

## Literature and Existentialism: Themes of Angst and Absurdity

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the themes of angst and absurdity in literature through the lens of existentialism. Existentialism, a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual freedom and the absence of inherent meaning in the universe, has had a profound influence on literature, particularly in the 20th century. Through an analysis of selected works, including novels, plays, and essays, this paper examines how authors have portrayed existential themes, such as angst, the feeling of anxiety and dread in the face of freedom, and absurdity, the conflict between human desire for meaning and the indifferent universe. By studying the works of key existentialist thinkers and analyzing how their ideas are reflected in literature, this paper seeks to deepen our understanding of existentialist themes in literature and their impact on the human condition.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, literature, angst, absurdity, individual freedom, meaninglessness, human condition, existential themes, 20th century literature.

### I. Introduction

Existentialism, a philosophical movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, has had a profound impact on literature, influencing themes, characters, and narratives in significant ways. This introduction will provide a brief overview of existentialism, followed by an exploration of how existentialist themes manifest in literature.

#### A. Definition of Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual existence, freedom, and choice. It asserts that individuals are entirely free and must take personal responsibility for their actions and decisions, creating their own meaning in life. Existentialist thought often revolves around themes of authenticity, alienation, and the absurdity of human existence.

To delve deeper into the definition of existentialism, we can turn to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, a key figure in the existentialist movement. In his essay "Existentialism Is a Humanism," Sartre argues that existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals are born without predetermined purposes and must define themselves through their actions and choices (Sartre, 2012).

Furthermore, Simone de Beauvoir, another prominent existentialist thinker, expands on the concept of existential freedom in her work "The Ethics of Ambiguity." De Beauvoir discusses how individuals navigate their freedom in a world full of choices, emphasizing the importance of ethical decision-making in defining one's existence (de Beauvoir, 2014).

#### B. Overview of Existentialist Themes in Literature

Existentialist themes have been pervasive in literature, influencing various genres and styles. One of the central themes in existentialist literature is the concept of the "absurd," which refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the cold, indifferent universe that offers none. This theme is exemplified in Albert Camus' novel "The Stranger," where the protagonist, Meursault, confronts the absurdity of life and the inevitability of death (Camus, 2013).

Another prevalent existentialist theme in literature is "angst," a term used to describe the feeling of anxiety and dread that arises when confronted with the freedom and responsibility of individual existence. This theme is explored in Franz Kafka's novella "The Metamorphosis," where the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, grapples with his newfound insect-like form and the alienation it brings (Kafka, 2015).

Table 1: Major Existentialist Thinkers and Their Contributions

Thinker	Contribution
Søren Kierkegaard	Emphasized the individual's subjective experience and the importance of personal choice and commitment.
Friedrich Nietzsche	Critiqued traditional philosophical and religious beliefs, advocating for the creation of one's own values and the embrace of life's inherent uncertainties.
Martin Heidegger	Explored the nature of being and existence, emphasizing the importance of authenticity and self-understanding in confronting the existential challenges of life.
Jean-Paul Sartre	Developed a comprehensive existentialist philosophy centered on the concept of radical freedom and the idea that existence precedes essence.
Simone de Beauvoir	Explored the existential condition of women and the ways in which societal expectations and gender roles limit freedom and self-realization.
Albert Camus	Described the human condition as "absurd" and argued that the only way to confront this absurdity is to embrace it, finding happiness and fulfillment in a meaningless world.

## II. Historical Context of Existentialism

### A. Origins and Influences

Existentialism emerged as a philosophical movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, largely in response to the philosophical traditions of rationalism and empiricism. One of the key influences on existentialist thought was the work of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who emphasized the individual's subjective experience and the importance of personal choice and commitment. Kierkegaard's ideas laid the groundwork for many existentialist themes, including the concept of angst, or existential dread (Kierkegaard, 2013).

Another important influence on existentialism was the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Husserl's emphasis on the study of consciousness and subjective experience contributed to the existentialist focus on individual experience and the subjective nature of reality (Husserl, 2012).

