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American Absurdity: Reconciling Conceptions of the Absurd in European and American Literature

Benjamin Spencer
University of South Carolina - Columbia

Director of Thesis: Jennifer Frey
Second Reader: Jeanne Britton

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Abstract

Critical to the philosophical discipline of existentialism is the concept of the absurd—the conflict between the innate human drive to seek meaning and the meaningless universe we inhabit.

In Europe, the meaninglessness of the universe was reinforced by the particular social and geographical conditions that existentialist and proto-existentialist authors such as Sartre, Camus, Kafka, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard faced. In the face of increasing system density and urbanization, along with the calamities of the Second World War, these authors felt themselves impotent in the face of forces beyond their control.

It is fascinating, then, that existentialism found a comfortable home in America, which faced none of these pressures. Instead, the conception of the absurd we find reflected in the work of the postwar Beatniks and later writers is influenced by a sense of system space and open geography, a lack of violent conflict, and a sense of progressive alienization from an individualistic society.

It is my thesis that these competing conceptions of the absurd are mutually incomprehensible. This gap in understanding contributes to an inability to engage in productive existentialist discussion, which can only be rectified by shared culture and experience.

Thesis Summary

This thesis aims to examine the development of the concept of the absurd in literature across different time periods and cultural contexts. The absurd, as defined by Camus, is the gap between humanity's desire to understand the world and the impossibility of doing so. The absurd played a fundamental role in the creation and spread of existentialism in both Europe and the United States.

However, the ways in which the absurd is recognized as an aspect of existence depends heavily on the sociological contexts in which an individual lives. By analyzing the works of absurdist authors, filmmakers, and artists across time, we can track the development of these absurdist conceptions. These absurdist themes have been found in the works of numerous European authors, as well as the works of the Beat Generation in America.

Looking at these works, the European and American conceptions of the absurd can be shown to differ along four sociological axes—system density, population density, conflict, and ostracism and alienation. Taken together, these factors lead to a European absurdity that characterizes the universe as inherently, fundamentally meaningless. American absurdity, meanwhile, places more emphasis on the human inability to understand the universe, even if such fundamental meaning does exist.

These differing conceptions of the absurd meet the threshold of incommensurability— they are so different that they cannot be meaningfully compared or reduced into each other. Instead, the only way to bridge this gap in understanding is to interact with the cultures from which these absurdist conceptions sprang, to better understand the pressures that led to their creation. By engaging with other formulations of the absurd, we can participate in more accurate and fulfilling existentialist discussion.

I.   Introduction

Existentialism, as a school of thought, is centered upon the idea of existence preceding essence, first formulated as such by Jean-Paul Sartre.[1] This formulation reflects the idea that there is no inherent meaning to life or the universe, and that the only meaning that exists is that which we impose upon it ourselves. Crucial to this philosophy is the concept of the absurd, an idea which has had revolutionary impacts both within academia and in broader social contexts.

Absurdity simply refers to the gap between our desire to impose meaning upon the universe and the universe's meaninglessness.[2] Every human action seems ultimately impotent and pointless against the vast scale of the physical and social forces at work around us. As European existentialist philosophers were developing their understanding of the absurd in the 19th and early 20th centuries, there were several forces unique to their time and place that were shaping their conceptions. These forces will be later discussed in depth.

In America, however, a land to which existentialism was not native, the forces influencing the understanding of the absurd were fundamentally different.[3] Yet, when the writings of the French existentialists such as Sartre and Camus began to be exported to the United States, they found a welcoming home amongst the Beat authors and later generations.[4] Clearly, even though the sociological conditions that had influenced European conceptions of the absurd were not symmetrically present, the idea of the absurd still struck a resonant chord within the American literary and philosophical conscience.[5]

[1] Copleston, F. C. "Existentialism." *Philosophy* 23, no. 84 (1948): 19–37. doi:10.1017/S0031819100065955.
[2] Webber, J. *Rethinking Existentialism*. (2018) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[3] Cotkin, George. *Existential America.* The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.
[4] Cotkin, George. "Punching Through the Pasteboard Masks: American Existentialism." In *Situating Existentialism*, edited by Jonathan Judakin and Robert Bernasconi, 123–44. Columbia University Press, 2012.
[5] Nagel, Thomas. "The Absurd." *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 716-727.

It is my thesis that the absurdities of Europe and the absurdities of America are so fundamentally different, due to the myriad of pressures facing the different continents at the time, as to be mutually incomprehensible. When a philosopher from Europe and a philosopher from America speak of the absurd, they are speaking about two separate concepts—a gap in comprehension that stands between the speakers and productive existential discussion. However, I believe that this is a solvable problem.

This paper will begin by briefly surveying the history of existentialism through its main authors and tracking the development of the absurd over time. The authors critical to the initial development of the absurd, such as Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Sartre, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Camus will be mentioned. We will then track the export of existentialism to the United States, where it was quickly taken up by the postwar Beat Generation.

Following this, ground rules will be established for analyzing the absurd. I will demonstrate that the best way to track the changes in absurdist understanding over time is by reading and analyzing the literature that pivotal authors produced. The pressures influencing an understanding of the absurd are best portrayed though novels, film, art, and other fictional creations, since these mediums allow for greater literary license than normal academic articles.

I will then elaborate on the concept of incommensurability—though both European and American absurdities are absurdities in a true and proper sense, I do not believe that they can be compared and contrasted in the formulaic, logical way that traditional philosophical argument requires. The two distinct concepts, existing incommensurably, instead require a greater understanding of each concept on its own terms instead of trying to force one into the mold of the other. It is important to note that, throughout the work, I am offering no positive or negative

assessments of either absurdity, or a way of living in general—I aim for my analysis to be descriptive, not normative.

After the rules have been established, the analysis of the absurd will begin in earnest. I will begin by discussing European absurdity and the forces that acted upon it as the concept was being formulated—particularly regarding the density of systems and civilizations on the continent, increasing urbanization, the calamities of World War I and II, and the general sense of community that pervades the environment. The works that will be discussed in this light include *The Plague, The Stranger,* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus, *Nausea* by Sartre, *Notes from Underground* by Dostoevsky, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche, *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Fear and Trembling* by Kierkegaard, Picasso's *Guernica, The Blood of Others* by de Beauvoir, and *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka.

Following the analysis of the pressures influencing European absurdity, we will turn to American absurdity. Influenced instead by the pressures of system space, rurality, peace, and individualism, American absurdity shines through most brightly in the writings of the Beat authors. Discussion will include the works *On the Road* by Kerouac, *Howl* by Ginsburg, *Go* by Holmes, *Less than Zero* by Ellis, *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Vonnegut, *Dr. Strangelove* by Kubrick, *Revolutionary Road* by Yates and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Kesey. These works clearly reflect an understanding of the absurd, but the way in which they do so is markedly different from that of the European writers.

While it is certainly possible to conduct a more thorough analysis of all of these works than that which I am presenting here, such a focused reading would not paint a picture of general American or European absurdity in the way that I require. My goal is to develop a broader

understanding of absurdist trends in literature rather than an exploration of the intent of any one particular author.

After comparing and contrasting American and European absurdities, I shall demonstrate, using the principle of incommensurability, how fundamentally incompatible the two absurdist conceptions are—they can be understood on their own terms, but not on each other's. However, this is not an unsolvable problem. I conclude by arguing that the mutual incomprehension that plagues our current understanding of the absurd can be rectified through shared experience, the exchange of cultures, and the greater conception of humanity as a unified whole.

II.   The History of Existentialism

The history of the absurdity within existentialism has been well-documented and discussed at length elsewhere. As such, a brief overview of the concept's literary roots and its export to the United States will be sufficient.

Existentialism began, officially, on October 29th, 1945, when Jean-Paul Sartre gave a lecture at Club Maintenant in Paris entitled *Existentialism is a Humanism*. It was in this lecture that he coined the famous phrase "existence precedes essence."[6] However, it is inaccurate to say that Sartre invented existentialism all on his own—though he may have been the one to popularize it and give it the official name of 'existentialism,' the notions of essence and the absurd had been gestating in the European intellectual community for at least a century.

The first thinker to speak directly about the notion of the absurd was the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. As a Christian, no example of absurdity stood out more to Kierkegaard than the story of Abraham, who defied all logic and moral understanding when he

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[6] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Translated by Philip Mairet and Carol Macomber. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2007.

began to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command.[7] Yet, because it allowed Abraham to grow closer to God, it was the right thing to do. This religious and philosophical argument is found in 1843's *Fear and Trembling,* marking the first existentialist push that would snowball into a movement by the end of the Second World War.[8]

Over the next several decades, literature began to trade more heavily in existentialist and absurdist themes. Though not an explicitly philosophical novel, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground,* published in 1864, served as a repudiation of both popular moral philosophy and the increasingly socialist movement developing in Russia at the time. In this short novel, we can see Dostoevsky conveying a lack of faith in the goodness of humanity and the idealism of a utopian society, a sense of insignificance and ostracism that continued to grow throughout the ensuing decades.[9]

The next pivotal author was Friedrich Nietzsche, who laid out a moral vision of existentialism. While not a properly existential thinker himself, his work had an undeniable influence on later generations. Notably, in 1883-1885's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we can see a literary turn towards the idea of a self-imposed morality. When all external sources of morality have been stripped away, as reflected in Nietzsche's famous proclamation "God is dead!", the only morality that remains is that imposed upon the will by itself.[10] A universe lacking inherently objective morality seems far more absurdly meaningless that a universe that possesses such a trait.

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[7] Strawser, Michael. "Reviewed Work: Literature Suspends Death: Sacrifice and Storytelling in Kierkegaard, Kafka, and Blanchot by Chris Danta." *Religion & Literature* 44, no. 3 (2012): 261–63. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24397767.

[8] Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Walter Lowrie. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941.

[9] Frank, Joseph. "Nihilism and "Notes from Underground"." *The Sewanee Review* 69, no. 1 (1961): 1-33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27540632.

[10] Leiter, Brian. "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics." *Ethics* 107, no. 2 (Jan 1997): 250-285.

Later, the absurdist writings of Franz Kafka would bring the realities of these absurd conditions to the popular consciousness. Kafka's most notable works, including *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial,* both written around 1915, brought the crushing weight of an absurd and impersonal universe down on the heads of ordinary characters in a way that previous writers did not.[11]

The final, surging wave of European existentialist thought came in the form of the First and Second World Wars. The works of the proto-existentialists had largely been about moral and societal woes—never had the pointlessness and absurdity of the universe been thrown so wide and so open as by the dropping of firebombs and death marches across the European continent.[12]

The author to capitalize on this development was, ultimately, Jean-Paul Sartre, who served in the French army and lived in Paris throughout much of the Nazi occupation. It was through his works, notably *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness*, that European existential thought was exported to America.[13] Camus, writing alongside Sarte in the mid-1940's, developed a unique literary style similar to Kafka's, and a conception of existentialism that often found itself at odds with Sartre. Their quarrel over existentialism, politics, and history ended their friendship, but does not override their basic agreement over what the absurd itself was—the gap between mankind's desire to understand and the universe's inability to be understood.[14]

Sartre himself thought that America would not be receptive to existentialist philosophy, believing that the culture of the nation was too focused on materialism and celebrity to engage in

[11] Gavins, Joanna. "The Literary Absurd." In *Reading the Absurd,* 1-9. Edinburgh University Press, 2013.
[12] Maness, Mary. "War Is Glorious: War Is Hell: War Is Absurd." *Language Arts* 53, no. 5 (1976): 560-63. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41404206.
[13] Cotkin, George. "French Existentialism and American Popular Culture, 1945-1948." *The Historian* 61, no. 2 (1998): 327–40. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1999.tb01029.x.
[14] Sartre, Jean-Paul, Albert Camus, David Sprintzen, and Adrian Van den Hoven. *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation*. Humanity Books, 2004.

the deep, introspective analysis necessary to understand the absurd. Previous efforts to bring existentialism to the United States had indeed failed, as thinkers and philosophers failed to account for the change in cultures.[15] Sartre, surprisingly, was the one to break the seal—by establishing his own cult of personality centered around the cultural cache of Paris and his experiences on the battlefield and as a prisoner-of-war during World War II, he succeeded in holding America's attention long enough to transmit the ideas of existentialism.

For now, the story picks up with postwar American culture—America was thriving economically and politically and had the muscle necessary to impose its will on the world. The cultural history of the United States, combined with the flourishing construction of the highway system, created exactly the confluence of social and technological conditions necessary for the concept of the absurd to take root.[16] It was in this free, open environment that the Beats began to experiment with literature and writing, influenced by a lifestyle of experimentation with sex and drugs, as well as a deep seated discontent with their place in society.[17]

The understanding of the absurd that the Beat authors reflected in their work was markedly different from that which had been imported from Paris. Their writings showed a lack of the moral concern that had plagued Nietzsche, while thoroughly rejecting the faith-based views of Kierkegaard. The despair of Dostoevsky's Underground Man was rejected in favor of a deeply hopeful approach to the world—that meaning can be created and enjoyed at an individual level, despite the roadblocks and obstacles that societal structures put in the way.[18] The Beats,

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[15] Kaufmann, Walter. "The Reception of Existentialism in the United States." *Salmagundi* 10 (1969): 69–96. https://www-jstor-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/stable/40546515.

[16] Ireland, Brian. "American Highways: Recurring Images and Themes of the Road Genre." *The Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 4 (2003).

[17] Wolitzer, Meg. "How the Beat Esthetic Marked Its Time." *The New York Times,* September 10, 1995, sec. The New Season/Art

[18] Oliphant, Robert. "The Auto-Beatnik, the Auto-Critic, and the Justification of Nonsense." *The Antioch Review* 21, no. 4 (1961): 405-19. doi:10.2307/4610364.

however, lacked direct personal experience of World War II and were living in a time of relative peace and unprecedented prosperity, allowing them more time to focus on internal issues of meaning instead of external conflicts.

The evolution of existentialism and our understanding of the absurd continue to the present day, and they are constantly developing as more people come to appreciate the field of philosophy for its unflinching look at the harsh realities of the world, and its inherent belief that, even in the face of absurdity, meaning, value, and the good life can continue to exist and be pursued.[19]

III.   Understanding the Absurd

Understanding the absurd requires us to possess a working definition of the term. Through many writers differed markedly in how they approached the concept, the most useful and prevalent definition is that offered by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus,* which has been previously referenced—as such, it is this definition we shall be using.[20] Absurdity is the gap created between mankind's innate desire to understand and the universe's inability to be understood. This conceptual genus can be divided into further species of absurdity, depending on the social and physical pressures surrounding individuals. These unique pressures alter the way in which individuals experience the absurd, leading them to form their own understanding of the concept, which will be detailed later.

In order to track, compare, and contrast conceptions of the absurd across both time and geographical space, however, we first need a suitable medium with absurdist themes to look at. By far, the easiest way to conduct this analysis will be by looking at the cultural product of

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[19] Wong, Paul TP. "What is Existential Positive Psychology?." *International Journal of Existential Positive Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2011).

[20] Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus And Other Essays*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.

people who were actively dealing with absurdity and other existential themes at the time of writing. While articles and academic books written by philosophers and thinkers allow us to see how they conceived of absurdism and its relationship to existentialism, and can occasionally be useful, such works are much less helpful when searching for the sources of that absurdity itself. This partially results from the nature of the relationship between absurdity and existentialism— while absurdity is a critical part of existentialist philosophy, the concept of the absurd exists independently from an existentialist framework. One does not need existentialism to investigate absurdity—however, the two often go hand in hand.

