

## **Exploring Existentialism and Meaning: Philosophical Perspectives in English and American Novels**

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**Abstract:** British and American novelists use their novels as carriers to state existentialism philosophy, which not only considers people's living state, but also guides people to choose independently and create value. This paper first introduces the background of existentialism, then analyzes the development and performance of existentialism in British and American novels, and finally explores the significance of existentialism in British and American novels for the creation of existentialism literary works and the criticism of reality. It aims to provide reference for literary creators, truly improve the quality of domestic and foreign novels, and promote the prosperity and development of literature.

**Keywords:** British and American Novels, Philosophical Views, Existentialism; Meaning

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Existentialist philosophy shows that the highest individual value is reflected from the aspect of free will. While individuals enjoy freedom of choice, they should also have a sense of responsibility. British and American novels contain certain philosophical elements of existentialism. With the release of novels in most countries in the world, existentialism has risen and spread widely, influencing people's choices and making them take actions to better grasp the present. It can be seen that the philosophical views of existentialism and meaning in British and American novels have practical significance.

### **2. BACKGROUND OF EXISTENTIALISM**

In the 19th century, Kierkegaard proposed Christian existentialism, which was the first appearance of existentialism (Zhao, 2024). After that, IELts Bear and related scholars innovatively developed on top of Christian existentialism and created atheistic existentialism. With the rise of existentialism philosophy in the 20th century, new existentialism elements were added to British and American literature. After 1918, the speed of scientific and technological development accelerated, enabling people to

obtain material satisfaction driven by scientific and technological forces. Relatively speaking, people's beliefs gradually weakened, and existentialism emerged under this trend. From 1931 to 1945, the society was in a period of war, and both scholars and ordinary people were in a confused and fearful state of life. Some British and American literary writers spread existential theory in the form of writing works, which not only injected new ideas into literary works, but also met the spiritual needs of readers (Ong, 2009). Among them, the creators of English literature described the living conditions of people at that time with the method of existentialism, showing the emptiness to readers and pointing to the survival dilemma. British and American literature shows that people are connected with each other. Once people's sense of existence is weakened, they will be lonely and uneasy, which will easily lead to rebellious behavior, and they will pursue freedom and prove choice in a deviant way, which again provides social conditions for the formation of existentialism. From 1940s to 1950s, existentialism in British and American literary works has become a trend in the field of literature, and gradually spread to the European region. The emergence of literary works with rich connotation and absurd style is the best proof of the formation and development of existentialism (Bosong, 2023).

### 3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXISTENTIALISM IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN NOVELS

From the perspective of literary creators and their works, this paper objectively analyzes the development of existentialism in British and American novels. The works of representative authors and the construction of existentialism are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Existentialist Construction in Anglo-American Fiction Based on Literary Creators and their Works

Country of Origin	The Literary Creator	Works of Art	Existentialism
Britain.	Alice Murdoch	"Off the Net"	Absorption and application
Britain.	Pinter	The Birthday Party	Learn from and develop
Britain.	John Fowles	The Sorcerer	Special Topics
The United States	Jack Kroak	On the Road	Ecological domain topics
The United States	Saul Bellow	"The Man Who Swayed"	Problem of alienation
The United States	Alice Walker	The Color Purple	Freedom, choice, action

### 3.1 Alice Murdoch

British novelist Alice Murdoch writes novels with existential elements from both philosophical and literary perspectives. The novelist makes good use of allegorality in writing, in which philosophical speculation makes her works unique and enhances her influence and popularity in the industry (Wang & Zou, 2023). *Under the Net* describes the hostile state between characters and the environment, as well as the relationship between actual life and imaginary life, thereby highlighting existentialism. Alice Murdoch permeates her own literary views in the work, and elaborates existentialism thoughts by combining some scenes. In her other novels, Alice Murdoch ponders the relationship between existential destiny and religion. The reason why Alice Murdoch can absorb existentialism in her novels is mainly influenced by Sartre's existentialism.

### 3.2 Pinter

The theme of Pinter's novels is that foreign things break the inner peace of the master of the room, and make the master full of distrust and fear. Just as the absurd novels are created on the theoretical basis of existentialism, their core ideas are summarized as the world is absurd and people are suffering.

Among them, the existentialism thought of French Sartre has a subtle influence on the theme of Pinter's novels, which explains why most of Pinter's works take the destruction and threat of foreign things as the theme, and show people's predicament incisively and vividly based on the existentialism element (Cotkin, 2003).

