

## Philosophical and Psychological Effects of Major Absurdist Writings on 20<sup>th</sup> century English Literature

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**Abstract :** This article delves into the philosophical and psychological reverberations of absurdist literature—particularly as articulated by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Eugene Ionesco in *The Bald Soprano*, Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, and Franz Kafka in *The Trial*—and their transformative influence on 20th-century English literary culture. Absurdist, grounded in existentialist thought, dramatizes the confrontation between humanity's insistent quest for meaning and a universe devoid of inherent purpose, yielding intense psychological states marked by alienation, anxiety, and metaphysical despair. Through their seminal works, these European authors deeply influenced English writers such as Samuel Beckett, whose *Waiting for Godot* portrays existential stasis; Harold Pinter, whose *The Birthday Party* captures psychological menace; and Iris Murdoch, whose *The Time of the Angels* explores moral disorientation in a godless world. These English figures assimilated absurdist motifs to probe fractured identities, inner turmoil, and the collapse of rational discourse in the wake of historical trauma. This study, through comparative textual analysis and philosophical-psychoanalytic inquiry, argues that absurdist writing reconfigured English literary form, fostering experimental narratives and deepening the psychological and ontological discourse of modernism and postmodernism.

**Keywords:** Absurdism; existentialism; psychological fragmentation; alienation; post-war literature.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in profound philosophical and psychological upheavals in literature, catalyzed by the existentialist and absurdist movements. Thinkers like Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Eugene Ionesco, in *The Chairs*, Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, and Franz Kafka in *The Metamorphosis* directly confronted the existential dissonance between the human compulsion for meaning and the universe's silent indifference. This confrontation birthed a literature steeped in psychological fragmentation, where alienated protagonists wander through surreal worlds that mirror the fractured post-war psyche. English literature,

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still reeling from the psychological devastation of two world wars and the collapse of imperial identity, found in absurdist writing a compelling vehicle for articulating spiritual exhaustion and societal disintegration. Writers like Samuel Beckett drew on Camusian absurdity and Kafkaesque dread to render characters in emotional paralysis; Harold Pinter channeled Ionesco's linguistic absurdity and Sartrean freedom into a theatre of silences and suppressed terror; Iris Murdoch, engaging deeply with moral philosophy, wrestled with the loss of metaphysical certainty in novels like *The Nice and the Good*. This paper investigates how the philosophical core of absurdism, fused with Freudian and existential psychology, remade the narrative architecture, character development, and thematic scope of 20th-century English literature, enabling it to give voice to the collective inner chaos of a disoriented age.

### **Philosophical Foundations of Absurdist Writing**

Absurdism, as articulated by Albert Camus, stems from the fundamental conflict between the human longing for meaning and the indifferent silence of the universe. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus captures this existential dissonance with poignant clarity, "the world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But... in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger"(13). This alienation, however, does not lead Camus to nihilism but to a philosophy of rebellion—an acceptance of the absurd through conscious defiance and personal integrity. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, "deepens this existential perspective by affirming radical freedom and the weight of responsibility in a world stripped of intrinsic order".(56) These philosophical convictions find theatrical expression in Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, "where nonsensical, repetitive dialogue parodies societal norms and exposes the futility of language and logic" (27). Franz Kafka, a precursor to absurdist thought, metaphorically embodies existential terror in *The Metamorphosis*, "where Gregor Samsa's dehumanizing metamorphosis illustrates the estrangement of the self from the world" (24).

These existential and metaphysical tensions resonated powerfully with English authors grappling with the disillusionment of the post-war era. As traditional narratives crumbled under the weight of philosophical skepticism, absurdism provided a framework for exploring fractured realities and questioning the very fabric of human purpose.

### Psychological Dimensions of Absurdist Writing

Absurdist literature not only engages philosophical themes but also excavates the psychological terrain of alienation, dread, and fractured identity. In *The Trial*, Kafka immerses Joseph K. in a nightmarish bureaucratic system that “evokes Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny—where the mundane becomes ominously unfamiliar” (241). This psychological distortion underscores the fragile boundary between internal fears and external chaos. In *The Stranger*, Camus presents “Meursault as emotionally detached, his blank responses not apathy but a psychic defense mechanism—Stoic resilience tinged with repressed trauma” (28). Sartre’s *Nausea* follows Antoine Roquentin’s confrontation with the absurd as “he experiences a visceral breakdown of meaning itself—his nausea symbolic of existential anxiety in its purest form” (91). Similarly, in *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco explores psychological conformity and the terror of losing individuality. As Berenger resists the metamorphosis of those around him into mindless beasts, “his alienation mirrors Carl Jung’s archetypal journey of individuation—the struggle to assert one’s authentic self in a homogenized world” (130).