Absurdity is tied innately to the human condition and has a dramatic and undeniable impact on the people that it affects. Understanding absurdity is an intimate and personal experience, and it is an experience best explored through the use of fictional characters and their interactions with their settings and other characters.[21] When authors show us how absurdist themes affect the characters they create, they are providing a window into their thoughts at the time. This aspect of existentialist literature was known even as the authors themselves were writing their most seminal works—Sartre remarked that "only in the novel is it possible to evoke the primordial gushing-forth of life in all its concrete, particular and temporal variety."[22]

Comparing and contrasting the experiences of these characters in the face of the absurd is an effective way to gain the depth of analysis we are searching for. For instance—the absurdity faced by Dostoevsky's Underground Man and Kerouac's self-insert Sal Paradise are similar in that neither of them feel at home in the rules and structures of society surrounding them—but, the particular way in which they process that absurd pressure distinguishes them. While the

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[21] Bruneau, Jean. "Existentialism and the American Novel." *Yale French Studies*, Existentialism, 1 (1948): 66–72. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928860.
[22]*Horizon,* 1945

Underground Man retreats into self-loathing, hatred, and ostracism, Sal Paradise goes on the road in search of his own identity, though the threat of alienation constantly looms in the background.[23] It is these variations in response that mark both cultural and philosophical differences in how the absurd is conceived of and reacted to.

Though this paper largely focuses on physical, pen-to-paper literature, there are other media through which absurdist themes have made themselves prominent over the decades—notably visual art and film. Each of these styles of storytelling carry different implications in both how they choose to present themselves to the audience, and how they break from the prior traditions in their genre.

These different ways of presenting absurdist conceptions illustrate exactly how prevalent these conceptions are in our cultural mind, such that they can be depicted meaningfully in so many ways. Picasso's infamous 1937 painting *Guernica*, for instance, takes the horrors of war and abstracts them into shape, color and symbol, the implications of the brushstrokes simultaneously becoming more obvious and more complex as fire and blood are removed from the physical and become conceptual vessels.[24]

Another relevant absurdist anti-war piece is Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. As opposed to the abstraction of *Guernica,* Kubrick depicts the consequences of mutually assured destruction during the Cold War in a harshly realistic light, though the characters within the film are exaggerated to the point of farce, showing the contradiction between human imperfection, infighting, and impulse, and

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[23] Setyaningrum, Gian. "A STUDY ON THE MAIN CHARACTER'S ALIENATION IN JACK KEROUAC'S ON THE ROAD." PhD diss., SANATA DHARMA UNIVERSITY, 2016.

[24] Gillespie, Iseult. "What Makes Guernica so Shocking? An Animated Video Explores the Impact of Picasso's Monumental Anti-War Mural," April 30, 2019. TedEd. https://www.openculture.com/2019/09/what-makes-guernica-so-shocking.html.

the existence of nuclear weapons capable of global destruction. The absurdity of life when such power exists is illustrated by multiple characters throughout the film—notably in the three roles portrayed by Peter Sellers as a Royal Air Force captain, the President of the United States, and the titular Dr. Strangelove himself.[25]

Absurdist themes have been prevalent in literature, visual art, poetry, and film from almost the advent of the mediums themselves. By analyzing the specific ways in which absurdism is and isn't reflected in plot, design, setting, and characterization, we can paint a picture of how absurdist ideas were being processed by cultural creators at the time.[26] It is therefore important to clarify exactly how these ideas are implemented into narrative works, and how they contribute to an understanding of absurdism unique to the country and time period in which these media exist. It also important to note that these existentialist and absurdist interpretations are by no means the only way to understand the works in question—they often occupy their own social, political, and psychological space apart from their philosophical absurdist dimension.

A. Absurdism in Literature

As mentioned previously, the absurd is an overwhelming force that imposes upon a person the realization that the universe is devoid of inherent meaning—without this compelling force, existentialism as a philosophy could not exist. Even outside of existentialism, however, writers have often wrestled with absurdist themes without explicitly labeling them as such. Iterations of the absurd existed in literature before Sartre and Camus defined the concept and

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[25] Maland, Charles. "Dr. Strangelove (1964): Nightmare Comedy and the Ideology of Liberal Consensus." *American Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (1979): 697-717. Accessed March 18, 2021. doi:10.2307/2712432.

[26] Marini, Guillermo. "A Primordial Sense of Art." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 1 (2016): 46–61. https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.50.1.0046.

gave it an official definition. These instances of absurdity are conveyed through characters, whose personal confrontations with the absurd affect them profoundly.[27]

It is the intimate nature of the absurd that makes it so compelling. A direct experience with absurdity will likely affect someone much more profoundly than simply reading about it, just as people are much more likely to donate to a charity that works in the local community instead of one that sends food to starving children a continent away. This is a simple result of proximity—we are more likely to care about the suffering that we can see. The same holds true for absurdity—it is easy to dismiss the absurd cruelty of children dying in a bombing in Central Africa or the Middle East, but it is much more difficult to disregard the absurd, random chance prevalent when a member of your family gets in a car accident. The human impulse to find a responsible party when they witness suffering is rendered completely impotent by a world that has no intention or purpose when it comes to famine, natural disasters, and other calamities.

It is in bringing these cosmic, seemingly distant absurdities into the lives of ordinary characters that the existentialist literature of Kakfa, Camus, Holmes, Vonnegut, and Ellis excel. Each of these writers' works features characters who are not endowed with extraordinary abilities or knowledge like Dostoevsky's Underground Man or Nietzsche's Zarathustra. These individuals are simply turned into cockroaches, subjected to plagues, unmoored in time, and are put on trials for offenses they did not commit in the face of an insensitive and impersonal universe and bureaucracy.

In these literary works, there are three main mechanisms by which absurdity is impressed upon the characters—the absurdity of nature, the absurdity of society, and the absurdity of the self.[28] Each of these originated in the writings of the European existentialists, and were given

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[27] Crosby, Donald A. *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*. SUNY Press, 1988.
[28] Gavins, Joanna. "Identifying the Absurd." In *Reading the Absurd*, 10-57. Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

new life in the writings of the Beats. However, as an introductory understanding, it is best to look to the classic works in which each type of absurdity is exemplified—Kafka's *The Metamorphosis,* Camus's *The Plague,* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea.*

The Metamorphosis is easily Franz Kafka's most well-known work. The premise is simple—Gregor Samsa wakes up in his apartment one day turned into a massive insect. The remainder of the short tale is dedicated to how he adjusts to his new life. At the beginning, he reflects on his previous life, while expressing relatively minimal shock at his transformation. It occurs to him that he does not actually mind his new existence as an insect—the only negative aspect of the transformation is that his family was deprived of the income Gregor provided. His family initially tries to care for him, but they grow weary of the strain he is placing on their resources—Gregor, feeling useless, willingly dies of starvation.[29] This work is an example of the absurdity of nature because Gregor's transformation is never explained—it is simply a thing that happens, and the characters must deal with it.[30] Like all acts of God in an expansive and seemingly impersonal universe, there seems to be no rhyme or reason behind it—when a character like Gregor is deprived of control over their existence, the absurdity of nature is brought down upon them like a hammer. Though Gregor attempts to stand up to this pressure, he soon crumples and is forced to yield to his new reality.

Much like *The Metamorphosis,* Albert Camus's *The Plague* relies on a simple premise— in the North African town of Oran, thousands of rats flood the streets and begin to die. Soon, people begin to be brought down by a similar illness, and the deaths begin to increase dramatically. The local government, which began by downplaying the severity of the outbreak,

[29] Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*. Translated by Katja Pelzer. Kurt Wolff, 1915.
[30] Feldherr, Andrew. "Metamorphosis in the Metamorphoses." Essay. In *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, edited by Philip Hardie, 163–79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

takes dramatic action by sealing the town gates and keeping everyone inside. The remainder of the novel details the actions of Dr. Bernard Rieux as he attempts to fight the plague, acting as an existentialist hero as he confronts pointlessness and continues to strive within that context. Locked within the confines of the town, all of the characters lack the ability to control their own destinies, and are forced to confront the absurdity of their impotence in the face of both the plague and the government. While the plague itself was certainly a natural force, the main sources of struggle come from the local government and the snake oil peddlers, priests, and misanthropists who are locked in their own battles against the disease.[31] It is this shift in absurdities, from a natural cosmic force to a human construct, that make this aspect of *The Plague* an example of societal absurdity. While this social absurdity is by no means the only type of absurdity found within *The Plague* and is not even the main focus of the novel, its impactful presence on Dr. Rieux and the narrative is undeniable.

The final type of absurdity, the absurdity of the self, is found in the vast majority of literary works, though it is rarely identified or typified as such. The seminal work in which the internal conflict is so identified is Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea.* Like many absurdist works, it is a book with surprisingly little plot, instead focusing on driving home the particular nature of the pressure the characters face. In this novel, a historian by the name of Antoine Roquentin goes about his daily life, conducting research in a local library. Over time, he feels an incongruity between his experience of the world and the world as it actually is, resulting in feelings of depression and nausea as he struggles to define the parameters of his own existence. This escalating sickness culminates in Roquentin realizing that he has a "fear of existence," a

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[31] Banerjee, D, Sathyanarayana Rao, TS, Kallivayalil, R, Javed, A. "Revisiting 'The Plague' by Camus: Shaping the 'social absurdity' of the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 54. (Dec 2020) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102291

revelation that comes to him while he stares at the root of a chestnut tree—regardless of the meaning that he wanted to impose upon the root, the root existed as itself independent of Roquentin. There is no inherent reason for the root, just as there is no inherent reason for Roquentin, or all of humanity itself. Roquentin's struggle to define himself is not born of any structures outside of him, natural or manmade—rather, they result from his perception of himself and the world, a prime example of the absurdity of the self.[32]

These three absurdities have cropped up in literature time and time again as authors explore absurdity and meaning through the lenses of their characters. From these foundations, we can construct a multifaceted portrait of how a particular group of people conceived of absurdity at any given time. When there are marked differences in how the absurdities of nature, society, and the self are presented, we can be reasonably confident that there are substantial differences in how these cultures conceive of absurdity.[33] It is these differences that separate the European and American species of the absurd and prevent them from being easily summarized or combined. Even the common usage of the word 'absurd' within these traditions elides many fundamental differences. To properly appraise the different flavors of absurdity present within these literary and philosophical movements, extensive contextualization and careful, detailed attention are required.

B. The Incommensurability of Absurdist Conceptions

Despite the similarities in how literary and artistic works treat the concept of absurdity in both Europe and America, the two concepts are fundamentally incommensurable. Essentially, this means that, even though they are both equally valid kinds of absurdities, they cannot be

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[32] Roth, Ben. "How Sartre, Philosopher, Misreads Sartre, Novelist: Nausea and the Adventures of the Narrative Self." In *Narrative, Philosophy and Life*, edited by A. Speight, vol. 2. Springer, Dordrecht. (Oct 2014): 81-102. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9349-0_6

[33] Cao, Shunqing. *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. Springer Science & Business Media, 2014.

added, subtracted, or compared through the use of a common language. If a European

existentialist and an American existentialist engaged in a conversation about the absurd, their

usage of the word 'absurd' would be referencing inherently different things.

The notion of incommensurability of values not new, and has had a long history within

philosophical thought. A classic example of incommensurable values can be found in John

Finnis's *Natural Law and Natural Rights,* in which he discusses the different kinds of basic

human goods—Finnis has a list of seven of these values, but only two are needed to illustrate the

point of incommensurability.[34] By examining the characteristics that these values have when

compared against each other, a useful understanding of the criteria for incommensurability can

be established.

Consider the basic human goods of knowledge and aesthetic experience. The goal of

knowledge can be furthered by going back to school and enrolling in a PhD program.

Meanwhile, the goal of aesthetic experience could be furthered by going to an art museum and

trying to replicate one of the paintings. Finnis claims that these two actions reference two

completely different kinds of desirable goals and are therefore incommensurable—it is

impossible to measure one's desire to replicate a painting in credit hours towards a doctorate.

It is notable, however, that this incommensurability does not imply incomparability—it is

still possible to look at the two careers, or the two absurdities, side by side and make valid claims

about each of them in relation to the other, but it is not possible to reduce one into the other, or

subsume them both equally under the greater umbrella of the absurd in general.

As a result of this incommensurability, we wind up with a problem not unlike that

formulated by Thomas Kuhn in the 1960's regarding paradigms in the philosophy of science.

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[34] Finnis, John. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. 113-115. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Kuhn argued that science did not creep towards its goal, but instead made leaps and jumps based on paradigm shifts—for instance, going from a Newtonian to an Einsteinian model of physics resulted in a dramatic change within the sciences. Notably, it is impossible to argue about the implications of a Newtonian model from an Einsteinian perspective, because each model comes with its own set of axiomatic assumptions.[35] These axiomatic rules lead to an environment where scientists talk past each other, using the same words, but meaning slightly different things.

The principle of incommensurability is therefore established by Finnis's comparison of values—two concepts are incommensurable if it is not possible to reduce one into the other or compare them with a common language or understanding. With this definition, how evident is it that this principle applies to European and American absurdities, and what are the implications of this?

It is now clear that, if the absurdities differ in content in such a way that each absurdity is distinct and irreducible, they cannot be commensurable. The threshold for incommensurability is therefore this—one concept of absurdity must have an influential characteristic that, by definition, the other kind cannot.[36] These distinctions will be presented in the following sections through the use of both the aforementioned literary analysis focusing on the absurdities of nature, society, and the self in European and American existentialist literature, as well as several numerical statistics. Following this demonstration, the implications of the distinction and the hope for reconciliation will be discussed.

However, it is important to note that there are not simply two kinds of absurdities. Existentialism as a philosophy has found a home all over the globe, and even drawing such

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[35] Kuhn, Thomas. "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." *American Journal of Physics* 31. (1963): 554. https://doi.org/10.1119/1.1969660
[36] Raz, J. *The Morality of Freedom*. 342. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.

boundaries as 'American' and 'European' absurdities are likely somewhat overzealous generalizations. Similarly, existentialism is not confined to these two regions, and is rising in popularity in such countries as Japan and the rest of Eastern Asia. These cultures have a vastly different understanding of the absurd due to their particular societal and historical experiences, distinct from both Europe and America. For instance, it is well-known how the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki resulted in the popularity of Godzilla as a media icon representing fears of the West and nuclear power.[37] These unique experiences, along with a close-knit family structure unlike any in the Western world, lend Asian Absurdities a flavor all their own. However, I am not personally familiar enough with these cultures and their literary histories to write comfortably about them. For the sake of time and productively restricting the works to be analyzed, of which there are many, I will be limiting my discussion to European and American works.

IV.   The Existentialist Canon

The existentialist canon is a loose collection of literary works that meaningfully represent existentialist themes and have furthered the development of the philosophy. The canon is small, compared to the much larger number of authors that have used existentialist and absurdist thought in their writings. It is not enough to simply engage with the absurd to become a member of the canon, but the work must improve or develop the conception of the absurd in a meaningful way.[38] As far as I am aware, there has never been a coordinated effort to systematize the list of works that belong in the canon; however, there are a small number of works that everyone generally agrees upon.

