. Characters speak in clichés and disconnected phrases, revealing the mechanical nature of social interaction. Ionesco suggests that modern life reduces individuals to automatons trapped in meaningless routines. The absurd thus reflects not only metaphysical questions but also social criticism.

Franz Kafka, although predating the formal movement of absurdism, significantly influenced its development. In works such as *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka portrays protagonists trapped in incomprehensible systems. Joseph K. in *The Trial* is arrested and prosecuted by an unknown authority for an unspecified crime. Despite his attempts to understand the charges, he receives no explanation. This bureaucratic labyrinth symbolizes the alienation of modern individuals within impersonal institutions. Likewise, Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect in *The Metamorphosis* represents existential estrangement. Kafka's narratives blend realism with surreal elements, creating an atmosphere where logic coexists with irrationality. His characters experience guilt, anxiety, and helplessness in a world that denies them clarity.

The stylistic features of absurd literature differ significantly from traditional realism. Plot structures often lack linear development; instead, they emphasize repetition and circularity. Characters are frequently archetypal rather than psychologically detailed. Settings are minimalistic or abstract, highlighting existential themes rather than realistic environments. Dialogue tends to be fragmented, paradoxical, or contradictory. Silence becomes as meaningful as speech. These techniques challenge audiences and readers to abandon expectations of logical coherence.

Thematically, absurd literature explores alienation, identity crisis, communication breakdown, time distortion, and the inevitability of death. The sense of alienation reflects the individual's separation from society, others, and even oneself. Identity becomes unstable, as characters struggle to define themselves in a world lacking fixed reference points. Communication fails because language proves inadequate to express authentic experience. Time often appears cyclical or static, reinforcing the perception of stagnation. Death functions not only as a biological end but as a philosophical reminder of human limitations.

The historical background of absurdism cannot be overlooked. The atrocities of the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, and global conflicts profoundly influenced writers. Rational progress and scientific advancement, once symbols of optimism, became associated with destruction. Faith in grand narratives—religious, political, or ideological—declined. In this atmosphere of disillusionment, absurd literature articulated the psychological reality of the era. It captured the anxiety and fragmentation characteristic of modern consciousness.

Despite its apparent pessimism, absurd literature contains elements of dark humor. Laughter emerges not from joy but from recognition of contradiction. The comic and tragic coexist. In Beckett's works, humorous exchanges between characters emphasize their vulnerability.



Ionesco's exaggerated dialogues provoke laughter while exposing existential emptiness. This fusion of comedy and tragedy intensifies the emotional impact and prevents total despair.

Absurdism also influenced narrative fiction beyond drama. Writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, though primarily existentialist, incorporated absurd elements into their novels. Later postmodern authors adopted absurd techniques to question reality and representation. The boundaries between absurdism and postmodernism sometimes blur, as both challenge conventional structures and emphasize fragmentation. However, absurdism remains distinct in its philosophical emphasis on existential confrontation rather than playful relativism.

In addition to Western literature, elements of absurdity appear in various cultural traditions. Folklore, satire, and allegory often employ illogical situations to critique authority or expose human folly. Yet twentieth-century absurdism differs in its philosophical depth and historical specificity. It does not merely entertain but interrogates existence itself.

Critical interpretations of absurd literature vary. Some scholars argue that absurdism reflects nihilism, suggesting that life lacks inherent value. Others contend that it affirms human resilience through confrontation with meaninglessness. Camus himself insisted that acknowledging the absurd enables freedom. By rejecting illusions, individuals assume responsibility for their choices. In this sense, absurd literature promotes ethical awareness rather than passive despair.

The continuing relevance of absurdism in contemporary society is evident. Technological acceleration, digital communication, political polarization, and environmental crises generate new forms of uncertainty. Many modern works echo absurd themes, portraying fragmented identities and unstable realities. Theatre productions of *Waiting for Godot* remain popular worldwide, demonstrating the universality of its message. Kafka's works continue to resonate in discussions of bureaucracy and surveillance. The absurd thus transcends its historical origin, becoming a lens through which modern humanity interprets complexity.

Educationally, absurd literature challenges students to think critically about philosophical issues. It encourages interpretation beyond surface narrative. The absence of clear answers stimulates analytical skills and creative engagement. By confronting ambiguity, readers develop tolerance for uncertainty. This pedagogical dimension contributes to the enduring significance of absurd texts.

In conclusion, the concept of the absurd represents a profound intellectual response to modern crises. Rooted in existential philosophy and expressed through innovative literary techniques, absurdism transformed narrative and dramatic traditions. Through the works of Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, and Kafka, absurd literature explores the tension between human aspiration and cosmic indifference. Although it portrays alienation and meaninglessness, it simultaneously affirms awareness and resistance. The absurd does not demand resignation but conscious engagement. Its artistic legacy continues to influence global literature, reflecting humanity's ongoing struggle to define meaning in an uncertain world.

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