### 3.3 John Fowles

He is a writer of form innovation and a representative of literary existentialism. Since the beginning of his literary creation, John Fowles has expressed his views on the topic of existentialism. From the perspective of the spread of existentialist philosophy, it happened that human beings were in a crisis situation. At that time, human beings were faced with the problem of survival, and people longed for freedom and got rid of shackles, thus being in a lonely and brave situation. When people came into contact with novels containing existentialist thoughts, they provided spiritual comfort to people in an invisible way, which provided a broad space for the development of existentialist literature works (Xu, 2023). After World War II, both people and society sought stability and were actually in pain. With the increasingly obvious

existentialism in his novels, John Fowles contributed cultural values to citizens and society, delivered his own views, and aroused the consensus of like-minded philosophers, thus setting off a cultural trend of thought based on his novels (Olson, 2012).

### 3.4 Jack Kerouac

The representative work "On the Road" contains existential elements. It mainly describes people's strong desire for survival, people's deep thinking for their own development in the face of the crisis from the ecological field, and people's concern about the society. Jack Kerouac insists on the theme and clue of his creation, especially the existentialism theme and clue in the ecological field, which is closely related to the ecological environment of human society. From the actual situation of social development, human beings are in the situation of ecological crisis, and the crisis has posed a threat to the normal survival and development of human beings, which can be seen from the creation of American literary works.

Based on this, the phenomenon of anti-traditional consciousness and opposition to mainstream literature comes into being. American social system, moral code, values and other fields all reflect existentialism, but the existentialism of novels in a different way more intuitive expression of dissatisfaction, presenting a multi-cultural phenomenon, to achieve the comprehensive penetration of existentialism in the field of American literature (Billington, 2021).

### 3.5 Saul Bellow

This writer elaborates existentialism around the problem of alienation. What is man and what is the purpose of man's existence become the goal pursued by Saul Bellow. He also believes that goal seeking is meaningless, that there is no essence in the hostile world.

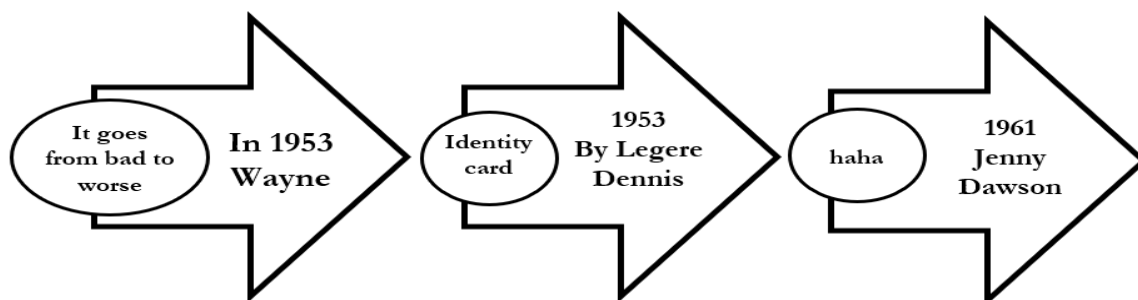
### 3.6 Alice Walker

Alice Walker is a black writer. In her novel 'The Color Purple', she conveys existentialism, elaborates on racial equality and self-seeking. Alice Walker is relatively positive in the process of developing existentialism philosophy. She believes that people should have the courage to pursue freedom, make the right choice, and put the choice into practice, so as to break free and meet the dawn (Den Dulk, 2014).

#### 4. THE EXPRESSION OF EXISTENTIALISM IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN NOVELS

##### 4.1 Self

The theoretical tone of existentialism is that "existence precedes essence," among which the three British novels (as shown in Figure 1) are spread around the theme of seeking self. Some characters in the novel are able to consciously seek "Who am I? The answer to the question, and some of the protagonists seek "what am I?" in the way of rebellion and struggle. The answer. In the British and American novels, the growing process of teenagers has both a mild side and a violent side. In the existentialism thought of different novelists, there are different characters and events. When the protagonist is seeking self-solution and thinks that seeking is futile, in fact, the process of seeking is a process of confrontation with the world.