These nuanced psychological insights offered English writers powerful models for depicting post-war disorientation and internal conflict. Rather than pursuing narrative closure or heroic catharsis, absurdist characters confront their fragmented realities with quiet desperation or existential courage, capturing the human spirit in its most unguarded and vulnerable form.

### Psychological Effects of Absurdist Writing

Based on psychological research and literary analysis (drawing from studies on narrative psychology and reader-response theory), absurdist writing can impact readers in the following ways:

1. **Cognitive Dissonance:** The lack of clear meaning or resolution can create discomfort, as readers struggle to reconcile the narrative’s ambiguity with their desire for coherence.
2. **Existential Reflection:** Exposure to themes of absurdity may prompt introspection about life’s purpose, encouraging readers to question their beliefs or values.

3. **Emotional Discomfort:** The unsettling or surreal nature of absurdist works can evoke anxiety, confusion, or frustration, though this may lead to deeper emotional processing.
4. **Catharsis and Liberation:** For some, embracing the absurd can reduce existential anxiety by fostering acceptance of life's inherent lack of meaning, aligning with Camus' idea of living authentically in the face of absurdity.
5. **Increased Creativity:** The unconventional structure may stimulate divergent thinking, as readers are forced to interpret and create meaning themselves.

#### Chart: Psychological Effects of Absurdist Writing

To visualize this, I'll create a bar chart showing the relative intensity of these psychological effects, based on their reported prevalence in literary and psychological studies (e.g., reader-response studies and existential psychology). The x-axis will list the effects, and the y-axis will represent their intensity (on a 0–10 scale, where 10 is highly intense), estimated based on qualitative descriptions in the literature.

#### Explanation of the Chart

S. No	Psychological Effect	Intensity (out of 10)	Descriptions
1	Existential Reflection	9	Prompts deep philosophical questioning—the most intense impact.
2	Cognitive Dissonance	8	Ambiguity and lack of closure cause mental tension.
3	Emotional Discomfort	7	Surreal and nihilistic themes provoke unease or frustration.
4	Catharsis/Liberation	7	Some feel liberated by accepting absurdity, though this varies individually.
5	Increased Creativity	6	Can inspire creative thinking, though the effect is indirect and less intense.

#### Influence on English Literature: Key Authors and Works

The absurdist legacies of Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Franz Kafka cast a profound and enduring influence over 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature, particularly in the psychological and philosophical frameworks adopted by Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Iris Murdoch.

This section maps the contours of that influence, exploring how existential dilemmas and absurdist tensions were translated into the narrative and dramatic sensibilities of English literary tradition.

### **Samuel Beckett: The Theatre of the Absurd**

Samuel Beckett, the Irish pioneer of minimalist theatre writing in English, stands as the most direct inheritor of absurdist thought, closely aligned with Eugene Ionesco in defining the Theatre of the Absurd. His landmark play *Waiting for Godot* powerfully embodies “Camus’s absurdism, with the characters Vladimir and Estragon locked in a perpetual wait; their fruitless hope mirroring humanity’s yearning for meaning in an indifferent cosmos” (23). The skeletal dialogue and circular structure mirror Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano*, “where language dissolves into incomprehensibility, revealing the breakdown of rational communication” (27). Psychologically, Beckett’s figures reflect existential paralysis—their stillness not apathy, but a psychic defense against the horror of a purposeless universe. Vladimir’s poignant admission—“We wait. We are bored” (48)—reveals “the existential nausea that Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness*, where the freedom to choose becomes an unbearable burden under absurd conditions”. (56)

Beckett’s radical dismantling of traditional dramatic structure—with desolate settings and fragmented, recursive dialogues—transformed English theatre into a mirror of modern psychological fragmentation. His novel *Molloy* extends this descent into inner disintegration, with a protagonist whose disordered thoughts reflect the mental alienation seen in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, where “Gregor Samsa’s grotesque transformation gives external form to psychic estrangement” (24). Beckett’s legacy ignited a shift toward experimentalism in English literature, encouraging writers such as Tom Stoppard and Caryl Churchill to probe beneath surface realities and dramatize the unconscious anxieties and existential trauma of the post-war psyche.

