

---

**ABSURDISM: THE CONTINUAL EXISTENTIAL QUEST FOR HOPE  
IN A HOPELESS, PURPOSELESS, ALIENATED, ENTRAPPED, AND  
LABYRINTHINE WORLD**

---

**\*Samapti Banerjee**

University of Burdwan, Department of English, Burdwan. West Bengal.

Article Received: 12 February 2026, Article Revised: 03 March 2026, Published on: 23 March 2026

**\*Corresponding Author: Samapti Banerjee**

University of Burdwan, Department of English, Burdwan. West Bengal.

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.5286>

**ABSTRACT:**

Absurdist fiction is a distinguished genre of English Literature. The genre primarily emerged in France and Germany. It appeared during the 1950s. This writings are an immediate reaction of the devastating effects of the Wars in human life. The disenchantment of the wars has created a huge void and meaninglessness in human existence. The main characteristic of the Absurd fiction is the purposelessness of human life. Absurd theatre has a great impact on the absurd fictions. The shape of Absurdist novels is circular. The ending concludes with the beginning, therefore referring the journey is without any purpose, no progress and no fixed target. The novels use satire, dark humor, the humiliation and invalidity of reason, meaningless actions etc. Martin Esslin first coined the term in his essay 'The Theatre of Absurd' published in the year 1960. Esslin points out that these theatres have a common factor that is absurd which is "absurd is that which has no purpose, or goal, or objective." This is a quotation of the famous Absurdist Romanian-French playwright Eugene Ionesco. Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Albert Camus, Saul Bellow, Donald Barthelme and Cormac McCarthy et.al are the prominent writers of Absurdist fiction. The Absurd fiction has been derived from the Latin word "absurdus" which refers to the 'contrary of reason' and 'inharmonious'.

**KEYWORDS:** Absurdist, meaninglessness, purposelessness, disillusionment, war, incongruity, humiliation of reason, satire, loss of identity and individuality, hopelessness, circular, cyclical, entrapment, threat.

**Major Characteristics of Absurd novels:**

1. Purposelessness of human existence
2. Abasement of reason
3. Nothingness
4. Incongruity and inharmonic
5. Circular plot- lack of fixed target
6. Satire, dark humor
7. Fragmented narratives
8. Modernist technique
9. Cold indifference of people to surrounding things
10. Detachment and lack of emotional attachment
11. Repetitive, monotonous and pointless toil- no target, no achievement –circular action.
12. Alienation and isolation from the surrounding or the society
13. No proper communication-failure to communicate rationally
14. Lack of logical and linear plot

**INTRODUCTION:** Absurdist fictions have greatly inspired by the Absurdist theatre. Absurdism is the prominent Modernist approach of literature. Existentialism and Nihilism have great influence on this genre. The art forms Dada and Surrealism have also evidently impacted the Absurd fiction. In the foundational work *The Myth of Sisyphus* of the great French philosopher Albert Camus the meaninglessness and circular motion, purposelessness is shown with vivid portraying.

**METHODOLOGY:** The study thoroughly follows close reading of all the texts. The textual, analytical and interpretative studies help in the deeper understanding of the Absurdism notion and crucial absurdist features of the characters and the circumstances through which they go through. The secondary sources, scholarly articles and writings have assisted in the enrichment and clarity of the texts.

**Some major Absurd novels**

**The Metamorphosis (1915): Franz Kafka** – is essentially an Absurd novel by the German author Franz Kafka. The German *Die Verwandlung* is also translated as the Transformation. The abrupt transformation of the protagonist Gregor Samsa into a ‘monstrous vermin’ is without any rationality. He is a salesman of a cloth business. His occupation needs constant travelling. He is the only earning man of his family. Despite of being terrified of his sudden

transformation, he is not panic-stricken rather he is panicking for his job. Mundane matters make him worry rather than his sudden physical change. He has transformed into a huge insect and cannot move from his bed, he is stuck with it. One of his office clerks comes to investigate his absence. Now transformed Gregor is unable to communicate with him or his family members. He is crawling in the ground and now becomes injured for forcefully dragging his body from the bed. The clerk is terrified by his absurd appearance and escapes from his house. His parents have locked him inside the room. His father is a bankrupt. They are not much bothered about his awkward condition. They show an absurd reaction and cold indifference in such an absurd situation. They are only concerned for their economic inconveniences. Gregor is only cared by Grete, his sister. He is now adapting his new entity and now loves to eat rotten food. Now he looks for large space to crawl all around. The family members show lack of empathy to Gregor. They are agitated by *its* presence. They have exhausted for its existence, '*it*' has become a burden for them. Gregor understands he is unwanted and in severe agony and physical pain breathes his last. His family members get relieved. All of them are employed, happy, and optimistic and decide to move to another apartment. The society, outside world and Gregor's workplace maintain a lack of concern for his existence or demise.

