

**EXISTENTIALISM AND POSTMODERNISM: POINTS OF TENSION AND
INTERSECTION IN LITERATURE**

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Abstract: This article explores the philosophical and literary intersections between existentialism and postmodernism, two influential movements that redefined twentieth-century thought and literature. While existentialism emphasizes individual freedom, moral responsibility, and the search for meaning in an absurd world, postmodernism questions the very possibility of stable meaning or coherent identity. This study examines how these contrasting perspectives converge and diverge in literary texts, focusing on their treatment of subjectivity, truth, and narrative structure. Using qualitative literary analysis, works by Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, and Thomas Pynchon are analyzed. Findings indicate that although postmodernism often subverts existential certainty, it inherits existential concerns about alienation and authenticity, transforming them into skepticism and fragmentation characteristic of late modernity.

Key words: existentialism, postmodernism, literature, philosophy, subjectivity, free will, search for meaning, identity, deconstruction, insignificance

Introduction

Existentialism and postmodernism represent two major intellectual currents that shaped modern and contemporary literature. Existentialism, emerging in the early twentieth century with philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, centers on the human condition—freedom, absurdity, and the struggle to create meaning in an indifferent universe. Postmodernism, gaining prominence after World War II, challenges the grand narratives and stable identities that existentialism still presupposes. Existentialist literature presents the individual as capable of shaping personal meaning through choice and responsibility. Postmodern literature, however, destabilizes that belief, portraying identity as fluid, reality as constructed, and meaning as endlessly deferred. Despite these differences, both schools address the crisis of subjectivity and the collapse of traditional moral and metaphysical frameworks.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the **points of tension and intersection** between existentialist and postmodernist thought as expressed in literary works. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do existentialism and postmodernism differ in their conception of human subjectivity and freedom?
2. In what ways does postmodern literature reinterpret or reject existential themes?
3. How do literary texts embody the philosophical transition from existential to postmodern sensibilities?

This research contributes to comparative literary theory by bridging philosophical analysis and textual interpretation, highlighting the ongoing dialogue between two paradigms of modern thought.

Methodology

The research adopts a **qualitative and interpretive literary analysis** within a philosophical framework. The methodology involves:

- **Textual analysis** of selected works by Albert Camus (*The Stranger*), Jean-Paul Sartre (*Nausea*), Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), and Thomas Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49*).
- **Comparative philosophical interpretation**, focusing on existential and postmodern themes such as meaning, absurdity, freedom, and fragmentation.
- **Thematic categorization**, identifying intersections and contrasts between existentialist and postmodern worldviews.

This method is appropriate because both existentialism and postmodernism rely heavily on philosophical discourse reflected in literary representation. The analysis focuses on *narrative structure, character psychology, and philosophical motifs* rather than statistical or empirical data.

Results

The analysis reveals three major areas of convergence and divergence between existentialism and postmodernism in literature.

The Individual and the Self

Existentialist literature foregrounds the self as an autonomous agent capable of defining essence through action. Sartre's *Nausea* exemplifies this with Roquentin's awareness of existence as a burden and his eventual acceptance of freedom. Postmodern writers, however, deconstruct this self. In Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas's quest for meaning dissolves into uncertainty, showing a fragmented self overwhelmed by systems and symbols. The existential subject's struggle for authenticity transforms into the postmodern subject's crisis of identity.

Meaning and the Absurd

Both existentialists and postmodernists acknowledge the absurdity of existence. For Camus, the absurd arises from the conflict between human desire for meaning and the world's silence. His solution is rebellion and the creation of personal meaning. Postmodern writers, however, refuse resolution. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* dramatizes the futility of waiting for meaning that never arrives. The existential rebellion is replaced by ironic detachment—an acceptance of absurdity without the hope of transcendence.

Language and Narrative Structure



Existential novels maintain a degree of coherence and psychological depth, reflecting belief in individual experience. Postmodern texts, by contrast, employ fragmentation, metafiction, and intertextuality to undermine narrative authority. While Sartre's prose uses introspection to explore consciousness, Pynchon and other postmodernists dismantle narrative coherence itself, illustrating the collapse of unified meaning in the late twentieth century.

Discussion

The findings suggest that existentialism and postmodernism share a concern with human alienation and the loss of meaning, but diverge sharply in their response. Existentialism is **humanistic**, maintaining faith in individual freedom and authenticity. Postmodernism is **anti-foundational**, questioning whether such concepts have any validity in a world of linguistic play and cultural relativism.

From Freedom to Fragmentation

Existentialism's core premise—that individuals can create meaning through free will—reflects optimism about human agency. In contrast, postmodernism views freedom as an illusion constructed by language, ideology, and power systems. The existential self acts; the postmodern self is acted upon by discourse.

The Death of the Author and the End of Authenticity

Roland Barthes's declaration of "the death of the author" encapsulates postmodernism's rejection of fixed meaning. This undermines Sartre's notion of authorship as an act of existential freedom. Literary meaning becomes collaborative, unstable, and open-ended—an outcome that existentialists might interpret as *bad faith*, the refusal to commit to authentic creation.

The Continuity of Crisis

Despite their differences, postmodernism continues existentialism's legacy by exposing the instability of human identity in an increasingly fragmented world. Beckett's plays and Pynchon's novels extend the existential crisis into a technological and media-saturated age. In this sense, postmodernism represents not a rejection but a **radical evolution** of existential anxiety into new cultural conditions.

Conclusion

The intersection of existentialism and postmodernism in literature illustrates a philosophical continuum from the search for authentic selfhood to the deconstruction of the self. Existentialist writers such as Sartre and Camus portray individuals confronting absurdity through freedom and choice, while postmodern authors like Beckett and Pynchon depict characters lost in linguistic and structural uncertainty.



These movements share an awareness of alienation but differ in their response: existentialism seeks meaning through action, whereas postmodernism embraces ambiguity as an inevitable condition. Understanding this transition enriches our comprehension of twentieth-century literature and the evolving representation of human existence.

Future studies may extend this research by examining feminist, postcolonial, or digital narratives that integrate existential and postmodern elements, reflecting the continuing relevance of both philosophies in shaping contemporary thought and art.

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