

# On the Existential Interpretation of Contemporary British and American Literature

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**Abstract:** Since the 19th century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard proposed the prototype of existentialism, existential thought has always been regarded as an important school of unique value in western philosophy. With the outbreak of World War II, the existentialist philosophy spread to the field of literature and politics, and a large number of sharp and thought-provoking excellent literary works emerged. Existentialism vividly depicts the difficulties and struggles faced by the people, reveals the absurdity of western social and political positions, and conveys the author's appeal and cry for self-awareness awakening and self-value realization in the article, which has a positive impact on the livelihood issues and social reform of western countries. By analyzing British and American existentialist literature, combining the characteristics of British and American existentialism and classic works, this paper deeply interprets the deep meaning of British and American existentialism, and the positive influence of British and American existential literature on human social civilization.

**Keywords:** Contemporary British and American Literature; Existentialism; Sartre

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## Introduction

After the Second World War, social unrest, economic malaise and class conflicts gradually intensified, and the people of all countries were deeply involved in the psychological trauma and internal contradictions brought about by the war. During this period, philosophers put forward existentialist ideas and advocated people-oriented, respect for individuality and freedom. Existentialism advocates that human birth and existence themselves are meaningless, and what makes life meaningful is man's self-awakening and individual choices. Encourage people to pay attention to their own hearts, not to be imprisoned by the so-called destiny and mission theory, and strive to create their own life. As soon as the existential philosophy came out, it immediately gained a strong social response. People began to re-examine themselves and their lives, and a large number of excellent existential literary works also emerged in the literary circle. It not only promotes the awakening of public self-awareness, but also has a long-term and positive impact on the cultural and economic development of the whole era.

## 1. The Development of the Existential Philosophy

Existentialism is one of the main schools of contemporary Western philosophy. Existential philosophy, as a kind of thought germination, can be traced back to the mid-19th century. The Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard proposed the ideological prototype of existentialism in his philosophical book "The Conception of Fear". Kierkegaard believes that man is the measure of all things. People exist because they have subjective psychological activities, and every moment they can feel the changes in the world. Kierkegaard takes religion as the premise, combines personal life experience, demonstrates religious belief and personality principles, and attaches great importance to the extreme importance and choice of individual individuals<sup>[1]</sup>.

It was not until 1926 in the twentieth century that the German philosopher and atheist Martin Heidegger formally proposed existentialism. He proposed in "Being and Time" that as a "being", what we face is "nothingness". Human existence in a meaningless universe is also meaningless in itself, but because people can shape themselves and achieve self-achievement, we can make life wonderful and meaningful<sup>[2]</sup>. As Heidegger's existentialist thought gradually became widely circulated in Germany, and gradually spread to France, the United States, Britain and other Western countries during World War II. By the 1950s, existentialism had become one of the most influential philosophical schools in the Western world, and had a significant influence on the field of British and American literature.

Existentialist philosophers have always emphasized the self-selectivity of personal life. It emphasizes that people are free and should transcend the absurd reality and create their own essence through actions. This spirit of fighting against the reality and constantly forging ahead, and the thoughts of optimism and hope in despair, all directly affect the existentialist literature.

## 2. The Development of Existentialist Literature

By the 1930s, after World War II, France had gradually replaced Germany as the center of existentialism. The development and spread of existentialism reached its climax in the 1940s and 1950s. As a brand new school of thought, it is very powerful and widely spread. Many excellent works of spreading existential philosophy have also emerged in the field of literature, causing the most popular literary trend in modern literature.

The representative figures of French existentialist literature are Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. In his play "No Exit", published in 1938<sup>[3]</sup> and expressed his views on people and "being" through the characters in the work. Sartre believes that the called "existence" is the self-consciousness. Self-consciousness and objective reality are opposed to each other, and society is often opposed to people. People feel loneliness, anger, disappointment, threat, fear, and even abandonment and betrayal.

In 1942, Camus's novel, *The Outsider*, came out, which features a lot of space about a little man called Meursault. He was lonely, cold, and even faced his mother's death and the impending death penalty. The novel uses Meursault's attitude, fully reveals the absurdity of the world, and people and society are in the opposite situation. The hero seems perverse, cold and inhuman, but this is the way he chose to fight the absurd world. As soon as the novel was published, it caused a great response in the literary circle<sup>[4]</sup>.

The industry believes that Sartre and Camus's works are filled with existential ideas and are a whole new school of existentialist literature. Although Camus himself has repeatedly denied this statement, it is exactly a major feature of existentialism: existentialism cannot be said in a word, and the existentialist philosophers have their own thoughts and views. So it is suggested that there are as many existential philosophers in the world as as many existential ideas.

Existentialism gives up the praise of God and God, nor does it pursue more gorgeous scenes and dramatic plots in the work. Authors tend to pay more attention to the small characters, focusing on the spiritual world and inner struggles of the little people. The article seems pessimistic, but in fact it is reflective, encouraging the people in that period to re-examine themselves and the society, no longer listen to the guilt and mission theory, focus on their inner feelings, listen to the real voice deep in the soul, take the initiative to make choices and changes, and master their own life again.