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[37] Noriega, Chon. "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When 'Them!' Is US." *Cinema Journal* (1987): 63-77.
[38] Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.

The European branch of absurdist literature, as mentioned above, includes the work of Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kafka, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus. Peripherally, it also includes art and plays such as *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, and *Guernica* by Picasso. These works began in the mid-19th century and continue on the present day, though the number of truly revolutionary authors spiked around the end of the Second World War before entering a steady decline. In the European postwar period, there were notable existential developments, such as the transition of absurdist themes from novels and visual art to the stage, leading to the creation of the 'theatre of the absurd,' a much analyzed genre in its own right.[39] It is vital to note that not all of these writers shared the same conceptions of existentialism or even the absurd—many, in fact, wrote before these terms were brought into popular use by Sartre and Camus. However, the impact that their writings had on the eventual development of the concept of absurdity were so profound that they deserve to be included in any discussion of the topic.

The American canon of existential and absurdist writings is much shorter, and only begins in earnest following the conclusion of World War II. Some authors before this had used existentialist language and absurdist concepts before this—notably Herman Melville in his 1851 novel *Moby Dick.*[40] A great work of American literature, *Moby-Dick* incorporates all three styles of absurdity within its narrative. The absurdity of nature is apparent in the White Whale's overwhelming power, despite all of Captain Ahab's efforts to conquer it. The absurdity of society is present in Captain Ahab's unceasing compulsion to chase the whale and in the bringing of his sailors along with him aboard the Pequod. The absurdity of the self is evident in both Ishmael and Queequeg's reflections on life and death as they follow Captain Ahab on his

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[39] Esslin, Martin. "The Theatre of the Absurd." *The Tulane Drama Review* 4, no. 4 (1960): 3-15. Accessed March 18, 2021. doi:10.2307/1124873.

[40] Dunphy, Mark. ""Call me Sal, Jack": Visions of Ishmael in Kerouac's 'On the Road'." *Melville Society Extracts* (2002): 1-5.

ill-fated quest. However, labeling *Moby Dick* as strictly existentialist literature is a branch too far—recognizing the absurdist themes within it was a development that took place long after its publication.

Instead, the literary ground of existential and absurdist fiction in America was largely fallow when the writings of Sartre and Camus made their way across the pond, and the Beat Generation began to incorporate the philosophy into their own writings. Following the works of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Holmes, existentialism sank its teeth into the American mythos and never let go. The notion of a strictly American canon of absurdist and existentialist literature is even looser than that of the European canon, since the writers who engaged with absurdist themes did not often label themselves as existentialists, and since they were not influential in the birth of the philosophy in the cafes of Paris.[41] Instead, existentialism worms its way through American literature in secret, influencing the actions and perspectives of characters without ever explicitly identifying itself strictly as such.[42] Since the American absurdist canon is so loose, I will focus on a variety of writers, genres, and mediums in my best attempt to encapsulate the sheer diversity of how absurdist concepts are represented.

Throughout the following sections, it is vital to make note of how European and American absurdities contrast with each other, while keeping in mind our previously established benchmark of incommensurability. The following four descriptive pairings specify features of the American and European incarnations of the absurd that could not appear in the other cultural context, identifying each division as a unique species under the genus of the absurd.

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[41] Holmes, John Clellon. "Existentialism and the Novel: Notes and Questions." *Chicago Review* 13, no. 2 (1959): 144-51. doi:10.2307/25293527.

[42] Adamowski, T.H. "Out on Highway 61: Existentialism in America." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (2005): 913–33. https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.74.4.913.

A. European Absurdity

As previously mentioned, the genus of the absurd is marked by the gap between mankind's desire to understand and impose meaning upon the universe, and the universe's inability to be understood. However, there are two different ways in which the universe cannot be understood, and it is this separation that allows for the differentiation of European and American absurdity. European absurdity is marked by the conceptualization of the universe as something that is completely devoid of meaning. Therefore, no matter how intelligent or wise humans become, it is impossible to discover an inherent purpose to the world, because such meaning simply does not exist. This particular formulation of absurdity was developed as a response to the particular pressures that absurdist and existentialist authors were facing at the time they were writing. The American conception of absurdity differs markedly from this version, and will be discussed later.

The canon of European absurdist literature is marked by four defining traits, each of which is related to a particular cultural, geographic, or societal pressure facing the authors at the time the works were being written. These pressures shaped how the authors perceived the world and altered their conceptions of what the absurd truly was. When these philosophers and thinkers were writing, they were operating with a conceptual blank slate—since no prior formulation of the absurd existed, they had full license to frame and explain it however they best saw fit.

The first of these critical traits is system density, or how prevalent and impactful social and cultural systems are, particularly in the forms of religion, class, tradition, and opaque government bureaucracy.[43] The second was urbanization and an increasing population, as the

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[43] Smither, Robert D. "Authoritarianism, Dominance, and Social Behavior: A Perspective from Evolutionary Personality Psychology." *Human Relations* 46, no. 1 (1993): 23-43.

Industrial Revolution enabled large scale migration into increasingly packed cities.[44] The third influence upon European absurdism was war, and the physical and psychological markers that it left upon the land and the people who lived there.[45] The final defining marker is that of community and ostracism, whereby people felt a loss of power and autonomy, and a tension between self-definition and the erasing influence of others.[46] Taken together, these European traits emphasize the arbitrary and impersonal nature of the universe, leading to a conception of the absurd marked by an understanding of the world as devoid of any inherent meaning whatsoever.

It is important to note, however, that the European conception of the absurd cannot be reduced to the sociological pressures of its creation. While European absurdity could not exist without these pressures, the idea of the absurd has its own conceptual existence apart from the conditions of its creation.

The four qualities that led to this European species of absurdity are evident in the literature of the time, and blend together to create a brand of absurdity that continues to be studied today. Each of these conditions will now be analyzed in more depth.

1. *System Density*

It is a unique feature of European life that governmental, religious, and social systems have always played an outsize role in controlling the activities of daily life for the individuals who live there.[47] The weight of centuries of structure and oppression can be felt even when

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[44] Goldewijk, Kees Klein. "Three centuries of global population growth: a spatial referenced population (density) database for 1700–2000." *Population and Environment* 26, no. 4 (2005): 343-367.

[45] Hunt, N, and Robbins, I. "The long-term consequences of war: the experience of World War II." *Aging & Mental Health* 5, no. 2 (2001): 183-190. https://doi.org/10.1080/13607860120038393

[46] Baumeister, R. F., Leary, M. R. "The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation." *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (1995): 497–529.

[47] Cambini, Carlo, and Laura Rondi. "Independence, Investment and Political Interference: Evidence from the European Union." *Florence School of Regulation.* (2011).

walking the streets today, as you can eat in restaurants that have been around for longer than the entirety of the United States. It was along the same streets that Fascist regimes marched, and competing royal families waged war for territory and resources.

Taken together, these systems create an atmosphere of social absurdity, an environment in which individuals feel impotent in the face of overwhelming structural force and tradition. This lack of control, and simply feeling buffeted by institutions with an influential legacy far outlasting that of any one person, is something that has been felt acutely for centuries, and was a central focus of existentialist and absurdist writers. In this case, two works that accurately highlight this aspect of absurdity are *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche, and *The Trial* by Franz Kafka.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra does not contain the most rigorous philosophical analysis of Nietzsche's existential concerns. However, the pulpy sayings of the prophet Zarathustra provide a window into many different strains of thought running throughout the entirely of Nietzsche's writing—in addition, the immense quotability of the almost Biblical writing has made the four parts of the work a common introduction to existentialist philosophy. Nietzsche himself considered it his magnum opus.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra largely consists of parables, detailing the interactions of Zarathustra with people who have not yet come to understand the true nature of existence and morality. A recurrent theme throughout the writing is the idea of the Übermensch—an individual who has overcome both the restrictions of his animalistic past and the inaccurate moralities of society, and entered upon the personal reckoning necessary to create his own valid morality.[48] The prophecy of the Übermensch, which Zarathustra emphasizes has not yet come to pass,

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[48] Loeb, Paul S. "Finding the Übermensch in Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 30 (2005): 70-101. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20717864.

strikes several blows at the absurdity of the rules imposed upon individuals by societal systems. No fewer than three of the parables give clear examples of this rejection of social systems, each relating to a particular oppressive structure.

The first of these parables is 'On the Teachers of Virtue.' In this parable, Zarathustra listens to an old and venerated teacher instruct young people in what virtue is—notably, the lecture is all about how to get a good night's sleep. The teacher claims that in order to sleep, you must laugh, find truth, and overcome yourself during the day—but Zarathustra pointedly observes that the end goal of these pious rituals is sleep and oblivion, a forgetting of the self:

> Now I understand clearly what was once sought above all else when teachers of virtue were sought. Good sleep was sought, and opiate virtues to promote it!
> For all these much praised sages who were teachers of virtue, wisdom was the sleep without dreams: they knew no better meaning of life. [49]

In this way, an allegory is drawn between social rules that demand you conform to the preestablished norms, and an erasure of the self—individual identity is lost in favor of structure.[50] Zarathustra acknowledges that such a self-forgetting is tempting, as buying into the system alleviates the burden of resisting it—but living life in such a way is explaining away the absurd, without ever truly confronting it. Such a rejection of reality does not contribute towards growth, or progress towards the Übermensch.

The second parable is 'The Priests.' Instead of listening to priests teach, and then condemning them for their false teachings, Zarathustra instructs his followers to leave the priests alone and allow them to go about their business—because, in his eyes, they have already

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[49] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On the Teachers of Virtue." In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* 26-28. Barnes & Noble Books, New York, NY, 2005.

[50] Seberger, John S, and Geoffrey C Bowker. "Humanistic Infrastructure Studies: Hyper-Functionality and the Experience of the Absurd." *Information, Communication & Society*, February 21, 2020, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1726985.

punished themselves enough. Just as the previous teacher instructed a certain way of behavior to get a good night's sleep, so do the priests instruct in religious behavior in order to ensure salvation. Zarathustra in fact pities the priests—they had such an overwhelming desire to understand the world that they filled every part of themselves with their faith in God, losing themselves in the process:

> The spirit of those saviors consisted of emptiness; but into every empty gap they put their delusion, their stopgap, which they called God.
> Their spirit was downed in their pity; and when they were swollen and overswollen with pity, it was always a great folly that swam on top.[51]

Nietzsche's ultimate point with this parable is to demonstrate that structured religion consumes the individuality of its followers just as social traditions do.[52] If any social system were to make a claim to understanding the universe, it would be religion—Nietzsche's dismissal of it, therefore, removes a major plank in any arguments for inherent meaning.

The final parable, this time striking at government, is entitled 'On the Famous Wise Men.' Here, Zarathustra chastises those who act as leaders among men, calling themselves servants of the people and proclaiming themselves as being able to guide a civilization into a better future. While there is certainly nothing wrong with improving social conditions, Zarathustra claims that focusing too much on society risks losing the sense of individual spirit, the obliteration of the wild and untamed self in the face of a materialist, practical government[53]. Just as in communist regimes, the state becomes religion, so too does the state become spirit. The

[51] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Priests." In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* 81. Barnes & Noble Books, New York, NY, 2005.
[52] Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System." Essay. In *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Banton, 1. London: Routledge, 1966.
[53] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On the Famous Wise Men." In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* 90-92. Barnes & Noble Books, New York, NY, 2005.

unifying theme amongst all of these parables is the recognition of how these systems obliterate

the individual self, causing the absurd to bubble up through the cracks of human construction:

> And truly, you famous wise men, you servants of the people! You yourselves have flourished with the people's spirit and virtue—and the people by you! I say it to your honor!
> But to me even in your virtue you are still of the people, the people with purblind eyes—the people who do not know what spirit is![54]

Zarathustra, after providing a scathing assessment of these religious, governmental, and

social systems, fully rejects them. The social absurdity inherent within the systems is recognized,

as they constrain the will of individuals and prevent them from understanding themselves and

morality on their own terms. This is not a cosmic absurdity, but one innately rooted in mankind.

The narrative of Zarathustra reflects an increasing conception of social systems as devoid of any

ordained meaning—they are simply conveniences put in place by people that serve to restrain

and control individuals. The weight of social structures imposes upon those it burdens a sense of

pointlessness, and an unceasing desire to break free of that burden. Nietzsche's Übermensch

represents a successful escape—Kafka's Josef K., however, is not so lucky.

The Trial, published posthumously in 1925, was never finished; however, it does have a

startling and abrupt ending as Josef K. is summarily executed by a butcher's knife. The entire

novel, from beginning to end, is a harsh and radical exploration of the justice system, and its

opaqueness to those who do not have the knowledge or means to understand it.[55] The courts—the

social and governmental structure by which justice is administered and wrongs are redressed—is

the one aspect of government with which people are most likely to regularly interface, be it

though a speeding ticket, civil suit, marriages, divorces, or even jury duty. Due to this, the court

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[54] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On the Famous Wise Men." In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* 91. Barnes & Noble Books, New York, NY, 2005.
[55] Kafka, Franz. *The Trial.* Verlag Die Schmiede, 1925.

acts as a convenient stand-in for ineffable social systems overall. When the very notion of justice is torn down, it becomes difficult to conceive of the universe as anything other than meaningless.

The novel begins when Josef K., a cashier at a bank, is arrested by two men. He does not know who the two men are, he does not know who they work for, and he does not know what his crime was. Neither he, nor we as the reader, ever discover this. Throughout the story, Josef is buffeted back and forth between comedic courtrooms that do not seem to take their job seriously, bedridden lawyers who have never succeeded in securing an acquittal and can't explain the reasoning of the court themselves, and religious authorities who have little more to offer than empty platitudes. The systems are ineffable and incomprehensible, a jumbled mass of contradictory institutions that is as internally inconsistent as it is pointless to an outside observer.

The central thesis of *The Trial* is summarized in a parable given to Josef K. by a church father within a cathedral. The parable is entitled 'Before the Law,' and was actually published by Kafka in 1915, a decade before *The Trial* was released. The story is simple—a man seeks to gain entrance into the law. The law, in this instance, is represented by a doorway guarded by a gatekeeper. The man could have walked through at any time, but he decides instead that it is best to wait to be granted entry. Years then pass, and he never successfully passes through into an understanding of the law—until finally, right before his death, the door closes:

> "Everyone strives after the law," says the man, "so how is it that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?"
> The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, "Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I am now going to close it. [56]

The absurdity of both the parable and *The Trial* as a whole is one that imposes itself both upon Josef K. and upon the reader. Just as Josef K. is never permitted to understand the inner

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[56] Kafka, Franz. "Before the Law." Essay. In *A Country Doctor*. Kurt Wolff, 1919.

workings of the system that controls his life, neither are we. Even from our godlike position

outside the pages, the absurdities of Josef K.'s world are just as ineffable to us as they are to

him.[57] With the novel's depiction of the utter impossibility of perceiving meaning in these

systems, it is not a large leap to conclude that such a meaning isn't there at all.

The result of this constrictive non-understanding is obvious—Josef, and we as readers,

lose our individualism and autonomy in the face of authority that cannot be understood or argued

with. This impenetrability of social absurdity clearly resounded with European existentialist

authors, as numerous works of both philosophical merit and fiction were dedicated to portraying

its brutality. The particular social, governmental, and religious traditions that gave rise to this

pervasive feeling of impotence and loss of control were unique to Europe and give the category

of European absurdity its first defining trait.