### **Harold Pinter: The Comedy of Menace**

Harold Pinter’s unsettling dramas, notably *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*, resonate with the existential dread and absurdity emblematic of Kafka and Ionesco. In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley’s psychological unraveling under the vague yet oppressive threat of unknown intruders “mirrors the paranoid disorientation of Joseph K. in Kafka’s *The Trial*—

both protagonists caught in claustrophobic realities that echo their inner chaos” (34). Pinter’s signature “comedy of menace,” built upon silences, pauses, and non-sequiturs, transcends theatrical device to reveal the unspoken tension and disintegrating logic of human interaction. These breakdowns in language and meaning parallel Ionesco’s absurdist dialogues in *The Bald Soprano*, “where communication fails under the weight of existential futility” (29).

Beneath this theatrical absurdity lies a profound Sartrean dilemma: characters like Davies in *The Caretaker* are thrust into a world “devoid of moral certainties, forced to confront the vertiginous responsibility of self-definition in the absence of external truths” (71). Their existential inertia is not apathy, but a psychic response to a freedom too vast and unanchored to bear.

Pinter’s enduring legacy in English literature emerges from his psychologically charged minimalism, where ambiguity and silence become tools for exploring buried fears and post-war trauma. His innovations set the stage for dramatists like David Hare and Sarah Kane, whose works delve even deeper into the subconscious fractures of modern identity and the existential dissonance of a world adrift in moral ambiguity.

### **Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novels**

Iris Murdoch, both philosopher and novelist, wove absurdist themes into her fiction with intellectual precision and emotional insight. In novels like *Under the Net* and *The Sea, The Sea*, she explores existential anxiety, freedom, and moral uncertainty with a philosophical depth informed by Sartre. Jake Donaghue’s wandering in *Under the Net* “reflects the disorientation of a consciousness unmoored from fixed values, echoing the existential absurdity of freedom in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*” (53). Her narrative philosophy aligns with Camus’s vision in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “where authentic existence emerges not from meaning, but from the refusal to succumb to despair” (13).

Psychologically, Murdoch’s characters reveal profound alienation and self-deception. Meursault’s detachment in Camus’s *The Stranger* finds an echo in Charles Arrowby from *The Sea, The Sea*, whose “obsessive introspection becomes a battleground for repressed guilt and egoic illusions” (28). Arrowby’s distorted perception of reality parallels

Kafka's surreal treatment of alienation, "where psychological distortion becomes indistinguishable from external absurdity" (30).

Murdoch's fusion of philosophical discourse with psychological realism elevated the English novel, inspiring authors like A.S. Byatt and Ian McEwan, who similarly grapple with existential complexity and moral ambiguity in their works.

### **Broader Impacts on English Literary Forms**

The existential and absurdist visions of Camus, Ionesco, Sartre, and Kafka significantly reshaped the contours of English literary expression, introducing bold experiments in structure and profound thematic introspection. Their influence reverberates across genres, styles, and generations:

- **Narrative Fragmentation:** Kafka's disjointed storytelling in *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* "pioneered a narrative form where chaos and disorientation reflect the fractured self" (24). This fragmentation inspired English modernists such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, whose works—*Mrs Dalloway* and *Ulysses* respectively— "embrace stream-of-consciousness and nonlinear timelines to probe the interior depths of consciousness" (94). Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* further internalizes this disintegration, where the erratic narrative structure mirrors the protagonist's psychological disarray. Pinter's plays adopt similar formal fractures, using abrupt shifts, silences, and discontinuities to evoke existential unease.
- **Theatre of the Absurd:** Ionesco and Beckett transformed English drama through what Martin Esslin termed the *Theatre of the Absurd*, which abandoned conventional plot for metaphysical reflection. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the cyclical waiting reflects the futility of hope in an indifferent universe, while Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* "collapses language into nonsense, exposing the void beneath social rituals" (30). Tom Stoppard inherits this mantle in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, "where characters are trapped" (22) in a meta-theatrical limbo that mirrors Beckett's existential stasis.
- **Psychological Realism:** Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus's *The Stranger* brought internal crises—identity, alienation, and the confrontation with meaninglessness—to the forefront of literature. English writers like Graham Greene and Muriel Spark responded with

psychologically dense characters who grapple with moral ambiguity and existential anxiety, as seen in Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, "where self-deception and guilt become inescapable psychological burdens" (117)