**The Trial (1925): Franz Kafka-** In the German *Der Prozess* or The trial in English the bank employee Joseph K. is arrested on his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday by two ruffians and executed on his 31st Birthday. His crime is not specified and he cannot identify the two people who arrest him. The uncertainty of existence is evident from the very incident. Existence is meaningless and absurd. Most absurd thing is that even after his arrest he is working in the bank and can do his daily activities normally. The law and court is projected as corrupt. They lack clarity and truthfulness. The court offices are situated in a crowded attic and are meant for indefinite postponement. He does not know his actual charges everything is absurd. Joseph K. is entrapped in a labyrinthine and hellish trap and he is unable to get rid of it. He represents the alienated modern man. The court system is complex, obscure and unjust and his lawyer Advocate Huld is also incapable of giving him proper legal support. Joseph K is tragically assassinated in the quarry by the butcher's knife completely ignorant of the offense he is accused for.

**The Myth of Sisyphus (1942): Albert Camus** –This renowned essay depicts the aimless and monotonous toil of Sisyphus, a Greek Mythological figure. He is punished to push a huge

boulder up to the mountain but as the huge substance reaches on to the top, it falls down abruptly to the down. It symbolizes the futility of human action and meaninglessness and purposelessness of his existence. The whole Universe is in an absolute silence and indifference with whatever is going on surrounding it. Sisyphus is the ultimate absurdist hero who is well aware of the futility and hopelessness of his task but has collected his own energy to this repetitive action. The repetitive action refers to the regular repetition of human activity. Sisyphus desperately accepts his cursed life and destiny and confidently asserts his own humanity. "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart despite of being frustrated the essay concludes in an optimistic tone. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." The essay is dedicated to Pascal Pia.

**The Plague (1947): Albert Camus-** The French novel *La Peste* or *The Plague* is an excellent example of Absurdism. Bubonic plague has been spread in the Algerian city of Oran. Its targets are innocent people. The novelist exposes the irrationality of the plague. When the poor, helpless people are suffering and dying – the novel shows the indifference of the Universe and nature. There is no divine or universal order. The Jesuit priest considers this condition as divine punishment. The novel disregards any religious point of view. The physician Dr. Rieux and others are trying to solve the disease with their utmost endeavor and revolting against the super power and are well aware of their limitations and the hopelessness and meaninglessness of the situation but they do not give up and carry on their duty whole heartedly . The people of Oran are alienated and quarantined in their own city, entirely alienated from the world.

**Catch-22 (1961): Joseph Heller-** The novel is set during World War II during the years 1942-44. The U. S. Army Air Forces B-25 bombardier John Yossarian is the protagonist of the novel. He is the anti-hero who is disenchanted with war. He is disgusted with the futility and meaninglessness of war. He has participated in forty-four combats and has escaped successfully twenty seven more wars. He has experienced the severity, massacre and devastation of wars and total seventy one wars he has faced during his career. He has now completely traumatized, terrified and dismayed with the notion of destructive warfare. He is escaping the combats in the military hospitals disguised as a chronic liver patient. The superior commanding officers of the authority are chasing him frantically. The higher officers like Colonel Cathcart possesses an indifferent attitude to the soldiers, they fight less and enforce the soldiers to fight more wars and are less bothered about their wellbeing and lives.

Though Yossarian has been projected as a selfish and coward soldier in the surface level but in actuality he is a competent flyer, a man of moral integrity who is being conspired by the higher authorities, by the doctors and military officers. The violence and calamities of wars have evoked a sense of fear, insecurity, trauma and disillusionment in him. Paranoid situation is prevailed in the War fronts. Rational behavior is considered as insanity whether madness is celebrated. Higher authority is corrupted, selfish, chasing monetary profit and power. Power is exercised by the insane, insensible, corrupt and irrational people. The pilots are incapable of escaping the threatening situations in the warfare. They are the mere puppets in the hands of commanding officers and dwells in and suffers from angst, depression and existential crisis.