2. *Urbanization*

As prevalent as social, political, and religious traditions are in the European

consciousness, it is only possible for those influences to exist in the particular geographic

landscape and population distribution present on the continent. Just as these structural systems

can deplete one's sense of individuality and autonomy, so too can the crush of both countries and

people.

In Europe, one can drive for two hours and easily cross the borders of several countries,

each of which has their own unique culture and identity. The flight time from one major

population center to another is usually no more than a few hours (counting time in the airport)

and trains are an equally practicable method of transport. Often, when you reach your

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[57] Winterhalter, Benjamin. "Franz Kafka's The Trial--It's Funny Because It's True." *JSTOR Daily*, July 2, 2019.

destination, you will find yourself in a place entirely unlike that which you left, despite its relative proximity to your home.

When you compress so much diversity and so many centuries of culture into an area only a few hundred thousand square miles more spacious than America, it can contribute to a feeling of smallness and insignificance.[58] This sensation is only reinforced by the population density of the European continent, which is home to approximately 748,000,000 people as of 2021, resulting in a population density almost three times as high as that of the United States.[59] What makes the self-effacing social absurdity of population and cultural density different from system density is how it imposes itself upon the individual. System density actively tosses a person about, making it seem as though they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. The absurdity of urbanization, however, is similar to the feeling of treading water in an ocean that is too vast to understand—it is not actively opaque or malevolent like system density—it simply is, and as a small individual in the face of such overwhelming numbers, the possibility of extracting any meaning whatsoever from an impersonal ocean is so miniscule as to be functionally impossible.

Two works that accurately represent the absurdity of urbanization in both social and personal contexts are *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre and *The Plague* by Albert Camus. As previously mentioned, both of these works were influential in the development of existentialism and absurdity and are multifaceted in the ways they portray the absurdity affecting their characters.

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[58] Darby, H. C. "On the Relations of Geography and History." *Transactions and Papers (Institute of British Geographers)*, no. 19 (1953): 1-11. Accessed March 18, 2021. doi:10.2307/621223.

[59] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs*,* Population Division*. World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision.* 2018.

Roquentin, the historian protagonist of *Nausea*, was previously cited as an example of the absurdity of the self as he came to understand that the existence of an object, particularly the roots of a chestnut tree, exist on their own terms before we can impose any essential labels upon it. What was not touched upon, however, is the degree to which the pressures of both society and his seeming insignificance affected his perception of himself and the world and contributed to his dissociation. This social absurdity exists alongside all of the other incongruities that Roquentin contends with, and can be evaluated on its own terms.

After all, it is not merely inanimate objects that have become untethered from their presumed essences for Roquentin—the same thing happens to people as well, separating into existence and essence in a way simultaneously overwhelming and reductive. Crowds of people, for instance—once individuals imbued with their own personalities, desires, and meaning, are broken up into disparate flashes of imagery and sensation.[60] These people, robbed of their own coherent individuality, inherently attempt to separate Roquentin from his sense of self by drowning him in a sea of faceless faces:

> I floated, dazed by luminous fogs dragging me in all directions at once. Madeleine came floating over to take off my overcoat and I noticed she had drawn her hair back and put on earrings: I did not recognize her. I looked at her large cheeks which never stopped rushing towards the ears. In the hollow of the cheeks, beneath the cheekbones, there were two pink stains which seemed very weary on this poor flesh.[61]

Relationships with this mass of indistinguishable people become undesirable, and when Roquentin is presented with the opportunity to reconnect with a woman he once knew, the prospect of the individual connection is staggering and monumental, if ultimately

[60] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea.* Translated by Lloyd Alexander. 18-24. New Directions, New York, NY, 2007.
[61] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea.* Translated by Lloyd Alexander. 18. New Directions, New York, NY, 2007.

disappointing.[62] Faced with the reality of his own separation from community and the universe, Roquentin at first reacts with disbelief, before accepting the conditions of his new reality.

The nausea that Roquentin experiences as a result of the untethering of existence from essence is dramatic and punchy—it strikes out at the reader, reminding us of both the weight of the social absurdity around us, and the impact of our perceptions of the world. The absurdity of the people and the crushing world around Roquentin is always barely hidden, ready to rush out and charge at any moment. Nowhere is this illustrated more harshly in the novel than at the end, when Roquentin witnesses a man in whom he has come to confide molest a small boy: "Once I heard his laugh, a fluted, childish little laugh. It gripped my heart: it seemed as though the two kids were going to drown a cat. Then the whispers stopped suddenly. This silence seemed tragic to me: it was the end, the deathblow."[63] The emotional finality of the crime is conveyed in stark, matter-of-fact, and obvious tones.[64] The anonymous crowd, when given action and impetus, is just as absurd as the disjointed mass of faceless and bodies.

The sense of crushing weight and overwhelming smallness at the eldritch reality of what lies beyond the veil of our perception is also brought to bear in Camus's *The Plague,* albeit in a slightly different manner. When previously discussed, *The Plague* was used as an example of social absurdity, particularly system density. And while there are still plenty of elements of such absurdism within the text, Camus also relies on the smallness of urbanization and a sense of numerical drowning to terrify Dr. Rieux and the reader. Like in *Nausea,* this facet of the text exists apart from the other pressures the absurdist protagonist faces.

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[62] Rolls, Alistair, and Elizabeth Rechniewski. "Uprooting the Chestnut Tree: Nausea Today." *Sartre's Nausea: Text, Context, Intertext. Faux Titre* 273 (2005).

[63] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea.* Translated by Lloyd Alexander. 165. New Directions, New York, NY, 2007.

[64] Rolls, Alistair. "Seduction, pleasure and a laying on of hands: a hands-on reading of Sartre's Nausea." *Sartre's 'Nausea': Text, Context, Intertext* (2005): 183-201.

This effort largely takes the form of the increasing sense of scale and urgency throughout the novel. At first, when the rats flood the streets, there is a general sense of unease, but not yet the sensation that something is going horribly wrong:

> When leaving his surgery on the morning of April 16, Dr. Bernard Rieux felt something soft under his foot. It was a dead rat lying in the middle of the landing. On the spur of the moment, he kicked it to one side and, without giving it a further thought, continued on his way downstairs. Only when he was stepping out into the street did it occur to him that a dead rat had no business to be on his landing, and he turned back to ask the concierge of the building to see to its removal.[65]

The reality of the situation only sets in as the first human deaths begin to be recorded, in ever swelling numbers. Soon, hundreds upon hundreds of people are dying as the city of Oran quickly runs out of medication and finds its hospital capacities overwhelmed, making Dr. Rieux's own ability to treat illness seem pointless.

In the face of such abstract amounts of death, people begin to lose their individuality. Dr. Rieux and his fellow medical workers are forced to retreat into themselves, abstracting away from the reality of death in order to treat the sick not as people, but as biological machines, no more than objects. Eventually, even this abstraction fails and the delusion collapses—no longer then do the doctors even aim to treat, but merely to diagnose and then evacuate before death:

> No resource was left him but to tighten the stranglehold on his feelings and harden his heart protectively. For he knew this was the only way of carrying on. In any case, he had few illusions left, and fatigue was robbing him of even those remaining few. He knew that, over a period whose end he could not glimpse, his task was no longer to cure but to diagnose. To detect, to see, to describe, to register, and then condemn—that was his present function. [66]

Amidst the backdrop of suffering, made possible by the sheer number of people being affected, the absurdity of the situation can shine through, as Dr. Rieux attempts to swim

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[65] Camus, Albert. *The Plague.* Translated by Stuart Gilbert. 7. Random House, 1948.
[66] Camus, Albert. *The Plague.* Translated by Stuart Gilbert. 192. Random House, 1948.

upstream against a tidal wave of contagion and death.[67] Throughout the novel, he comports himself as Camus believed an absurdist hero should—recognizing the futility of his own position and striving in spite of that. However, this aspect of Dr. Rieux's character does not invalidate the other, very real absurdist pressures present in the novel. Oddly, a quote popularly attributed to Joseph Stalin puts it best: "a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths are a statistic."

The impact of population density and urbanization upon the European brand of absurdity is perhaps best understood through the previous metaphor of an ocean. A single person, dropped in an ocean, will find themselves impotent and powerless until they eventually succumb. However, as evidenced by the writings of these existentialist authors, the ocean here is not water—but the crushing weight of other individuals broken into their constituent, meaningless parts, and a toll of numerical death and suffering that cannot be described in any other way than absurd. The wave is so massive that it becomes incomprehensible.

3. War

The large number of deaths in *The Plague* were effectively used by Camus to convey Dr. Rieux's sense of impotence in the face of the absurd, a sensation only reinforced by the additional pressures of confinement and social system density. These themes made the novel incredibly influential in early conceptions of the absurd and allow it to continue to be relevant in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic today.[68] However, those fictional deaths did not do nearly as much to bring the European conception of the absurd into full bloom as did the actual, real deaths and atrocities of World War II.

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[67] Abram, Harry S. "Death and Dying in Camus' The Plague." *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1973): 184-190. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-278X.1973.tb00864.x

[68] Franco-Paredes, Carlos. "Albert Camus' The Plague Revisited for COVID-19." *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 71, no. 15 (Aug 2020): 898-899. https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciaa454

The impact of World War II on existentialist philosophy and conceptions of the absurd cannot be overstated.[69] In fact, World War II touched every part of life around the globe, and set the stage for the modern postwar power structure that we see today. Europe, however, as the site of the conflict, suffered the most. The trenches from World War I still lingered on the landscape when Nazi Germany's military apparatus turned its eyes to conquest, with modern equipment and tactics. As a result of this shift in warfare, civilian casualties were at least double, and perhaps triple, the rate of military casualties.[70]

This aimless, wanton violence, dealt both personally in the streets and impersonally through bomber planes above, was not unnoticed by the existentialists at the time. The painting *Guernica* by Picasso is not considered an inherently existential work, but it captures the absurdism of death dealt by planes in horrifying, abstracted detail. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Blood of Others* makes the suffering feel intimately real as she distills her own experiences during the Nazi occupation into those of the character Helene.[71]

It is important to note, however, that the violence of World War II simply built and reinforced that which was already established during World War I. Chemical weapons and trench warfare had already convinced many Europeans of the absurdity of modern war, resulting in a widespread reluctance to confront Nazi Germany until it was too late. This absurdist realization is poignantly present in the famous poem *Dulce et Decorum est* by Wilfred Owen, which explains in horrific detail the aftermath of a gas attack on an exhausted, downtrodden contingent of soldiers:

[69] Venken, Machteld, and Maren Roger. "Growing up in the Shadow of the Second World War: European Perspectives." *European Review of History* 22, no. 2 (2015): 199–220. https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2015.1008410.

[70] White, Matthew. *Historical Atlas of the 20th Century.* (2003) http://necrometrics.com/ww2stats.htm

[71] Bair, Deirdre. *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography.* 237. Jonathan Cape, London, 1990.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer,
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.[72]

The unprecedented scale of suffering and death witnessed during the Second World War merely reinforced what was already known from the First World War, bringing the idea of absurdity back into a world now more readily accepting of it.

Guernica as a painting represents the firebombing of the eponymous Spanish town of Guernica on April 26th, 1937, resulting in immense civilian casualties. It has already been discussed in some detail as an absurdist work, so it shall only be treated briefly here.

★ Picasso, *Guernica* (1937)

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[72] Owen, Wilfred. *Dulce et Decorum est.* (1920)

The large size of the canvas and the disorienting aspects of cubism allowed Picasso to abstract the real suffering of the firebombing into symbol and beyond it, as contorted and screaming bodies lie engulfed in flames. Just as the monstrosity of the bombing cannot be understood, so too does the painting defy understanding.[73] In this way, by reaching beyond understanding, the painting highlights the inherent absurdity of war, bringing into visual form what those who suffered in Europe during the fighting inherently understood—the weapons of modern war are powerful and indiscriminate, and there is no reason why a bomb should land on your neighbor's house, rather than yours. All of the human planning and calculation in the world cannot compensate for impersonal chance.

Conversely, Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Blood of Others* renders the suffering of war in intimate terms as Jean Blomart waits for his lover Helene to die in the aftermath of a mission for the French Resistance. The novel is told primarily through flashbacks as we are carried along on the thread of events that brought them both to Helene's deathbed.

The primary absurdist tension in the work is between the violence imposed upon the people of France during the Nazi occupation, and the cruel, harsh, yet necessary work of those employed in the French Resistance. Both sides engage in acts of violence, by necessity, as they attempt to further their cause.[74] It is tempting to then say that political violence was simply necessary because the Nazis are universally conceived of as evil, but this neglects to acknowledge the inherent absurdist tension underneath—both the actions of the Resistance and

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[73] Gillespie, Iseult. "What Makes Guernica so Shocking? An Animated Video Explores the Impact of Picasso's Monumental Anti-War Mural," April 30, 2019. TedEd. https://www.openculture.com/2019/09/what-makes-guernica-so-shocking.html.

[74] de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Blood of Others.* Editions Gallimard, 1945.

the actions of the Nazis required the use of violent, horrific crimes, though each acted upon

different targets and at different scales.[75]

Ultimately, the novel presents us with no firm conclusions. Though Helene does die, and

Jean continues to work with the Resistance, the absurd situation that the war has imposed upon

them is left untreated. Instead, through a focus on Helene's suffering and the prospect that Jean,

as a resistance leader, will have to soon send others to suffer a similar fate, we are left with a

sense of deep discontent and despair.[76] This cyclical understanding of war and violence is a

common thread within the central dialogue, only reinforced by the claustrophobic, limiting

parallel construction of the following lines:

> "They use the pretext of avoiding war to make you swallow any kind of peace," said Paul.
> "They use the pretext of a revolution to involve us in any kind of war," said Jardinet."[77]

The actions of war always impact real people, and the most that we can do in the face of

such violence is to recognize the existentialist freedom of our actions against the suffering of

others, and our belief in a cause. The realities of war subjugate individuals to the violence,

forcing them to do inhumane and cruel things that defy their own understanding. Even those who

struggled in battle were rarely able to justify the devastation that they caused, experienced, and

witnessed. De Beauvoir herself intended the work to be read in terms of representing absurdity

and other existentialist aspects of life, as she believed that philosophical concepts and theories

are mere formalizations of what is, at first, concrete and real experience.[78]

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[75] Holveck, Eleanore. ""The Blood of Others": A Novel Approach to "The Ethics of Ambiguity"." *Hypatia* 14, no. 4 (1999): 3-17. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810823.

[76] Mahon, Joseph. "The Blood of Others: The Fictional Primer on Existentialism." Essay. In *Existentialism, Feminism and Simone De Beauvoir*, edited by Jo Campling, 18–34. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

[77] de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Blood of Others.* Editions Gallimard, 1945.

[78] SCHEU, ASHLEY KING. "The Viability of the Philosophical Novel: The Case of Simone De Beauvoir's "She Came to Stay"." *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (2012): 791-809. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23352295.

The real, tangible impact of the violence continues to impact Europe today. Many schools, particularly those in Germany, teach specific and detailed history classes aimed at preventing fascist ideologies from rising again in order to prevent similar atrocities. Every street in Paris was once walked upon by Nazi boots, and military installations still dominate the landscape. Memorials and monuments commemorate the sites of massacres and death marches, while the real buildings in which such horrific acts were carried out are well-maintained and presented with the appropriate context. Getting to a concentration camp is not a difficult thing, and one can feel the air become heavy with the weight of what happened there even as you approach the gates.