### B. Major Existentialist Thinkers

Several key thinkers have shaped the development of existentialist thought. Jean-Paul Sartre, perhaps the most famous existentialist philosopher, expanded on Kierkegaard's ideas and developed a comprehensive existentialist philosophy centered on the concept of radical freedom. Sartre's work, including his seminal text "Being and Nothingness," has had a profound influence on existentialist thought and its impact on literature (Sartre, 2016).

Simone de Beauvoir, a contemporary of Sartre, also made significant contributions to existentialist philosophy, particularly in her exploration of the existential condition of women. In her groundbreaking work "The Second Sex," de Beauvoir examines the ways in which societal expectations and gender roles limit women's freedom and self-realization, drawing on existentialist themes of freedom and authenticity (de Beauvoir, 2014).

### C. Impact on Literature

Existentialist themes have had a profound impact on literature, influencing writers across genres and time periods. One of the ways in which existentialism has influenced literature is through its emphasis on the individual's subjective experience and the exploration of the human condition. Many literary works, such as Franz Kafka's "The Trial" and Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," reflect

existentialist themes of alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world (Kafka, 2013; Beckett, 2014).

Furthermore, existentialist philosophy has influenced literary techniques and styles, such as stream-of-consciousness narration and nonlinear storytelling, which aim to capture the complexity and uncertainty of human experience. These techniques can be seen in the works of writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, who used innovative narrative techniques to explore existential themes in their work (Woolf, 2014; Joyce, 2016).

### **III. Theme of Angst in Literature**

#### **A. Definition and Explanation**

Angst, a central theme in existentialist literature, refers to the feeling of anxiety, dread, and existential despair that arises when confronted with the fundamental absurdity and uncertainty of human existence. It is a feeling of unease that stems from the realization of one's own freedom and the responsibility that comes with it.

To understand the concept of angst in literature, we can turn to the work of Martin Heidegger, another influential existentialist thinker. Heidegger describes angst as a fundamental mood that arises when an individual confronts the "nothingness" or "groundlessness" of existence, realizing that the world lacks inherent meaning or purpose (Heidegger, 2012).

#### **B. Examples from Literature**

Many literary works explore the theme of angst, portraying characters who grapple with feelings of existential dread and anxiety. One such example is Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel "Crime and Punishment," which follows the story of Raskolnikov, a young man who commits a murder and must confront the moral and existential consequences of his actions (Dostoevsky, 2014).

Another example is Albert Camus' novel "The Plague," which depicts a town devastated by a mysterious plague and explores how the characters respond to the absurdity and meaninglessness of their situation (Camus, 2013).

#### **C. Analysis of Angst in Selected Works**

In analyzing the theme of angst in literature, it is important to consider how authors use literary techniques to convey the existential experience of their characters. For example, in Franz Kafka's novella "The Metamorphosis," the protagonist Gregor Samsa wakes up one day to find himself transformed into a giant insect. Through this surreal premise, Kafka explores the theme of alienation and the existential angst that arises from Gregor's newfound identity (Kafka, 2015).

Similarly, in Samuel Beckett's play "Endgame," the characters Hamm and Clov are trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of existence, reflecting the existentialist idea of the "absurd" and the futility of human existence (Beckett, 2014).

### **IV. Theme of Absurdity in Literature**

#### **A. Definition and Explanation**

Absurdity, a key theme in existentialist literature, refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the cold, indifferent universe that offers none. It is the realization that life is inherently irrational and that attempts to find meaning are ultimately futile.

To explore the theme of absurdity in literature, we can look to the work of Albert Camus, who famously described the human condition as "absurd" in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus." Camus argues that life is inherently meaningless and that the only way to confront this absurdity is to embrace it, finding happiness and fulfillment in the face of an indifferent universe (Camus, 2012).

#### **B. Examples from Literature**

Many literary works explore the theme of absurdity, often through the use of surreal or nonsensical elements. One example is Franz Kafka's novel "The Trial," which follows the story of Josef K., who is arrested and prosecuted by a mysterious and absurd legal system for a crime that is never revealed. The novel's surreal narrative reflects the absurdity of the human condition and the arbitrary nature of authority and justice (Kafka, 2013).