**Rhinoceros (1959): Eugene Ionesco-** This is a fundamental Absurdist play written in French by the renowned Romanian-French dramatist Eugene Ionesco. This play was included in Martin Esslin's essay 'The Theatre of the Absurd'. This drama is also influenced by the World War II and its tragic aftermath. The citizens of the provincial French town are abruptly transformed into Rhinoceros and suffer from an illogical disease called Rhinocerositic. Except the protagonist Berenger, all the inhabitants go through this sudden and irrational mass metamorphosis. This is inspired by the Surrealist art form. The massive transformations of the people reveal their attitude, their loss of individuality, identity and a mass or herd attitude and outlook towards life. They are incapable of discussing rational, logical topic, utter failure to communicate properly and intelligently. No more human voice except that of Berenger and everywhere is Rhino trumpeting. The alienated, solitary, intoxicated and imperfect, Berenger is the protagonist and the classic absurd hero who has not lost his individuality in the extreme dominance of societal pressure of dominant discourse and autocratic ideology like the masses who have completely lost their individuality, humanity, self worth and ideas but follow the societal dictates unquestionably and with reverence. They are dwelling the animalistic lives in the herd losing individual identity. *"Humanism is dead, those who follow it are just old sentimentalists"*. Incidents occur in the play repetitively following cyclical rhythm.

**The Birthday Party (1958): Harold Pinter-** This is a crucial absurdist play and also a comedy of menace. The play is pervaded with humor and horror. The birthday party actually exists or it is an illusion is not evident from the play. There is an absurd horror, constant threat; existential dread is prevailing in the text. There is a complete disruption of

communication. Silences, incongruities, pauses pervade the communication. The characters are experiencing identity and existential threat. The sudden intrusion of two strangers McCann and Goldberg terrifies and threatens the domestic atmosphere. Stanley is interrogated and accused and he is being traumatized by the unwanted violent intruders. There interrogation is absurdist and irrational. The plot is haphazard. The characters lack motive and purpose. The room, Pinter house is claustrophobic and a feeling of choking and entrapment is there.

**The Caretaker (1960): Harold Pinter-** This absurdist play does not follow a logical and linear plot. There is no logical communication among the characters, no serious progression of the plot. The absurdity of the homeless man, the confusion of his real identity, the disorderly, messy and untidy condition of the room. Mick's irrational and aggressive behavior, and Davies's entry into their house by Aston is not properly explained and are totally absurdist. Davies's identity is ambiguous. Bernard Jenkins or Mac Davies which is his real name is completely unclear. Aston is kind, sensitive, traumatized and having gone through mental breakdown. Davies is impudent, arrogant and disloyal; He continuously tries to create a rift between the two brothers. He is desperate to stay in their house and to work as a caretaker but he actually does the complete contradictory things. The whole setting and plot creates an ambience of mystery and menace. Throughout the play the characters show uncertainty, unsystematic, meaninglessness and purposelessness of modern lives. The play is pervaded with constant psychological tension and threat. Davies' entry into the house aggravated the tension and mental unrest in the household.

**Waiting for Godot (1953): Samuel Beckett-** This is a fundamental absurdist novel. Vladimir and Estragon are endlessly waiting for Godot. The barren, desolate setting refers to the meaningless, alienated and monotonous existence. Repetitive actions, cyclical structure of the plot suggests the repetitive routine of human life. The story evokes the predominant sense of hopelessness and desolation. Human beings try to get rid from the endless loopholes but are unable to quit and are compelled to adhere to the repetitive, meaningless and absurd actions. They are entrapped in the false hope but hopelessness prevails in reality. The concept of Godot is itself an enigma, a veritable mystery, a puzzle which will never be solved. The plot is full of irrational conversation. The play suggests the hollowness, total void and emptiness of human existence.

**Krapp’s Last Tape (1958): Samuel Beckett-** This is another vital absurdist play. It also deals with the fact of existential emptiness, identity crisis, impact of past and memory. Krapp, an aged man is listening to his past records in the tape on his 69<sup>th</sup> birthday. The dialogues are incoherent. To hold the past is impossible, the longing to hold onto the consistent self identity is absurd. Alienation and loneliness is a crucial theme of the modern existence.