It is that lingering memory of violence and horror that has left a pervasive impact on European absurdity. It is impossible to consider the absurd in Europe without reliving, to some degree, what took place all over the continent less than a century ago. The memory of war is a tangible presence that has a role in every aspect of European life and emphasizes in absurdist conceptions exactly how both precious and fragile life is. Against this looming backdrop, it is difficult to even attempt to find meaning within the horrors of the past.

4. *Community and Ostracism*

The final unique defining trait of European absurdity is the tension between community and ostracism. As previously mentioned in the discussions of urbanization and system density, the overwhelming pressure of population and opaque bureaucracies can lead to a sense of social absurdity and a loss of individualism. At the same time, these qualities in a civilization are not inherently bad—governments and social organizations certainly help to manage a country, and a

large population leads to an increase in diversity and culture. Amidst these conflicting impulses is an inherent desire for community, and a fear of being ostracized.[79]

This desire for community and a fear of ostracism is relevant to absurdity because it is often the field upon which absurdist themes play. Some confrontation with the absurd is necessary to be fulfilled as an existential individual, while a denial of the absurd and acceptance of preexisting systems is needed for human companionship and cooperation. This tension between community and ostracism informs an individual's reaction to the absurd, and is thus important for understanding the impact that a particular formulation of the absurd has on a personal level. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground,* Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*, and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* provide us a spectrum of responses to the community-ostracism tension to analyze for said tension's impact on absurdist conceptions.

The ideal jumping off point is *Notes from Underground,* and Dostoevsky's Underground Man. The Underground Man is the paragon of someone who has carried his understanding of absurdity too far, and has completely withdrawn from society as a result. When he attempts to reintegrate, he finds himself ostracized by others, with whom he fights, and by himself as he wrestles with his own rejection of societal structures.[80] Delivered in an introspective, manifesto-like narrative, we can see this rejection at play: "At work, in the office, I tried not to look at anyone, and I was perfectly aware that my colleagues not only considered me an eccentric, but— I felt that too—seemed to regard me with a kind of loathing. [81] The balance between social activity and absurdist identity and individualism has been completely thrown out of balance. No one envies the Underground Man for this, but he perceives his state of ennui and ostracism as a

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[79] Bernheim, B. "A Theory of Conformity." *Journal of Political Economy* 102, no. 5 (Oct 1994)

[80] Scanlan, James P. "The Case against Rational Egoism in Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground"." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 3 (1999): 549-67. doi:10.2307/3654018.

[81] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground.* Translated by Mirra Ginsburg. 40-41. Bantam Classics. (1863)

necessary condition—in one of the final lines of the novel, he speaks accusingly towards the

reader for not embarking upon a similar path, claiming that "I have merely carried to an extreme

in my life what you have not dared to carry even halfway."[82] It is from the cautionary tale of the

Underground Man that we can see a desire in European absurdity to not carry itself too far,

preventing individuals from being completely cut off from society.[83]

A similar perspective is represented in Camus's *The Stranger.* A man by the name of

Meursault attends his mother's funeral, but does not feel grief or exhibit any of the socially

appropriate emotions. Later, he fatally shoots a man who threatens him with a knife, and is

arrested and tried for the crime. During the trial, it is repeatedly emphasized how little Meursault

adhered by society's rules, particularly regarding his mother's funeral.

> But the prosecutor rose to his feet again, adjusted his robe, and declared that only
> someone with the naivete of his esteemed colleague could fail to appreciate that between
> these two sets of facts *[the lack of remorse at his mother's funeral and the murder he
> later committed]* there existed a profound, fundamental, and tragic relationship.
> "Indeed," he loudly proclaimed, "I accuse this man of burying his mother with crime in
> his heart!" This pronouncement seemed to have a strong effect on the people in the
> courtroom.[84]

Though Meursault's actions during the murder were ambiguous enough that he could

have gotten off with a light sentence, he is instead condemned to be publicly guillotined. Later,

when the opportunity for a pardon presents itself, Meursault actively rejects it, believing that the

systems of society were unfit to judge him in the first place. In this way, Meursault is

extraordinarily similar to the Underground Man—he is cast out from society because he

embraces individuality and the absurd too greatly, disregarding the standards that allow for

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[82] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground.* Translated by Mirra Ginsburg. 130. Bantam Classics. (1863)
[83] Oakley, Dylan. "Notes From Underground: An Examination of Dostoevsky's Solution to the Absurd Dilemma." *Macalester Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2011): 10.
[84] Camus, Albert. *The Stranger.* Translated by Matthew Ward. 82-107. Random House, 1988.

community in the process. In 1955, Camus would make the subtext of *The Stranger* explicit with a note in his journal—"…the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game."[85] It is clear in both *The Stranger* and *Notes from Underground* that too radical a departure from socially acceptable norms will be met with ostracism and suffering.

It is telling, conversely, that there is a lack of existentially important novels with central characters who simply ignore the absurd and buy into the systems wholeheartedly. These characters do exist, but they are largely used to draw negative contrasts between themselves and the protagonists. For instance, Zarathustra roundly criticizes priests, wise men, and teachers of virtue throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* while the Well-Read Man in *Nausea* turns out to be a child molester. The lack of such characters indicates that the authors did not feel a need to explain why completely buying into existing systems was a poor choice—for them, the reality of life in Europe involved necessarily confronting the absurd. These writers did, at least, offer a positive middle ground forward.

This ideal approach to reconciling ourselves with universal absurdity is found in a collaboration of ideas between Kierkegaard and Camus. In 1849, Kierkegaard laid out the three proper qualities essential for an Absurd Man to live well in the introduction to *The Sickness Unto Death.* The first quality is a rejection of suicide as an escape from the absurd—after all, existential thought holds that death is no more inherently meaningful than life. Second, one must reject the idea of rescue from a higher power—though God may exist, it is not through God's existence alone that meaning is imposed upon the universe. Finally, one may accept the absurd as an unchangeable fact of existence and choose to live on in spite of that.[86]

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[85] Carroll, David. *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice.* Columbia University Press. (2007): 27.
[86] Kierkegaard, Soren. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Translated by Walter Lowrie. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941.

These three features of the Absurd Man were popularized and best explained in Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*—easily the most influential existentialist writing of all time. Throughout the work, Camus explores different avenues that philosophers have used to overcome the absurd, either by appealing to religion or reason to imbue the universe with meaning. In each instance, he rejects their solutions because the absurd is something that cannot be overcome—as an inherent principle of the human condition, its existence is undeniable.[87] Camus agrees with Kierkegaard that suicide and meaning-imposing religion must both be rejected, but differs in how he believes one should live after that rejection as one now fully experiences the freedom and passion of choice: [88]

> The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.[89]

While Kierkegaard turns to faith, an approach Camus wholeheartedly rejected, Camus offers up the story of the titular Sisyphus, eternally condemned to rolling a boulder up a mountain in Tartarus because he cheated death. Sisyphus is likened in this way to all of humanity, partaking in systems and rituals that lack inherent meaning, cause suffering, and will never change. However, because Sisyphus is able to recognize the absurdity of not only the systems and rituals, but also the suffering that results from them, as Camus puts it, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy."[90] Camus ultimately concludes that the ideal life for a fully recognized Absurd Man is one in which they recognize the futility of their actions and choose to live to the

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[87] Nagel, Thomas. "The Absurd." *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 716.

[88] Bixler, J. S. "On Being Absurd!" *The Massachusetts Review* 10, no. 2 (1969): 407-12. Accessed March 18, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25087871.

[89] Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus And Other Essays*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.

[90] Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. Vintage Books, 1991.

fullest in spite of that. In this way, they avoid the ostracism of the Underground Man and Meursault, retaining membership in a community while recognizing the absurdity of said community.

This final influential trait in European absurdity is that of the tension between community and ostracism. It is impossible to fully commit to community, because it is impossible to deny the existence of the absurd. At the same time, there is a fear of ostracism should one choose to embrace the absurd too greatly and deviate too far from the norms that allow for the smooth operation of society. Instead, the ideal path forward is to accept the absurd as an unchangeable aspect of existence, and choose to live on well in spite of that.

Taken together, these four traits create a uniquely European absurdity, premised on the claim that the universe completely lacks inherent meaning. This appraisal of the universe as being devoid of meaning is one made as a result of the sociological pressures facing these absurdist authors—impersonal systems, crushing populations and urbanization, and abhorrent violence present themselves as amalgamations so devoid of personability that the very existence of meaning within them seems impossible. It is the most that once can do to balance their confrontation of the absurd with their acceptance of it, so that they may balance the tension between community and ostracism and continue to live a good life.

B. American Absurdity

The genera of the absurd is defined as the gap between mankind's desire to understand the universe, and the impossibility of understanding the universe. The pressures European existentialists faced led to their conceptualization of the absurd as reflecting a total lack of inherent meaning in the universe. However, the American brand of absurdity was developed under different pressures, and as such conceives of absurdity in a unique way. Instead of

claiming that the universe is devoid of meaning, the American species of absurdity claims that

the human ability to conceive of and understand the universe is so lacking and impotent that,

even if there were meaning to it, we would not be able to understand it. This shift of focus from

the lack of meaning in the universe to the lack of ability to understand such meaning is a result of

the distinct social and cultural pressures present in the United States that could not be found in

Europe.

Similar to European absurdity, the American species of the absurd has been influenced by

four cultural, social, and geographic pressures that were unique to the time and space of the

postwar Beat generation. By the time the Beats began to write, the European brand of absurdity

already existed, and was being exported to the United States—as such, the aforementioned

characteristics of European absurdity had an undeniable influence on the literary developments

of the time.[91] However, it is even more powerful then when we recognize how the Beats

accepted some principles of existentialism and rejected others, modifying and altering their

notion of the absurd to better reflect the pressures that they were facing.

As a result of this deliberate shift, and the fact that the concepts of existentialism and the

absurd were first developed in Europe, the traits of American absurdity often find themselves in

a polar opposite position compared to the qualities of European absurdity. For instance, instead

of being bounded by other countries and tightly packed social groups, the constant westward

expansion of the United States, along with the Californian dream, provided a manifest destiny-

like impetus to impose one's will on the world instead of fitting into a predetermined mold. The

inverse of urbanization is simply rurality and space—the population density of the United States

is far less than that of Europe, contributing to a greater feeling of freedom of movement.

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[91] Bisbort, Alan. "Narrative History: Origins of the Beat Generation." In *Beatniks: A Guide to an American Subculture.* 1-8. Greenwood Press, 2010.

Furthermore, the United States did not bear the physical marks of World War I and II in the same way that Europe did—operating at some remove from the conflict, civilians in the United States did not understand the brutality of the conflict as intimately as Europeans did. While the violence and trauma that American servicemen experienced on foreign battlefields was real and legitimate, this did not translate into such an understanding for civilians, who typically conceived of war as more distant. Even when authors had direct personal experience of war, they had difficulty conveying it to other citizens without resorting to metaphor and abstraction. Finally, American absurdity is trademarked by the tension of individualism and alienation from others as opposed to the community and ostracism of Europe. Taken together, these traits emphasize an individual's smallness before the universe in a way that the European pressures did not. And, like European absurdity, American absurdity has its own conceptual existence apart from the sociological conditions that allowed for its creation.

These poignant, deliberate deviations from traditional European absurdity marked the advent of American absurdity as its own special conceptual flavor. The shifts were conscious, and can be found throughout the writings of both the Beats and later poets and authors. Each of these traits will be analyzed in turn, before drawing both European and American absurdity together for a final, fully informed comparison.

1. *System Space*

In Europe, powerful systems of government, religion, and social order have held sway over their citizens for centuries. Throughout the history of America, however, there have never been any systems that rose to the same level of pervasiveness or control. As a result of this, the national mythos of the United States emphasizes themes such as libertarianism, capitalism, and

rugged individualism.[92] Instead of critiquing or reforming social systems, American absurdity instead aims to escape from them. This craving for freedom had been found in American culture from the beginning and was given new life and influence once the Beat Generation became appraised of European existential ideas.

However, there are two conditions that must be appended to my claim of an open American system space. The first is that religious thought has always been very influential in American culture and continues to be so in the present day.[93] However, since America is largely Protestant, there was never the culturally dominating nationwide prevalence of the organized system of priests and bishops found in the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The second disclaimer is related to Native Americans. For the White settlers who populated North America beginning in the 17th centuries and expanded westwards, it truly seemed as though there were no civilized systems in place, allowing them the freedom to create their own. This was, of course, incorrect—Native Americans had complex societies and rules that had existed for centuries before the arrival of European settlers. As European colonists, and eventually the United States itself, expanded west, the systems that the settlers created in the space they perceived as empty displaced many of the Native American systems and traditions. This was a tragedy, and could be discussed in its own paper—but for our purposes, the important feature of westward expansion is that the system space was believed to be empty.[94]

It was with such a belief in manifest destiny and American exceptionalism that the infant United States pushed westward, pioneering and colonizing throughout the center of the country

[92] Bazzi, Samuel, Martin Fiszbein, and Mesay Gebresilasse. "Frontier culture: The roots and persistence of "rugged individualism" in the United States." *Econometrica* 88, no. 6 (2020): 2329-2368.

[93] Djupe, Paul A., and J. Tobin Grant. "Religious Institutions and Political Participation in America." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 2 (2001): 303-314.

[94] Shain, Barry Alan. *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought.* Princeton University Press, 1994. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691224992

and finally settling on the West Coast. The ideal of the rugged American spirit, cowboys, and making your own way in a natural lawless setting, where the only thing you have to fight against is the world itself, has remained a part of American culture since, and has manifested in writings as myriad as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey, *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg, and *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates.

Kesey published *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in 1962, and it immediately had an impact on the counterculture movement of the 60's. Drawing on his personal experience having volunteered for government experiments involving the usage of drugs such as LSD, the novel has often been referenced as a scathing indictment of a psychiatric system that treats its patients as animals, rather than people.[95] However, the individualist, anti-system themes of the work are no less poignant.

The systems that constrain and limit the psychiatric patients are given the collective nickname of 'The Combine' by the patient who narrates the novel, a Native American named Chief Bromden. The Combine is personified by Nurse Ratched, who controls the patients through subtle and insidious methods, often promising them rewards instead of threatening them with harsh discipline. Eventually, they are lulled into such a false sense of security that they no longer feel any desire to escape the hospital and rejoin life outside of the grey walls. The introduction of the chaotic character of McMurphy into this environment upsets the carefully balanced artificial reality, as his individualism, personality, and pranks disrupt the pattern of control Nurse Ratched had established.

Instead of critiquing or willfully participating in the rules of the hospital, McMurphy's only goal is to break free from the systems around him and live his life on his own terms—a

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[95] Safer, Elaine B. ""It's the Truth Even If It Didn't Happen": Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest"." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1977): 132-41. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43796071.

clear manifestation of American absurdity.[96] The absurdity is amplified by the pervasive, all-encompassing nature of the system, but is derived primarily from the existence of the system itself, as evidenced by phrases like "You had a choice: you could either strain and look at things that appeared in front of you in the fog, painful as it might be, or you could relax and lose yourself."[97] There are hints throughout the novel that many of the people within the institution do not really need to be there are all—the power of Nurse Ratched, therefore, is represented as tenuous and artificial. Still, despite this rejection of systems, McMurphy is forcefully lobotomized before being suffocated by a pillow as an act of mercy—all of his willful individualism collapsed impotently before a world that he could not begin to stand up to.