**Figure 1:** Search for Representative British Novels Under the Theme of Self

##### 4.2 Absurdity

From the perspective of existentialism philosophy, absurdity means that people cannot perfectly integrate with the environment, and people feel uncomfortable living and developing in the environment, and their emotions cannot be responded to in the world, thus falling into a situation of depression and hesitation. Based on this, the creators of novels reflect it in the protagonist. This feature is fully reflected in the protagonists of the two works (Wei, 2023). In existentialism, the world is so strange, why should people exist, so it is absurd to believe that people exist. Literary writers such as Sartre and Beckett describe the absurdity of characters and plots in their novels. In addition, some English poetry works also convey the existentialism thought of the world being absurd and the meaninglessness of human existence. In American novels, Holden, Ambrose and other protagonists have experienced an absurd life path. They are depressed and confused in their hearts, so that they question their own identity and do not know what to do (Crowell, 2012).

#### 4.3 Death

In existentialism, the existence of human beings in the absurd world is not inevitable, but accidental. Based on this, life has only length, not quality. Novelists who hold this view often take "death" as their writing theme to convey the idea of the absurdity of life and fate. Representative works include the British novel "A House", "Elevator" and so on, the world is absurd to terrible, people in the world is so small, people can do nothing about their own fate and life and death. Holden, the protagonist of the American novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, appears as a weak man, and no matter he is at home, he is not given due attention. Moreover, he has experienced such brutal events as sexual harassment, blackmail and beating by his peers, which makes him think of becoming the catcher in the Rye, and finally he falls into a mental breakdown (Wu, 2021).

#### 4.4 Loneliness

Existentialism believes that the world absurdity will make people spiritually alienated and fall into loneliness. It is not only reflected in the indifference between people, but also in the whole lonely situation of modern society. It is impossible to realize the deep communication between people and between people and the world. In the long run, it will make people uncomfortable and lack of security. In the *House Sitter*, three people under the same roof are isolated from each other, their words and deeds are not understood, and they accuse and complain to each other. In fact, everyone in the room is very lonely and goes further and further on the road of alienation. When American novelists convey the theme of existentialism -- loneliness, they tend to position the protagonists as young boys and girls, who are marginalized in society as a disadvantaged group. From the perspective of boys and girls themselves (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2020), due to their young age, lack of maturity and economic dependence on their parents, they are in the stage of having ideas and being unable to implement them. This kind of vulnerable group is easy to fall into a lonely situation, which will make readers have a strong sense of alienation in the novel. For example, in the novel *Lost in the Happy House*, Ambrose is only 13 years old. He is not confident, often marginalized in the family and society, and often appears as a bystander. As he grows up, this sense of loneliness becomes stronger.

#### 4.5 Choice and responsibility

Existentialist philosophy believes that even if people are in the absurd

world, they should have the courage to choose, take active actions, and explore their own nature. Bryan's *Climbing the Ladder* (1957) shows the theme of free choice and portrays the self-created existential hero, who challenges the norm and believes that there is no absolute standard to follow. After the choice, we should have the ability to take responsibility (Nguyen & Truong, 2023), show our self-essence to the greatest extent, restore the value of human beings' own existence, and call on more people in the society to objectively view the existence of the world and the existence of people. As a social individual, we should make every effort to make the right choice, congregate them into positive factors driving social development, break through the survival dilemma, and explore the future development path (Guo, 2019).

## 5. THE MEANING OF EXISTENTIALISM IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN NOVELS

The existentialist writers in British and American novels believe that all human beings are equal, and people have the right to pursue freedom and create value by initiative. Based on the carrier of novels, the philosophy of existentialism has been extended to other countries around the world, attracting more people's attention and practice to existentialism. Sartre proposed that man exists in isolation, and this existence is filled with mystery (Burton, 2022). Existentialist philosophers believe that people exist in society, society gives people the identity of social citizenship, and people have relations with external objects and others. The philosophy of existentialism in British and American novels leads to deep thinking about the relationship between individuals and individuals and between individuals and the environment.