**Lost Generation and Absurdism:** Lost generation is the immediate aftermath of the World War I. The term was first coined by Gertrude Stein and first used by Earnest Hemingway in his debut novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). This movement shows the post-war Generation who are disenchanted with the notion of war, lack of faith in religion, desolate, frustrated, aimless and alienated human beings. They lack purpose in lives. They cannot communicate properly and used to intoxicate themselves a lot to escape from the reality. Absurdism is the concept emerged after World War II. Martin Esslin first used the term in his *Theatre of Absurd*. This notion refers to the absurd, meaningless, purposeless human existence. They live an alienated, follow monotonous, repetitive routine of their life despite being aware of the aimlessness of their work they carry on their futile actions. They also fail to communicate rationally and suffering a huge existential threat.

<b>Lost Generation</b>	<b>Absurdism</b>
1. After affect of World War I	1. Aftermath of World War II.
2. Term coined by Gertrude Stein.	2. Term coined by Martin Esslin.
3. Moral disenchantment	3. Existential meaninglessness
4. Social alienation	4. Isolation and alienation
5. Often concludes as being ‘Lost’	5. Mostly concludes in a defiant happiness (Sisyphus)

**CONCLUSION:** Thus the Absurdism is a crucial literary movement which has projected in theatre, plays and novels. The Absurdism reflects the alienation, absurd and meaningless existence of modern human beings. They are incapable to communicate with each other in a logical and rational way. Fragmented narratives refer to their shattered existence. They are repeating their activities in a monotonous routine wise system and there is a cyclical structure of it. They are entrapped in the loophole of hopeless existence but still they are trying and keep up going on with least progression in their lives as if they are entrapped in a certain point in the uncertainty of their lives journey but they cannot escape their impending doom.

**REFERENCES:**

1. Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano (La Cantatrice Chauve)* was first performed on May 11, 1950, at the Théâtre des Noctambules. Ionesco followed this with *The Lesson (La Leçon)* in 1951 and *The Chairs (Les Chaises)* in 1952.
2. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was first performed on 5 January 1953 at the Théâtre de Babylone [de; fi; fr] in Paris.
3. Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. 1953.
4. Beckett, Samuel. *Krapp's Last Tape*. 1958.
5. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. 1942.
6. Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. 1947.
7. Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. 1961.
8. Ionesco, Eugène. *Rhinoceros*. 1959.
9. Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*. 1915.
10. Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. 1925.
11. Pinter, Harold. *The Birthday Party*. 1958.
12. Pinter, Harold. *The Caretaker*. 1960.
13. Barnes, Hazel E. *The Existential Imagination*.
14. Billington, Michael. *Harold Pinter*.
15. Bloom, Harold, editor. *Joseph Heller's Catch-22*.
16. Burkman, Katherine H. *Modernism and the Theatre of the Absurd*.
17. Cohn, Ruby. *Absurd Drama*.
18. Cohn, Ruby. *Samuel Beckett: A Study of His Novels*.
19. Corngold, Stanley. *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form*.
20. Cruickshank, John. *Camus and the Literature of Revolt*.
21. Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.
22. Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*.
23. Harding, James M. *Understanding Eugène Ionesco*.
24. McCarthy, Patrick. *Albert Camus and the Search for Meaning*.
25. Merrill, Robert, editor. *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*.
26. Pilling, John, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*.
27. Preece, Julian, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*.
28. Quigley, Austin E. *The Pinter Problem*.
29. Adorno, Theodor W. "Trying to Understand Endgame."
30. Bair, Deirdre. *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*.

31. Bentley, Eric. *The Playwright as Thinker*.
32. Fletcher, John. *About Beckett: The Playwright and the Work*.
33. Gontarski, S. E., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*.
34. Hinchliffe, Arnold P. *The Absurd*.
35. Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land*. 1922.
36. Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925.
37. Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. 1926.
38. Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. 1929.
39. Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. 1933.
40. Dos Passos, John. *Three Soldiers*. 1921.
41. Cowley, Malcolm. *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*.
42. Hoffman, Frederick J. *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*.
43. Lehan, Richard. *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel*.
44. Meyers, Jeffrey. *Hemingway: A Biography*.
45. Mizener, Arthur. *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald*.