A similar rejection of any controlling system whatsoever can be found in Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl,* considered by many to be the manifesto of the Beat Generation. Within the thumping, screaming, relentless lines, we can find the ethos of Beat culture—feeling lost, faceless, and empty within the bounds of American society, they instead sought liberation and joy in the counterculture movement of sex and drugs.[98] The poem is brutal and obscene, detailing in no uncertain terms exactly how the Beats felt—as though they had called out society for the absurdities inherent within it, and had been thoroughly rejected because of that truth. The most damning indictment within the poem is Ginsberg's identification of American society with Moloch in the second section. Moloch, a deity mentioned in the bible as requiring child sacrifices, is compared to America's lust for power, oil, factories, and bureaucracy.

[96] Fick, Thomas H. "The Hipster, the Hero, and the Psychic Frontier in One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest." *Rocky Mountain Review* 43, no. 1 (1989): 19–34. https://doi.org/10.1353/rmr.1989.0002.

[97] Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.* Viking Press, 1962.

[98] Raskin, Jonah. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. University of California Press, 2004.

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!
Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch! [99]

On its surface, the rejection of systems found within *Howl* appears similar to that of European absurdity, because both conceptions lead to the destruction of the individual. The key difference is in how the Beat authors responded to that absurdity—following the American ethos of system creation in empty space, they aimed not to reform culture, but to create their own counterculture in the open field of the 1960s. The social anxiety lurking beneath the divergent American and European system absurdities may have been similar, but the environment created by American culture changed the way in which the Beats perceived the absurdity and responded to it. While European thinkers would have rejected the idea that any meaning could be found in the universe, the Beats were willing to strive in search of that meaning, even if they ultimately fell short.

The rejection of systems continues intimately within Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road.* Published in 1962, it brings the absurdity of social systems into an idyllic suburban household, as we watch the marriage of Frank and April Wheeler crumble under the pressures of society as they feel the love and enjoyment they once experienced together drain away, and a deep-rooted discontent with the social order of the 1950's sinks in. In a desperate attempt to resuscitate the passion, Frank begins having an affair, and April proposes moving to Paris.

However, these attempts to define themselves apart from their societally prescribed roles continue to fail, as Frank begins to identify more and more with his mundane office job, and April begins to reflect on what she wants from life after conceiving another child. The marriage

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[99] Ginsberg, Allen. "Howl." In *Howl and Other Poems.* Pocket Poets Series, City Lights Books. (1956)

ends in death and bloodshed, a hauntingly critical look at the white-picket fence societies of the stereotypically idyllic 1950's. Notably, the solution to the absurdity of society is not reform or acceptance, but self-redefinition and escape as Frank and April try to define themselves as individuals apart from how they were conditioned to be during their upbringings[100]—an individualistic ethic captured in the following phrase: "If you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone." [101]

Systems have always been judged and criticized in America, and the national mythos of settlers, pioneers, and even the Declaration of Independence have contributed to an atmosphere in which the creation of one's own system is perceived as a just and rational response to the pressures of society. Though the system space is no longer nearly as empty as it once was due to the increase in governmental and corporate influence, the impact of such a mythical space on both the American conception of the absurd and our response to it is undeniable. Within this understanding, there is a presumption that the system space around us remains open, ready for us to impose meaning and understanding upon it. However, as illustrated by McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, there remains the unnerving and ever-present possibility that all of our efforts to understand and create will come up short.

2. *Rurality*

While a conceptually empty system space has undeniably influenced the traits of American absurdity, the actual empty space of the national geography has been no less impactful. Indeed, physical space has been one of the defining traits of the American identity ever since Lewis and Clark set out to map the land that lay before them.

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[100] O'Nan, Stewart. *The Lost World of Richard Yates.* Boston Review. (Oct 1999) http://bostonreview.net/stewart-onan-the-lost-world-of-richard-yates

[101] Yates, Richard. *Revolutionary Road.* Little, Brown. (1961)

There has never been a shortage of land in America—though a similar proportion of citizens live in urban areas to Europe, it is the space between those population centers that lends America its unique sense of wide open possibilities.[102] Compared to Europe, the population of America is a measly 330,000,000. It is possible to drive for hours down lonely roads without encountering a single town, and to spend an entire tank of gas getting from one end of California to the other. It is not feasible to take a train from New York to LA, and even flying takes over six hours. Comparatively speaking, flying from London to Moscow takes four and a half. The sense of space and natural majesty found in the United States is so great that the most sophisticated National Park system in the world was instituted to ensure that people could experience nature in all of its glory, protected from encroaching developers.

It is this overwhelming sense of space, and the irreplicable sensation of both progress and futility that one feels while traveling within it that has been instrumental, above all, in developing the notion of American absurdity.[103] Traveling within this space, infinitely small with nothing but a gas engine and four wheels, the very prospect of being able to understand the world seems distant and impossible. With the integration of the interstate system and car culture into mainstream society, the seemingly infinite space of America became a canvas upon which the Beat writers painted their ideals for their generation—and no writer embraced the spirit of the open road more than Jack Kerouac. Amidst his semi-autobiographical tales of sex, drugs, and debauchery, there are unique thematic and textural features of his writing that clearly show the influence of the absurdity of space and empty possibility upon his mind. The one work that

[102] Vandello, Joseph A., and Dov Cohen. "Patterns of individualism and collectivism across the United States." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77, no. 2 (1999): 279.

[103] Sage, Daniel. *How Outer Space Made America: Geography, Organization and the Cosmic Sublime*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2014.

stands head and shoulders above the rest as representing this absurd theme is the seminal *On the Road.*

On the Road is a novel that, from the very beginnings, thrives on a sense of movement and space, a sense that is conveyed through both narrative and word choice, as well as the very way in which the book itself was written. Famously, the original text of the book was written over three weeks in 1951 on a single continuous scroll of paper, stretching to approximately 120 feet of single-spaced text, without paragraph or section breaks. Reading the original version is quite literally a journey, without the interruptive breaks of blank space or turning a page as in the traditional codex form of the novel.[104]

The sense of literary motion continues through the central character of Sal Paradise, the protagonist loosely based on Kerouac himself. In various vehicles, often packed full with other members of the Beat Generation, Sal travels from New York to San Francisco, New Orleans, Denver, Chicago, Detroit, Washington DC, through Texas and down to Mexico City, making dozens of other stops and trips along the way. The story isn't content to remain in one place for too long, a discontent that lay in the author's fingers as much as it did in the character of Sal Paradise himself. Many novels that involve journeys are straightforward—consider Tolkien's *The Hobbit* or *Lord of the Rings,* or even Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*—in each of these works, there was a destination that the characters were seeking. For Sal, there is no such destination—the only motivation is the seeking of something beyond what can be found where he is. It's an intellectual and emotional pursuit, combining the promise of what lies ahead with the loss of what is being left behind—a tension that Keraouc masterfully articulates as follows: "What is that feeling when you're driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you

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[104] Kupetz, Joshua. "The Straight Line Will Take You Only to Death: The Scroll Manuscript and Contemporary Literary Theory." Introduction. In *On The Road: The Original Scroll*, 83–95. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008.

see their specks dispersing? – it's the too-huge world vaulting us, and it's good-bye. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies."[105] There is no guarantee or promise that there is any understanding or reality anywhere over the horizon, but it is still something worth pursuing, simply on the off-chance that one may be successful in discovering something new.

It is in that sense of space and a quest for something else that the absurdist influences of the highway in *On the Road* become apparent. There is a belief, deeply held by Sal and many other characters in the novel, that there is something magical about the space of the country and the travel itself.[106] Beauty exists in strange cracks, through bus windows and beneath New Jersey piers—traveling throughout a space that makes one so insignificant is itself an embracing of the absurd. Searching for freedom and happiness requires a confrontation with the absurd. It is the traveling itself that impacts the American species of the absurd—endlessly reduced by the landscape into a moving speck, the limits of one's own inability to appraise and understand the universe are imposed upon the individual and their sense of scale and self-conception. Just as Sisyphus infinitely rolling his boulder up the mountain is absurd, so too is the endless journey from coast to coast and back again, across a space so vast that it cannot be understood, and in fact rejects understanding. While European absurdity rejects the possibility of the universe having meaning, the very geography of the United States rejects the possibility of a person ever being able to understand the country, much less the universe, if there was any meaning there to begin with. The sheer vastness of the land is incomprehensible, even apart from how that space implies the absurd. The absurdist hope of *On the Road* is perhaps best summarized by Howard Cunnell, in a short piece entitled *Fast This Time: Jack Kerouac and the Writing of <u>On the Road</u>*:

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[105] Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road: The Original Scroll.* Penguin Group, 2008.
[106] Mouratidis, George. "Into the Heart of Things: Neal Cassady and the Search for the Authentic." Introduction. In *On The Road: The Original Scroll*, 69–82. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008.

What is electrifying about the novel is the idea that God, self-realization, and a transforming freedom are *out there*, through the window where you sit confined at school or at work, maybe where the city ends or just over that next hill. This makes the heart thump and blood beat in your ears. A religious seeker and a writer of dreams and visions, Kerouac is a source in that sense, if you are fixed on seeking answers, and once that kind of light goes on in your house it's likely to stay on and you'll always be looking. [107]

Once again, the metaphor of the ocean is useful for understanding the impact that a sense of rurality and space has had on the American conception of the absurd. In Europe, individuals felt insignificant due to the overwhelming crush of civilizations and people, compressed into an area so tightly that the very notion of individualism began to fade and the features of bodies and faces began to lose their coherence. In America, that same notion of insignificance and smallness is imposed by the geography of the country itself.[108] If one stood in the center of the Great Plains, it is possible that you would be the only person, and indeed the only prominent feature of the land from horizon to horizon. Suspended between the open expanse of the blue sky and the golden ripples of a wheat field, standing next to a majestic Sequoia, or hiking through the dark, claustrophobic pine forests of Oregon will make one feel absurdly small indeed. There is no better argument for an inability to understand the universe than one made by the universe itself.

3. Peace

Along with the sense of profound smallness imparted by the landscape, the isolationist geography of the United States has allowed for over a hundred and fifty years of near-uninterrupted local peace, in which all major battles were fought overseas. While European countries were being squeezed by great powers on all sides, America was protected by expansive

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[107] Cunnell, Howard. "Fast This Time: Jack Kerouac and the Writing of On the Road." Introduction. In *On The Road: The Original Scroll,* 1-52. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008.

[108] Vlagopoulos, Penny. "Rewriting America: Kerouac's Nation of Underground Monsters." Introduction. In *On The Road: The Original Scroll*, 53–68. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008.

oceans and secure borders with the neighbor nations of Canada and Mexico, who could not hope to challenge the United States economically or militarily.

Indeed, the last extensive war to be fought on the United States mainland was the Civil War, from 1861 to 1865. While there were smaller scale wars involving the displacement of the Native Americans and territorial expansion after this time period, those engagements did not nearly reach to the same magnitude of importance as the Civil War. However, over time, the memory of the Civil War has faded—there are now none alive who directly recall it or the brutal violence that it contained. An understanding of the true physical absurdity of war has been lost, as generations of Americans now no longer have experiences or cultural traditions reflecting the immense human and moral cost of war.[109] Even during the Civil War, casualties were largely limited to actively enrolled military personal, at a rate of 650,000 military deaths to 50,000 civilian—a marked difference from the exponential increase in civilian casualties of the world wars.[110]

The only time in recent memory in which the reality of war has been thrust into the American psyche was during the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. The unexpected nature of the attacks, the way in which terrorists deliberately turned the superiority of American aviation against the nation, the location of the attacks in New York—a critical part of United States culture—and the incomprehensible images broadcast in full color television all imparted upon citizens of America a profound and deeply disconcerting sense of impotence, danger, and insignificance.[111]

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[109] Oliver, Rebecca. *All quiet on the disillusioned front: the effects of World War II on American literature.* Thesis. (2018)

[110] Hacker, J. "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead." *Civil War History* 57, no. 4 (Dec 2011): 307-348 https://doi.org/10.1353/cwh.2011.0061

[111] Khadem, Amir. "Cultural Trauma as a Social Construct: 9/11 Fiction and the Epistemology of Communal Pain." *Intertexts* 18, no. 2 (2014): 181–97. https://doi.org/10.1353/itx.2014.0007.

Americans responded to the pervasive trauma in a number of ways, both admirable and abhorrent—increased patriotism, community service, and a greater focus on family were paired with xenophobia and expensive, misdirected wars.

Other than the single impactful event of 9/11 and the rising threats posed by Russia and China, however, citizens in the United States currently live in an era of unprecedented stability and peace. This has led to a conception of the absurd violence of war as something that exists far away, on the other side of the world, and a rendering in literature of existential military threats as abstract. War is not understood in the United States as a shared, collective, social experience that physically tears apart neighborhood streets and the families that live there. Instead, war and violence are problems for other people—there are no constant, ubiquitous physical scars on the landscape of the country that remind us of how fragile the social order is. There are memorials and monuments, but not mass graves.

The impact of war on America, such as it is, has been far more psychological than physical. Veterans returning from overseas often brought bodily and psychological scars of battle that profoundly affected the rest of their lives—however, the hometowns that they returned to saw nothing of the same physical damage that ravaged European cities. Despite the constant glorification of war in movies, serious literature and film on the issue has largely taken a psychologically absurdist tone—notably including Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five.* This psychological focus emphasizes aspects of the human condition that make it impossible to claim to understand the universe—constant bickering, insanity, and a failure to grasp the reality of distant war combine to reinforce the limits of human reason. This limit to our understanding marks American absurdity as a concept marked by a recognition of our own limitations.