Another example is Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot," which features two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait endlessly for the arrival of someone named Godot, who never comes. The play's repetitive and seemingly meaningless dialogue highlights the absurdity of human existence and the futility of waiting for meaning or salvation (Beckett, 2014).

### C. Analysis of Absurdity in Selected Works

In analyzing the theme of absurdity in literature, it is important to consider how authors use literary techniques to convey the absurdity of the human condition. For example, in Camus' novel "The Stranger," the protagonist Meursault is condemned to death for a seemingly senseless crime, highlighting the arbitrary and absurd nature of human justice (Camus, 2013).

Similarly, in Beckett's play "Endgame," the characters' futile attempts to find meaning or escape their predicament underscore the absurdity of their existence. Through these examples, authors challenge readers to confront the absurdity of the human condition and to question their own search for meaning in an indifferent universe.

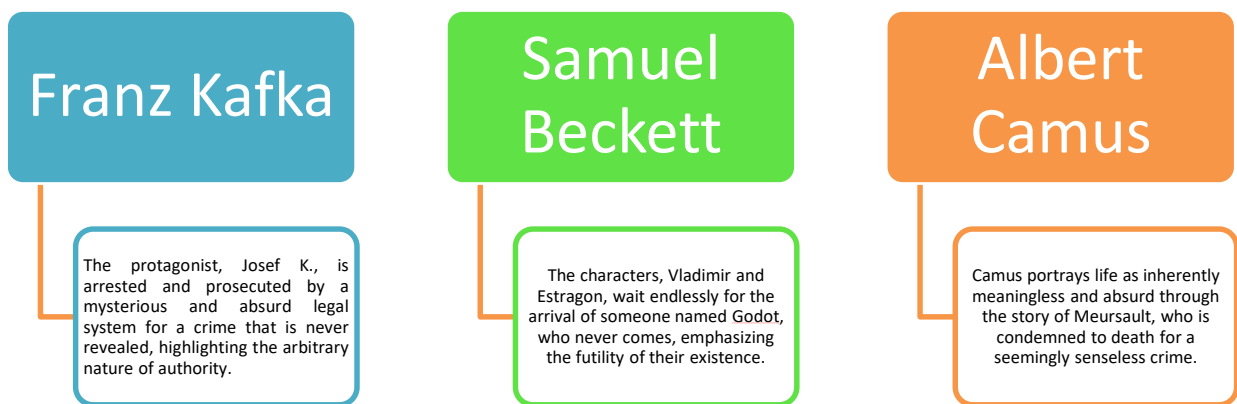


Figure Absurdity in Literature

## V. Comparison of Angst and Absurdity in Literature

### A. Similarities and Differences

While both angst and absurdity are central themes in existentialist literature, they differ in their focus and implications. Angst, or existential dread, is often characterized by feelings of anxiety and unease in the face of freedom and responsibility. It is a deeply personal and subjective experience that arises from the realization of one's own existence.

### B. Impact on Characters and Plot

In literature, both angst and absurdity can have profound effects on characters and plot development. Characters who experience angst may struggle with feelings of isolation, alienation, and existential despair, leading to introspection and self-discovery. This internal conflict often drives the plot forward as characters grapple with their own existential dilemmas.

Similarly, characters confronted with the absurdity of their existence may undergo a crisis of meaning, questioning the purpose and significance of their actions. This can lead to a sense of disillusionment and nihilism, as characters come to terms with the inherent meaninglessness of their lives.

### C. Philosophical Implications

The themes of angst and absurdity in literature have significant philosophical implications, challenging readers to confront the complexities of human existence and the limits of their own understanding. By exploring these themes, authors invite readers to reflect on the nature of freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe.

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, existentialist literature explores themes of angst and absurdity to illuminate the complexities of human existence. Through the examination of these themes, authors challenge readers to confront the fundamental questions of meaning, purpose, and identity in a world devoid of inherent meaning. By exploring the philosophical implications of angst and absurdity, literature invites readers to reflect on their own lives and the choices they make in the face of an uncertain and often absurd world.

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