## 3. Development in the Field of British and American Literature

As the banner of existentialism floated throughout the Western literary circle, existentialism reached its peak in British and American literature. American writer Norman Mailer combined his experience and insights to create the novel *The Naked and the Dead* in World War II when he was 25. The novel combines the author's military career and teaching career to create a battle of the US and Japan on the small island of Annopope. Taking national war, class struggle and racial discrimination as the breakthrough point, it revealed the political nature of American bullying to the people<sup>[5]</sup>. War has always been a coup staged by a handful of powerful rulers to satisfy their selfish desires and disregard society and people's livelihood. He encouraged the American people at that time not to be negative. As long as the public remained awake and plucked up the courage to jointly fight totalitarianism against war and exploitation, it would bring a bright future to the country and the people.

The British novelist William Golding, of the same period, wrote the novel "The Lord of the Flies" in 1954, also focusing on small islands and war. The novel focuses on the same and gay teenage soldiers, where a group of teenagers crash on an isolated island in the context of the fictional "World War III". The children wander on the rich and beautiful island, far away from the war, and opening up a new life of ease and harmony. At first, the children maintained the division of labor and communication in a civilized society, and life operated in an orderly manner. But the comfortable life gradually awakened the laziness and barbarism in human nature, the civilization and order on the island gradually declined, and the children moved

from mutual cooperation to indifference and killing. At the end of the novel, only a few children are saved after the fight, and the beautiful island is destroyed by fire and no to exist<sup>[6]</sup>.

Golding concretized the heavy philosophical proposition and aroused people's thinking through such a story. Simple children attract pity, the cruelty of the desert island survival is desperate. We can find resonance in every child, and we are shocked by the dangerous struggle scenes. *The King of the Flies* reveals the evil side of human nature. Through the change of children from rational civilization to brutal cruelty, it reflects the absurdity of the real world. It also points out the truth that only when human nature becomes good and establishes civilization and order can all living beings get salvation.

In addition, there is the novel "The Purple" by the contemporary female writer Alice Walker, where she portrays the role of a black woman<sup>[7]</sup>. The work deeply explores the story of Celia, a black woman, who bravely breaks through the shackles and faces the dual challenges of racial discrimination and gender causing unfair treatment, while pursuing happiness and freedom.

## **4. The Characteristic Analysis of British-American Existentialist**

### **Literature**

Affected by the Second World War, the United Kingdom and the United States fell into a period of social unrest, economic depression and intensified contradictions. Literary creators are the first people to wake up, but also the pioneers to re-examine the country and society. The timely emergence of existentialism has become the antidote to the authors' spiritual sustenance and self-redemption. Compared with the French existentialism for individual characters' delicate feelings and empathy, the British and American existentialism authors are more keen to describe the common difficulties and all living beings in the background of The Times, so as to expose and denounce all kinds of irrationality in the western social system. It depicts the fragility of human nature and the unhappiness of life, magnifies the plight and pain faced by the characters, and also enables the readers to more deeply understand the emotions and feelings of the characters.

Unlike other literary works, the existentialist works never deliberately pursue the perfection or drama of their characters, nor do they pursue the dramatic ups and downs in terms of plot arrangement. The author pays more attention to each little person real and down to earth, ordinary but distinct three-dimensional. No matter the occupation, age, gender, the character's speech and behavior must be consistent with the identity, and reflect the image of the character in plain and sincere way.

In addition, although existentialism focuses on describing pain and struggle, its purpose is never only to vent and criticize, but also not to force up the tragic color of moaning. The ultimate pursuit of existentialism is to adapt to and change. The description of pain and inner struggle can better empathize with readers and the general public, encourage people not to suppress their emotions and inner feelings, face up to difficulties and pain, but never compromise with the society, and firmly change their faith if they want to change.

## **5. The Existentialist Evolution of Contemporary British and American**

### **Literature**

After World War II, western countries have not reestablished their social framework due to economic losses and other factors. Writers have always been the pioneers of politics. Through plain language, they depict the human sufferings, comfort the popular public, and promote the reform of the country and the awakening of humanistic faith<sup>[8]</sup>.

By the late 1960s, existentialist literature was not in decline and was gradually replaced by new literary schools. However, the schools of absurdity and black humor transformed from it continue to this day, with excellent literary and film and television works such as *Catch-22*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Pulp Fiction*.

Today, existentialism is still highly respected. Existentialism advocates focusing on individual feelings and promoting conscious awakening. It still plays a positive role in the fields of pedagogy and psychology and international relations.

Tag:

The British and American existential literature sprouted in the era of turbulent and poor people, and the existential

literature works have strong social background characteristics. Existentialist literature works are close to life, meet the requirements of the people for philosophy at that time, and play an important role in the field of contemporary British and American literature. British and American existential literature not only produced a strong social response in its glorious period, but also influenced the literary thoughts and schools in the following decades. Although the existentialist literature works also describe the pessimistic color full of despair in anxiety and predicament, its core lies in the struggle, the awakening of self-consciousness and the pursuit of their own value, to find hope from despair, and to obtain the meaning of survival. Through the simple and true description, the existentialist literature realizes the equal dialogue between philosophy and the Li people, which not only heal the people suffering under the background of The Times, but also the exploration spirit conveyed by the works actively promotes the development and progress of human society. Therefore, British and American existential literature can be said to be the catalyst to promote the process of human civilization history, and continue to have a long-term positive impact on the development and progress of human society.

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