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, is considered by many to be the quintessential absurdist, black comedy, anti-war film. The plot is simple—the Base Commander Jack Ripper buys into conspiracy theories about communists and takes matters into his own hands, using a secret emergency protocol to launch a nuclear strike against Russia. The remainder of the film is concerned with the governments and militaries of Russia and the United States trying to take down the planes before they drop their payload, which would trigger an automatic counterattack by an undisclosed Russian superweapon and make the surface of the Earth uninhabitable.
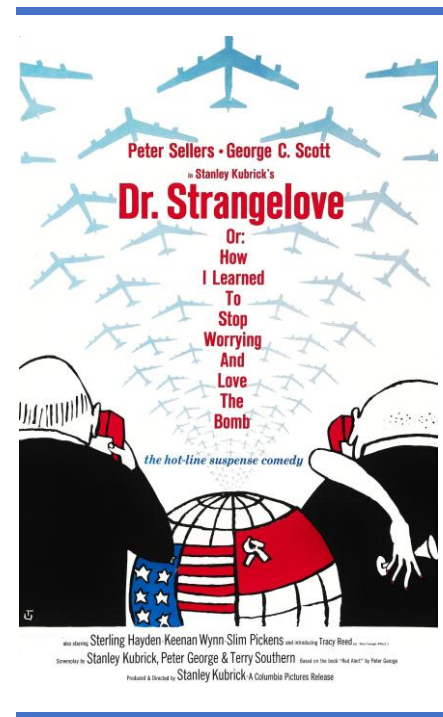
The absurdity of war here is neither physical, nor real. The consequences of the nuclear strike are discussed, but never shown, as the film famously ends with footage of nuclear tests over Vera Lynn's rendition of "We'll Meet Again." Instead, the mad psychology of war is played up and exaggerated to such extreme levels that it becomes simultaneously humorous and terrifying. The overly informal way in which the Russian and American presidents speak with each other and the futile actions of the few sane individuals who want to avert nuclear Armageddon combine to create an atmosphere so mockingly improbable that it is terrifying to think that it could easily be real—a manifestation of the nuclear anxiety that infected every layer of both government and society.[112] This contradiction between the human ability to control our

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[112] Lubot, Rebecca C. "A Dr. Strangelove Situation: Nuclear Anxiety, Presidential Fallibility, and the Twenty-Fifth Amendment." *Fordham Law Review* 86, no. 3 (December 2017): 1175-1198

fates and the sheer destructive randomness of the universe is best highlighted by the fluid-based

conspiracies of Base Commander Jack D. Ripper:

> But today war is too important to be left to the politicians. They have neither the time, the
> training, nor the inclination for strategic thought. I can no longer sit back and allow
> Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion, and the
> international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily
> fluids.[113]

All it takes for the world to end is for one person to lose their grip on reality. The

absurdity the film conveys, then, is not that of intimate or real violence, but instead how human

fallibility and infighting can so easily lead to destruction.[114] Even at the conclusion, as the world

is ending, General Buck Turgidson is occupied with how to maintain American security against

the Soviets when the survivors crawl out from underground into a ruined world after the

radiation has dissipated. In shockingly clear terms, it is made obvious how ill-equipped people

are to set aside their biases and self-centeredness to engage with the realities of the world:

> It'd be extremely naïve of us to imagine that these new developments are gonna cause
> any change in Soviet expansionist policy!
> I mean, we must be increasingly on the alert to prevent them from taking over other mine
> shaft space in order to breed more prodigiously than we do thus knocking us out through
> superior numbers when we emerge!
> Mr. President, we must not allow a mine shaft gap![115]

Taking these same psychological war themes and bringing them down to an individual

level is Kurt Vonnegut's most well-known work, *Slaughterhouse-Five.* The book is a

masterwork of science fiction and anti-war rhetoric—a genre and a theme that are not typically

seen as meshed together. These component parts are as absurd in relation to each other as they

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[113] Kubrick, Stanley. *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.* Hawk Films, 1964.
[114] Cooke, Elizabeth. "Understanding the Enemy: The Dialogue of Fear and Desire in Dr. Strangelove." In *The Philosophy of Stanley Kubrick,* edited by Jerold J. Abrams, 9-32. University Press of Kentucky, 2007.
[115] Kubrick, Stanley. *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.* Hawk Films, 1964.

are to the work the book describes. In a story grounded in Vonnegut's real experiences as a

German prisoner-of-war during the firebombing of Dresden, the fantastical alien abductions stick

out like a sore thumb—just as the aliens are absurd, so too was the firebombing.

This point is most thoroughly driven in by the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim's, sense of

becoming "un-un-stuck in time," allowing him to experience multiple parts of his life

simultaneously and out of order.

> Billy says that he first came unstuck in time in 1944, long before his trip to
> Tralfamadore… The umpire had comical news. The congregation had been theoretically
> spotted from the air by a theoretical enemy. They were all theoretically dead now. They
> theoretical corpses laughed and ate a hearty noontime meal. [116]

These radical shifts in perspective occur at several points throughout the novel, often

reflecting Billy's increasingly difficult battle with post-traumatic stress disorder. In this way,

Vonnegut uses the imagery of becoming unstuck in time to convey the psychological impact of

war to a country and a culture that lacks the context to understand him directly.[117] One does not

need the metaphor of becoming unstuck in time and watching the scroll of history wind up and

unfurl over and over again if one had actually lived through the atrocities of war. The mere

presence of the metaphor as a distillation of Vonnegut's experience reflects how little

comprehension the American public had of the physical and psychological realities of war.

Lacking this understanding, and with additional attention paid to the limits of human

understanding, it is little wonder that American absurdity emphasizes the inherent boundaries of

comprehension more than the European species.

The European understanding of the absurdity of war is intimate, physical, and real, as

people are surrounded by constant material and cultural reminders of the scars that World War II

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[116] Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Delacorte, 1969. 38-40.
[117] Gavins, Joanna. "Absurd Fictions." In *Reading the Absurd*, 97-134. Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

left upon the continent. The modern American absurdity of war is comparatively distant—war has always been something distant, happening to other people, in other places. As such, it makes the violence easier to both justify and glorify. The servicemen who returned from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam with bodily and mental wounds provide a rare window into the suffering caused by such violence; however, these lasting injuries are often disregarded, and not experienced by many others apart from these same veterans and their families.

Instead, when veterans such as Vonnegut aim to convey the lasting psychological impact that war has had on them, they resort to extreme metaphor and abstraction instead of simple biographical narrative. War is rendered absurd not through the impact of its brutal and senseless violence, but through an absurdist representation of the psychological states that both make war possible, and are made possible by war. American absurdity is therefore marked by an absence of war, and a sense of psychological impotence—actual, physical war, to the degree that it is relevant for the vast majority of citizens, is treated distantly and psychologically. This focus on limitations is very similar to that conveyed by the sense of geographical space in Kerouac's work, a unifying thread within the American species of absurdity.

4. *Individualism and Alienation*

Finally, existing at the crossroads of the previous influences on American absurdity, is the tension between a desire for individualism and a fear of alienation. Compared to the conditions of existence in Europe, which necessitate being a member of society and participating in it fully, the American way of life allows for much greater individual development, which entails a certain degree of absurdist anxiety.[118] An open system space, a large geographic space

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[118] Weisz, J. R., Rothbaum, F. M., & Blackburn, T. C. "Standing Out and Standing In: The Psychology of Control in America and Japan." *American Psychologist* 39, no. 9 (1984): 955–969. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.39.9.955

over which to roam, and an atmosphere of peace in which survival was possible without relying

on your community were all necessary conditions for the formation of an absurd tension between

individualism and alienation.[119]

Like the tension between community and ostracism in Europe, the tension between

individualism and alienation in America is one that results from the particular way in which the

concept of absurdity is conceived. The tensions are a result of the particular societal pressures

surrounding individuals, and are useful for evaluating cultural responses to the different species

of the absurd across time.

As previously mentioned, the national mythos of America was founded upon the concept

of individualism. This is evident in both the conception of the Founding Fathers as radicals who

broke away from the dominant, mainstream subservience to England, and in the elevation of

pioneers and cowboys to the status of folk heroes—developments that were only accelerated by

the innovation and subsequent widespread popularity of film.[120] However, the natural

consequence of too much individualism is alienation, as one feels that society is no longer a

hospitable place capable of empathy and understanding. There are many different understandings

of what alienation is, including that popularized by Karl Marx—for our purposes here, alienation

is best defined as the sense of being isolated from a meaningful community. Instead of fearing

conscious ostracism, as the Europeans did, the isolation imposed upon individuals in America is

primarily an absurdity of the self, even in the face of other social and natural absurdities. This

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[119] Triandis H. "Collectivism v. Individualism: A Reconceptualisation of a Basic Concept in Cross-cultural Social Psychology." Edited by Verma G.K., and Bagley C. *Cross-Cultural Studies of Personality, Attitudes and Cognition.* Palgrave Macmillan, London. (1988) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-08120-2_3

[120] Narvy, Jason Andrew. *Cowboys, gangsters, and beatniks: Alienation in dramas of the American West, 1906-1960.* University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010.

tension is represented in many pieces of literature—two prominent ones being *Go* by Holmes, and *Less than Zero* by Ellis.

John Clellon Holmes's *Go* is not the most paradigmatic novel of the Beat Generation; however, it was the first. Published in 1952, it introduced the world to the particular blend of desperation and discontent native to the Beats—like many later works, it was semi-autobiographical, with many pseudonyms used in a paper-thin effort to mask the real identities of those the novel portrays. The setting of New York, as described by Holmes, is an underworld of sex, drugs, and clubs in which many of the side characters are attempting to forge their own identities.[121]

The sole outlier is Paul Hobbes, Holmes's stand-in, who is attempting to balance the individualistic lives of those he enjoys spending time with and the domestic tranquility of his marriage to his wife Kathryn. Throughout the pages, as Holmes struggled with the temptation of amplifying his individuality through hedonism, he is constantly drawn back by the reassuring presence of Kathryn. Despite his marriage falling on hard times due to infidelity from both partners, the comfort of sacrificing some degree of individualism is ultimately presented as the better option as Hobbes's friend group begins to collapse—those who were supremely and ultimately individual are dysfunctional, and wind up alienated or dead.[122] For Holmes, social norms are inescapable, and individualism that leads to alienation is no more functional than simply accepting those norms—extreme individualism is no more than "the idiotic industry of an ant building his hill in the path of a glacier, and imagining that he is free."[123] American absurdity

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[121] Theado, Matt. "Brother-Souls: John Clellon Holmes, Jack Kerouac, and the Beat Generation." *Journal of Beat Studies* 1 (2012): 116.

[122] Charters, Ann. "John Clellon Holmes and Existentialism." In *The Philosophy of the Beats*, edited by Sharon N. Elkholy, 131–46. University Press of Kentucky, 2012.

[123] Holmes, John Clellon. *Go.* 247. Scribner's, 1952.

recognizes the inherent limitations of an individual's ability to understand the universe, but the culture of the United States continues to encourage people to go out in pursuit of potential meanings. Here, Holmes draws boundaries around the value of that pursuit, recognizing that too much individualism results in an inability to continue with the social relationships that make life enjoyable.

This theme of alienation is harnessed and amplified upon in *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis. Published in 1985, more than thirty years after *Go,* it touches upon the exact same absurdities and anxieties—albeit in Los Angeles, instead of New York. The college student Clay returns to Los Angeles for his winter break, and watches as he feels himself becoming progressively alienated within the individualistic, hedonistic culture around him.

As the debauchery increases to criminal levels, Clay tries to stand up for himself and declare that some actions are simply not right; however, the very idea of 'rightness' has ceased to have meaning for the other partiers, and Clay can feel the concept losing meaning for himself as well.[124] This loss is amplified by occasional flashbacks to Clay's childhood, before his family had been torn apart and he had grown up into a harsh, selfish, and uncaring social reality. At the spectacle of losing himself to individualism and brutal hedonism, Clay withdraws back towards social structures. The deep-seated anxiety of losing his grounding is best exemplified by the repeating motif of a billboard that simply says "Disappear Here." The individual disappearing into himself at the cost of morality and those around him is clearly portrayed as undesirable.

> I come to a red light, tempted to go through it, then stop once I see a billboard sign that I don't remember seeing and I look up at it. All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard and the car screeches as I leave the light. [125]

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[124] Sahlin, Nicki. ""But this Road Doesn't Go Anywhere": The Existential Dilemma in Less Than Zero." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 33, no. 1 (1991): 23-42.
[125] Ellis, Bret Easton. *Less Than Zero.* Simon & Schuster. (1985)

In Europe, the ethic of community and the fear of ostracism pull people towards each other and society. The cultural pressure is for adherence to a social norm, and ostracism is what results from not adhering to that norm. In America, though community pressure exists, the ethic of individualism is far stronger. This pushes people away from social norms, and alienation is what results when that impulse go too far. While the European absurdity is ultimately a fear of becoming too much of society that you lose yourself, the American absurdity is a fear of becoming so much of an individual that you lose society and the ability to actualize oneself within it. In both species of absurdity, the possibility of losing valuable relationships is recognized as undesirable—the defining characteristic is how the tension between others and the self is conceived of. In European absurdity, one struggles away from society and towards individualism, while fearing the ostracism resulting from going too far. In American absurdity, the cultural impulse towards individual self-actualization must be balanced with productive engagement with society.

It is notable that, to the best of my knowledge, no American author has aimed to reformulate Camus and Kierkegaard's recommendations for reconciling this absurd tension. The three traits of the Absurd Man—rejecting suicide, rejecting a higher power, and embracing absurdity as a critical facet of life—apply in North America as much as they do in Europe, though the particular brand of absurdity that must be reconciled is undeniably incommensurably different.

V.   Mutual Incomprehension

Through the use of literary analysis across time, it is now clear that the European and American conceptions of absurdity have been influenced by system density, population density and geography, their experiences with war, and the anxious tensions resulting from these factors

in unique and distinguishable ways. These traits have led to citizens of these countries and continents to conceive of the absurd differently, a distinction that has an impact in both how individuals appraise the philosophy of existentialism and how they react to it. As established previously, our threshold for incommensurability as a result of this is as follows: one concept of absurdity must have a characteristic that, by definition, the other kind does not. The overall definition of the absurd is simply the incongruity between human attempts to understand the world, and the world's inability to be understood.

The first trait distinction is in European system density versus American system space. In Europe, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Trial* by Nietzsche and Camus, respectively, portray the immense weight that religious, political, and social systems place on individuals living among them. The systems are omnipresent, omnipotent, and incomprehensible to an individual. Those who then adhere themselves to such systems run the very real risk of losing themselves to the structure. These structures are ineffable, and the very possibility of meaning existing within them seems lost in a maze of contradictory bureaucracies and impulses.

In the United States, meanwhile, the national myth of open system space has inspired in American hearts a belief in individualism and complete rebellion from systems of all kinds. While European writers would admit of the necessity of some systems, American authors were more likely to reject them entirely, as evidenced in Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* Ginsberg's *Howl,* and Yates's *Revolutionary Road.* American individuals were more likely to be encouraged to create their own systems, and to go in search of a meaning that may or may not even be there. Though systems are an undeniable part of life in both America and Europe, the way in which these systems are conceived of is radically different. This creates a notable split in conceptual absurdities—the notion of the individual in European absurdity shrinks, while in

American absurdity it is elevated to almost mythic proportions. At this stage of distinction, it is tempting to think that American absurdity is somewhat more hopeful than European absurdity, or perhaps not an absurdity at all.

That hope is quickly drowned by the next trait distinction, which results in similar feelings of insignificance, inability, and impotence on both sides of the Atlantic. The geographic and population density of Europe had lent the continental consciousness a sense of closeness and proximity. It is possible to go everywhere important, and do everything important, with relative ease. However, that same convenience becomes overwhelming as European authors remark on how the crush of people and proximity results in a drowning dissociation, and a loss of individuality. Just as the ineffable bureaucracy of incredible system density seemed devoid of meaning, so too does the undifferentiated amalgamation of people pressing in from every side. Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus's *The Plague* were offered as examples of this.

America, however, has never been short on space. The feeling of insignificance accomplished by throngs of cities and people in Europe is accomplished in America by the sheer sense of scale and geography of the nation. This is best exemplified in Kerouac's *On the Road,* which contains a sense of desperate, searching movement in both the actions of the protagonist and the formatting of the text itself. Instead of being drowned in crowds and cities, one drowns among asphalt and open skies. If there is meaning to the universe—and, amongst such wide open spaces, such a thing at least seems possible—it is difficult to believe that an individual would ever be able to perceive and understand it. The trait of population density inspires the same absurd emotion on both sides of the Atlantic—smallness through scale, though the mechanisms by which this is accomplished differ markedly.