### 5.1 Criticizing the Society of Cross-Flow of Logistics

Under the background of different times, there are class stratification, racial difference and wealth gap in society. Through the carrier of British and American novels, existentialism criticizes the society with logistics, pointing out the hypocrisy of white society, the wantonly noise of poor white people, and the white class's lack of resistance to money. To some extent, based on the existentialist philosophy, we help vulnerable groups and marginalized groups in society to achieve justice, and hope that these groups get due attention and pursue social fairness and equality. Taking the *Catcher in the Rye* and *Lost in the Happy House* as examples, the

protagonists are white and belong to teenagers. Although they do not suffer from racial discrimination because of their skin color, their growth path is full of thorns. Digging deep into existentialism and its critical practical significance, the specific expression is as follows (Ratcliffe, 2008). First, pointing to white social hypocrisy. The phrase "hypocrisy" appears many times in the *Catcher in the Rye*, which is a concrete embodiment of existentialism's criticism of the white society. Deep in his heart, Holden disliked Andolini and Haas, the principal of Eldon Hills Middle School, thinking that they were very hypocritical and lack sincerity. Even if the appearance gives people a sense of kindness, but in fact, it fails to do meticulous care for students, lack of love spirit. The protagonist is angry because of the heart, coupled with the teacher's lax discipline, can always play truant and other bad behavior against the norms, over time, contaminated with the hypocrisy of the society. In addition, the shopkeeper of Vig's bar in the novel is also very hypocritically. In his eyes, money and interests come first, and he represents the American middle class. In this way, the existential thought in the novel reveals the hypocritically side of the characters. For example, in the novel *Lost in the Happy House*, the protagonist and his family belong to the middle and upper classes. Normally, their words and deeds should match their identities, but in fact, they do not. Second, poor white people scream. The poor white people in the *Catcher in the Rye* include Maurice and Sunni, who always take advantage of their arrogance to deceive others by virtue of being white. From the perspective of existentialist philosophy, Maurice, Sun Ni and other poor white people lack kindness, lack sympathy for vulnerable groups, and often obtain money by despicable means. The protagonist Holden used to be a victim. In sharp contrast, Horvitz, although an ordinary taxi driver, was simple. After making his career choice, he was happy and dedicated to his work. He made a living through auxiliary actions rather than giving up on himself, and his positive worker also had a meaning (Shi, 2023). Third, the white class has no resistance to money. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, DB is a writer who works in Hollywood. People around DB admire him very much and they all take a flattering attitude. The protagonist has been the bearer of friendly messages many times. Those who profited from the undertaker business were invited to speak at the school. On his way to Ocean City, Ambrose imagined that he would be rich and successful when he grew up. It can be seen that under the effect of existentialism, people who have no restraint in front of money will lose objectivity and reason.



## 5.2 Criticizing the Indifferent Family Relationship and Parent-Child Relationship

One of the meanings of existential philosophy in British and American novels is to criticize the indifferent family relationship and parent-child relationship, and believe that the family should be full of love and the harmonious construction of parent-child relationship. When the family and parent-child relationship are guided by the correct education concept, it will help to improve the happiness of the family and enhance the adhesion between parents and children. Under existentialism, the British and American concept of self-reliance parenting has certain benefits, but it will also lead to the looseness and indifference of the parent-child relationship and the relationship between family members to varying degrees, which will make the teenagers suffer from difficulty, confusion, loneliness and pain. In *Catcher in the Rye* and *Lost in the Happy House*, the protagonist thinks that the parent-child relationship is not close enough. Among them, Holden's mother is impatient, and there are often conflicts between him and his mother due to the age gap, personality difference and cognitive difference, and the parents quarrel continuously, which affects Holden's mind. In addition, Holden boarded in the school and had relatively few opportunities to live and communicate with his parents, which was not conducive to the establishment of parent-child relations and the effective solution of problems once conflicts arose. Holden hopes to become a catcher in the wheat field, guarding the innocence of children. Ambrose's parents were too extreme in their attitude towards him. Ambrose's mother believed that he had not grown up, distrusted him, failed to capture his sensitive emotional and behavioral changes, and his father was unwilling to devote more energy to him. Ambrose faced the confusion on the road of growth, without the correct guidance and patient help of his parents, he could only move forward alone. Ambrose wanted to design the Happy Pavilion to bring joy and happiness to the participants.

## 6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the British and American novels are widely published and spread, and the existential philosophy and its meaning in the novels have a strong influence. The existentialism of philosophical views in British and American novels is embodied in self-seeking, absurdity, death, loneliness, choice and responsibility. The significance of existentialism is mainly reflected in the criticism of reality, which is mainly reflected in two aspects:

the criticism of the society of logistics and the criticism of the indifferent family relationship and parent-child relationship. The prevailing trend of existentialism philosophy improved the quality of British and American novels and promoted the steady development of literature.

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