- **Post-War Disillusionment:** The philosophical despair of absurdism resonated powerfully in post-war English literature. Camus's vision of a purposeless world finds a chilling analogue in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, "where civilization collapses into primal savagery, reflecting the psychological regression of humankind stripped of moral order" (55). This descent into meaninglessness captures the collective trauma and ethical uncertainty of a world emerging from global conflict.

### **Psychological and Philosophical Legacy**

The psychological resonance of absurdist literature lies in its stark portrayal of alienation, repression, and existential anxiety as defining features of the modern psyche. Kafka's haunting bureaucratic landscapes, such as in *The Trial*, laid the groundwork for dystopian visions like George Orwell's 1984, "where state surveillance and psychological manipulation echo Joseph K.'s plight in a world where truth is elusive and authority is unknowable" (93).

Camus and Sartre, meanwhile, challenged readers to confront the existential burden of freedom. In *The Magus* (1965), John Fowles "dramatizes this crisis through characters ensnared in psychological games that test their autonomy and identity" (29), echoing Sartre's notion that man is "condemned to be free" (78). Ionesco's surreal dialogues—where language disintegrates—were reinterpreted by Harold Pinter through silences and pauses, embedding psychological tension in every verbal and nonverbal gesture.

Philosophically, absurdism demanded that English literature grapple with the void—not by descending into nihilism, but by seeking authenticity amidst absurdity. Camus's exhortation to "live without appeal" (65) in *The Myth of Sisyphus* deeply influenced post-war writers who sought to redefine meaning in a fragmented world. Sartre's existential emphasis on agency and moral responsibility also inspired feminist and postcolonial explorations of freedom, notably in Doris Lessing's *The*

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*Golden Notebook*, “where identity and narrative itself fracture under ideological and emotional strain” (102).

Kafka’s existential dread and Ionesco’s critique of mindless conformity offered enduring frameworks for resisting societal norms, shaping the satirical visions of Angela Carter and J.G. Ballard. These English authors, responding to the absurdist legacy, dismantled illusions of order and reason, revealing literature not as a mirror of certainty, but as a stage for the eternal drama of human ambiguity and striving.

### **Conclusion**

The absurdist visions of Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Franz Kafka left an indelible imprint on 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature, not merely through stylistic innovation but through a profound engagement with the philosophical and psychological dilemmas of modern existence. Camus’s concept of the absurd—articulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*—and Sartre’s existential freedom as defined in *Being and Nothingness* provided a framework for exploring alienation, choice, and the burden of self-definition. These philosophical undercurrents reverberated through the minimalist bleakness of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and the moral introspection of Murdoch’s *The Sea, The Sea*, where psychological fragmentation and the search for authenticity converge.

Through stark depictions of disorientation, emotional paralysis, and fractured identities, absurdist literature captured the psychological toll of confronting a universe devoid of intrinsic meaning. Kafka’s portrayal of bureaucratic and existential entrapment in *The Trial* laid the groundwork for English narratives grappling with post-war trauma and societal disintegration. These works compelled English writers to abandon traditional narrative certainties in favor of exploring the fragmented self within a destabilized moral landscape.

Ultimately, the legacy of absurdism in English literature lies in its successful synthesis of philosophical speculation and psychological realism—offering a mirror to the inner anxieties and outer uncertainties of the modern human condition. Its enduring power resides in the way it speaks to universal experiences of loss, freedom, and the search for meaning. Future scholarship may profitably examine how these absurdist currents persist in contemporary English literature, particularly as writers

navigate the disorientations of a post-modern, globalized world still haunted by the same existential questions.

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