It is in the third dichotomous trait, war and peace, where the two conceptions really begin to diverge. The European experience of war is visceral and real, kept alive by active memory and the physical scars on the continent that will take centuries to heal. It is impossible to live in Europe without walking along streets that have been touched by violence, and to not then reflect on what that violence means. This intense, personal understanding of the absurdity of violence is apparent in art, such as Picasso's *Guernica,* poetry, such as Owen's *Dulce et Decorum est,* and literature, such as de Beauvoir's *The Blood of Others.* The random, impersonal nature of conflict, devoid of any inherent purpose or particular direction is present in all of these works.

The United States of America, despite being a global superpower, has no such intense, intimate physical memory. The most recent large scale violence was over a hundred and fifty years ago, and even the taste of national trauma inflicted during the 9/11 attacks did not have the same sense of widespread, personal impact as World War II—the collapse of the Twin Towers touched the national consciousness, but directly affected relatively few people. Additionally, the nature of the attacks themselves differ markedly from widespread war. While World War II is by far the largest example of state-sanctioned violence, the attacks of 9/11 were carried out by a small group of people with limited resources and technology.

Instead, the perception of war in the current zeitgeist is extremely limited—violence is often seen as a problem for other people. The real and personal experiences of overseas service members are meaningful and significant, but simply cannot stand up to a culture without a communal understanding of violence and conflict. When authors and filmmakers have attempted to discuss war, it has often been through layers of abstraction and metaphor largely focused on the psychological impacts of violence. Often, in both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Dr. Strangelove,* these messages are baked in a casing of absurdist and satirical humor. In American literature, the

focus is instead on the limitations of human reason and understanding in relation to war. The conflict itself is often seen to have a purpose, such as defeating evil or liberating oppressed peoples. The ability of individuals to process and understand the requisite violence, however, is profoundly limited. Ultimately then, the European conception of the absurd is indelibly affected by real, tangible experience with suffering, while the American understanding of such senseless absurdity is filtered through a psychological lens, as much defined by what isn't there as by what is.

These distinct traits come to a natural, progressive conclusion with the European tension of community and ostracism, and the American tension of individualism and alienation. In European literature, the gravity of society is depicted almost like a fire—a little bit of it is good, but fall too far into it and you'll lose your individuality. Stray too far away, and you'll wind up like the protagonists of Camus's *The Stranger* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*—ostracized and alone. It is only by taking the path of the Absurd Man, laid out in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* that a balance can be struck, and an enjoyable life lived.

The American tension is not a pull towards society, but a push away from it—a radical desire for individualism and self-determination that derives from the national mythos and culture. The fear, then, is not ostracism from society, but of alienating oneself from it through too radical an exploration of individuality. This fear of alienation appears in both Holmes's *Go* and Ellis's *Less Than Zero,* where a life lived too freely results in the breakdown of grounding morality and community. Just as in European absurdity, however, the only solution is to embrace the absurd and strike a middle ground between alienation and ostracism, and the complete loss of individuality and self-definition.

In a brief summary, the European species of the absurd relies on the proposition that the universe is devoid of inherent meaning, a claim that is supported by the particular social pressures that absurdist and existentialist writers faced when they were creating these concepts. The American species, meanwhile, believes that, even if there is meaning, individuals are poorly equipped to appraise and understand it. Both of these species of absurdity fall under the genera of the absurd, as they both reflect the gap between mankind's desire to understand the universe, and our inability to even begin to comprehend it. The differentiating aspect is whether that gap is created by a complete lack of meaning in the universe, or our inherent inability to understand whatever meaning might be there.

Our analysis now turns to whether these dichotomous traits are enough to incommensurably separate the concepts of American and European absurdity. According to our previously established definition, reached through an analysis of John Finnis's comparison of values in *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, the answer is an unequivocal yes. It is impossible for an understanding of large geographic space to fit into the dense population and city clusters of Europe, just as it is impossible for the American understanding of peace and freedom from violence to fit within a European model touched by World War II. The abstraction from war by Picasso, and the abstraction by Vonnegut, are formulaically irreconcilable. The social contexts leading to these conceptions of the absurd differ so dramatically that the species of European and American absurdity themselves exist individually.

The contradictorily compelling nature of social systems exists within both absurdities—these systems erase individuality, yet some adherence to them is necessary to have productive and peaceful experiences with others. However, the responses of American and European

thinkers to this tension have been markedly different, as the Europeans have feared ostracism by others, and Americans have feared alienation undertaken by themselves.

The distinction made, it is now clear that the two conceptions are incommensurable, and cannot be understood in terms of each other. Though they share some characteristics, none of these features is of the type necessary to unify the two absurdities under a single umbrella. Consider the metaphor of a stained glass window—each absurdity is a window in a cathedral, with one on the east side, and one on the west. They are both examples of stained glass windows, undeniably—but, one cannot understand the eastern window simply by looking at the western one. Common traits emerge when the windows are viewed side by side, but the windows cannot be defined in terms of those commonalities. In doing so, the nuances of color, shape, and material would be lost. In Finnis's incommensurability framework, aesthetic appreciation and knowledge were two aspects of the basic human good, yet they could not be reconciled under the umbrella of the good.[126] So too is the case with European and American absurdities—absurdities indeed, but irreconcilable.

The results of this irreconcilability are dramatic. The conceptions of the absurd that European and American philosophers hold in mind when they use the term "absurd" are therefore markedly different, each understanding of the concept holding subtle nuances that other interlocuters can neither comprehend nor appreciate. As a result of this, any transatlantic discussion of the absurd must almost necessarily be incomplete, as people talk past each other and fail to acknowledge the meaningful differences in their comprehension of the absurd. The quality of philosophical discourse overall suffers as a result.

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[126] Finnis, John. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. 115. Oxford University Press, 2011.

VI.   Reconciling Absurdity

It is overwhelmingly clear that the conceptions of absurdity in both Europe and America are of fundamentally different species. European absurdity was born out of a deep discontent with the social, political, and cultural structures in place at the time, and amplified by the increasing encroachment and constriction of urbanization before finally erupting in the violence of the world wars. Wrapping around every one of these was a sense of community, and the fear of ostracism from that community if one attempted to deviate from the societally established norms.

American absurdity has markedly deviated from the example set by its older cousin—despite the increasing role of government and the ever-present influence of religion, the nation had a much more freewheeling, libertarian approach towards freedom and giving individuals the ability to do as they please. This freedom, however, found itself impotent in the face of overwhelming space, left untouched by the horrors of war. Amidst the Beat Generation, we can see the desire of the young literary generation to establish themselves in the new and open world while still being deeply afraid of being alienated from both the society left behind and those individuals who shared their opinions.

Since these absurdities are mutually incomprehensible, irreducible into each other, and incapable of being explained in shared terminology, then how are we to bridge this gap in understanding? Without rectifying the incommensurability problem, then those who discuss absurdities and existentialist thought across the Atlantic will always be, on some level, talking past each other. Any work currently being done in the academic or literary spheres that engages with the absurd would benefit from having this conceptual gap highlighted and closed.

The trick rests in the definition of incommensurability itself—it is not possible to compare European and American absurdities on each other's terms because those terms are so different, but it is possible to understand each of them on their own terms. European absurdity must be understood from a European's perspective, just as American absurdities must be understood from an American's.

The key to increasing absurdist understanding is empathy—willfully exposing oneself to relevant experiences from other cultures, partaking of media that represents a culture's experience with the absurd in a correct and comprehensible way, and engaging in more shared experiences not as individuals or nations, but as humanity as a whole.

The first, and easiest way to increase an understanding of another culture's absurdities is by visiting said country and exposing yourself to their way of life. Someone who has lived their entire life in America and only traveled in their personal car through the suburbs on wide open roads is going to be radically shocked by European living. The greater reliance on public transport and walking, the density of the buildings and the populations, and the rich, overwhelming weight of history are experiences that fundamentally contribute to a European conception of the absurd but cannot be found in America. While it impossible for an American, as a tourist, to fully come to appreciate and understand the intricacies of life in a European country, the mere experience of walking the streets and exposing oneself to new environments will help dramatically.

The same principle runs the opposite way. Europeans who visit America will no doubt be shocked, surprised, and appalled by many aspects of the culture. Many Europeans who I have spoken with personally find the most difficult adjustment to make to be that of space—

transitioning from reliable public transportation to needing a car to get anywhere regularly is a significant shift.

Notably, however, it is not enough to simply be a tourist in a foreign country to gain an understanding of the absurd. One must expose oneself to experiences of absurdist relevance. In Europe, this could take the form of visiting old battlefields and concentration camps, of attempting to navigate in a city you've never been in before without a guide, or having breakfast at the existentialist Café de Flore. In America, to understand the scale of the country and both the immense promise and unbearable weight that that space holds, a European would need to get out of the city. Flying from population center to population center shrinks the space and removes one from the intimacies of daily life—renting a car and driving down a lonesome road to a national park, and eating lunch at a roadside diner is a much more personal, colorful way to come to understand American absurdity.

However, there are some cases in which it is not feasible to visit another continent. In such circumstances, it is possible to turn to culture and media. As mentioned previously, the brilliance of writers such as Ellis, Kafka, Camus, and Kerouac is that they bring the cosmic absurdities to a human level, filtered through the experiences of their characters. While it may be impossible to personally experience the pressures that these authors were facing when they formulated their conceptions of the absurd, it is possible to understand their characters.

To this end, simply reading the original novels, watching films and recorded plays, or analyzing paintings and other artistic media can provide a window into another culture's absurdity. It is not always the easiest thing to go looking for—absurdist media is rarely that chosen for export when a country is trying to represent itself on the global stage, but it does undeniably exist. A European reading *On the Road* will experience at best the shadows on the

wall of Plato's cave, a dim reflection of the absurd experience of truly putting rubber to road, but the shadows shall be there nonetheless.

Furthermore, though personal experience is by every account the strongest method of coming to understand the absurd, it is interesting to analyze these existential and absurdist works as a reflection of the author's state of mind. Though one is getting their dose of absurdity at a degree of removal, they are getting twice as much—the absurdities that the characters themselves are facing, and the absurdities that the author faced that influenced the way they wrote the characters.

Sharing experiences and cultures is, however, ultimately imperfect. It is a retroactive understanding, aiming at bridging a gap in absurdist understanding resulting from centuries of cultural, social, and philosophical divergence on both sides of the Atlantic. If we ever wish to develop a shared sense of the absurd, distinct from the previous European and American iterations, but commensurable and able to be discussed by philosophers with the same language, we must actively begin to change how we think of ourselves as a community.

As the world continues to globalize, and communication and collaboration between the United States and European countries becomes more prevalent, the absurdist themes that once divided the continents are beginning to merge into new shared experiences. For instance—it was impossible for people in America to fully understand the impact of the world wars and the scars they left on the land, just as it's impossible for a European to understand the sheer scale of the United States and the promise of the open road unless they have been here. Absurdity is abstract and impersonal but intimate in the ways in which is touches you—it is something that can never be truly explained but must be felt.

However, this division of experiences is beginning to collapse. Consider the COVID-19 pandemic. Though each country handled the disease on their own terms, often to varying degrees of effectiveness, the entire world suffered together through the conditions outlined in Camus's *The Plague*—the worse and better demons of humanity battling for either victory or defeat in the face of an insidious natural force. It was a universal, shared confrontation of the absurd—and, just as we now live in the waning days of the pandemic, so do the words of Dr. Rieux about the fictional plague he faced ring true: "there are more things to admire in men than to despise."[127] Expanding our conception of absurdity to encapsulate not just ourselves as individuals, or ourselves as a nation, but ourselves as a species facing the universal absurd together, will begin to build a foundation of mutual understanding and absurdity that can be used for productive and empathetic discussion.

Though it is impossible to understand American and European absurdities without experiencing the conditions that make such absurdities so powerful and prevalent in society, the technological environment in which we live has made such experiences more accessible than ever. By sharing experiences, culture, and partaking in a greater understanding of humanity as a shared quality amongst all people in the face of a cosmic absurd, we are better able to comprehend each other's absurdities, and grow to face the absurdities relevant to us all.

The absurdities themselves remain incommensurable, and impossible to be reduced or hybridized. However, by understanding each absurdity on its own terms, as every concept in a meaningless universe demands to be understood, we can gain a greater ability to engage in productive existentialist and absurdist discussion.

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[127] Peters, Michael. "The Plague: Human resilience and the collective response to catastrophe." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2020) https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1745921

VII.   Conclusion

The story of existentialism and the absurd is one that stretches back centuries, but continues to have an impact today as more and more people recognize the complexities and benefits of the school of thought.

The central principle of existentialism is self-definition, that very same concept of existence preceding essence. The absurd, then, stands in the way of self-definition. It is only possible to define oneself as an individual by understanding the background of what one is not— and, if that background is fundamentally unable to be understood, the task becomes much harder. Therefore, there are clear benefits to understanding the cultural, social, geographic, historical, and political factors that have led different groups to perceive of the absurd in different ways. The easiest way to get a sense of these factors is by evaluating literature, art, and poetry created by existentialist and absurdist figures over time, in both environments.

European absurdity is defined by a large number of pre-existing systems and a crush of people and population centers—both of these features contribute to a feeling of smallness and a loss of individuality. Combined with the very real scars of war, a tension is established between community and ostracism—an inherent desire for and a fear of self-definition created by anxiety over the actions of others in response to that individuality. The European species of the absurd then relies on the claim that there is no inherent meaning in the universe, regardless of whether humans were capable of comprehending it or not.

American absurdity is marked by a conceptual absence of systems, and a sense of smallness imposed by sheer geographical space. This simultaneously elevates the individual above preexisting systems, while acknowledging that nothing any individual will create can stand up against an impassive universe. Instead of a widespread cultural memory of violence,

there is a collective denial of its reality, punctuated by harsh bursts of personal experience with conflict. In this environment, compelled by a national mythos that favors rugged individualism, the tension created is that between individualism and alienation. The resident fear is not what the community will do in response to one's self-definition, but what one will do themselves with that definition. The American species of absurdity instead pays increased attention to mankind's ability to understand. The psychological and social conditions around the formation of the uniquely American absurdity lead to the claim that, regardless of whether there is or isn't meaning present in the universe, humans are ill-equipped to understand it. The most that we can do is hope and search.

These two conceptions are incommensurable, built as they are from experiences and conditions that cannot be replicated or reduced into each other. As a result, philosophical discourse about the absurd has been marked by a general misunderstanding of what interlocuters on either side of the Atlantic mean by 'the absurd.'

However, this condition of talking past each other is not permanent. While the two absurdities can never be combined into one overarching absurd conception, each absurdity can be understood on its own terms by deliberate exposure to the lives and cultures of different groups. Eventually, as we advance towards a mode of thought that regards humans as one singular group on a planet instead of being divided up into many different countries and nations, a genuine shared understanding of the absurd based on truly common experience can begin to flourish.

European absurdity is real, and American absurdity is real. They are both distinct, and demand to be understood on their own terms—as a result, the experiences of every individual in the face of these absurdities will also be unique. Embracing the life of the Absurd Man—

rejecting suicide and meaning from a higher power, while aiming to recognize the inherent

necessity and beauty within such absurdities—is therefore necessary, as it allows a greater and

more comprehensive understanding of the universe, society, and the self.

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