Reading the Absurd

Dr Joanna Gavins
University of Sheffield, UK
My research

- literary-linguistics
- cognitive poetics
  - using knowledge of the human mind from cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics and neuroscience to understand the literary reading experience
- the Absurd in literature
ALBERT CAMUS

L’ÉTRANGER
The Absurd in literary criticism:

- sustained literary critical interest for over 50 years
- Esslin (1961) and Cornwell (2006) key accounts
- no previous definition of temporal, generic or stylistic parameters
- widely applied but highly nebulous concept
Top ten novels tagged ‘Absurd’*

1. *The Outsider* by Albert Camus
2. *The Trial* by Franz Kafka
3. *The Plague* by Albert Camus
4. *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
5. *Incidences* by Daniil Kharms
6. *The Fall* by Albert Camus
7. *The Castle* by Franz Kafka
8. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll
9. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut
10. *Exile and the Kingdom* by Albert Camus

* Tag used 1,654 times by 570 different users on LibraryThing. Related tag ‘absurdism’ used 1,174 times by 385 users. ‘Absurdist’ used 724 times by 220 members (November 2013).
Literary genres as conceptual categories

Radial structure
+ Literary genres as conceptual categories

Radial structure

apples
oranges
grapefruit
tomatoes
Literary genres as conceptual categories

Radial structure

Camus
Heller
Auster
Sartre
I enjoyed this novel quite a bit. More than that, actually; this man, Meursault – I find him to be a fantastic, wonderful creature. The philosophy of existentialism is something so good and this book is full of such truth. The writing style is something that adds to it – Camus has done an excellent job of giving to the reader Meursault’s personality and managing to make everything seem quite so simple. I adore Meursault. I adore this man, and I cannot say so enough. Existentialism is inside of me, devouring my brain, but it’s nice to be able to put a name to one’s way of thinking.

(nyssa, 2011)
I hate the main character and love him at the same time. It wasn’t until the last chapter that I actually liked him. What a genius. And now that I look back, I understand who and what he is. He wasn’t a character meant to sympathize with, or relate to. He wasn’t even much of a character until the last chapter. He was a montage of existentialism; an indifferent symbol, robotic in attitude… What *The Stranger* said about God, and what little time we have to dwell on such uncertainties is beautiful. And I completely agree. We waste our lives worrying about the post-life without giving any thought to what’s happening in our current life. Regardless of the afterlife – which I personally don’t believe in – we should all take the time to appreciate the life we have now; for better or for worse.

(cura, 2012)
Responses to *The Outsider*

**Academic contexts**

- central absurdist text
- ‘the elegantly rationalistic and discursive style of an eighteenth century moralist’ (Esslin, 1980: 24)
- important motifs of heat and light (see Feuerlicht, 1963; Frohock, 1949; McCarthy, 1988; Viggiani, 1956)

**Non-academic contexts**

- central absurdist text
- ‘astounding’, ‘life-changing’, ‘Top 10 novels to read before you die’
- frequent reports of ‘self-modifying feelings’ (c.f. Kuiken, Miall and Sikora, 2004), linked explicitly to the character Meursault
It was a rustling sound that woke me. After having my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even more dazzling than before. There wasn’t a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to the eyes. It was at that point that mother’s friends came in. There were about ten of them in all, and they came gliding gently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I’ve ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet I couldn’t hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I’d never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost all very thin and carrying walking-sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn’t see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. When they sat down most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, with their lips all sucked into their toothless mouths, and I couldn’t tell whether they were greeting me or whether they just had a twitch.

(Camus, 1982: 15)
It was a rustling sound that woke me. After having my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even more dazzling than before. There wasn’t a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to the eyes. It was at that point that mother’s friends came in. There were about ten of them in all, and they came gliding gently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I’ve ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet I couldn’t hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I’d never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost all very thin and carrying walking-sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn’t see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. When they sat down most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, with their lips all sucked into their toothless mouths, and I couldn’t tell whether they were greeting me or whether they just had a twitch.

(Camus, 1982: 15)
It was a rustling sound that woke me. After having my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even more dazzling than before. There wasn’t a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to the eyes. It was at that point that mother’s friends came in. There were about ten of them in all, and they came gliding gently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I’ve ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet I couldn’t hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I’d never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost all very thin and carrying walking-sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn’t see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. When they sat down most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, with their lips all sucked into their toothless mouths, and I couldn’t tell whether they were greeting me or whether they just had a twitch.

(Camus, 1982: 15)
It was a rustling sound that woke me. After having my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even more dazzling than before. There wasn’t a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to the eyes. It was at that point that mother’s friends came in. There were about ten of them in all, and they came gliding gently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I’ve ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet I couldn’t hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I’d never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost all very thin and carrying walking-sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn’t see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. When they sat down most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, with their lips all sucked into their toothless mouths, and I couldn’t tell whether they were greeting me or whether they just had a twitch.

(Camus, 1982: 15)
It was a rustling sound that woke me. After having my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even more dazzling than before. There wasn’t a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to the eyes. It was at that point that mother’s friends came in. There were about ten of them in all, and they came gliding gently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I’ve ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet I couldn’t hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I’d never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost all very thin and carrying walking-sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn’t see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. When they sat down most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, with their lips all sucked into their toothless mouths, and I couldn’t tell whether they were greeting me or whether they just had a twitch.

(Camus, 1982: 15)
Textual attractors (from Stockwell, 2009)

- **newness**
  present moment of reading is more attractive than the previous moment

- **agency**
  noun phrases in active position are better attractors than in passive position

- **topicality**
  subject position confers attraction over object position

- **empathetic recognisability**
  human speaker > human hearer > animal > object > abstraction

- **definiteness**
  definite > specific indefinite > non-specific indefinite

- **activeness**
  verbs denoting action, violence, passion, wilfulness, etc.

- **brightness**
  lightness or vivid colours being denoted over dimness or drabness

- **fullness**
  richness, density, intensity or nutrition being denoted

- **largeness**
  large object being denoted, or a very long elaborated noun phrase being used to denote

- **height**
  objects that are above others, are higher than the perceiver, or which dominate

- **noisiness**
  denoted phenomena which are audibly voluminous

- **aesthetic distance from the norm**
  beautiful or ugly referents, dangerous referents, alien objects denoted, dissonance
It was a rustling sound that woke me. After having my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even more dazzling than before. There wasn’t a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to the eyes. It was at that point that mother’s friends came in. There were about ten of them in all, and they came gliding gently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I’ve ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet I couldn’t hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I’d never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost all very thin and carrying walking-sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn’t see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. When they sat down most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, with their lips all sucked into their toothless mouths, and I couldn’t tell whether they were greeting me or whether they just had a twitch.

(Camus, 1982: 15)
It was a rustling sound that woke me. After having my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even more dazzling than before. There wasn’t a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to the eyes. It was at that point that mother’s friends came in. There were about ten of them in all, and they came gliding gently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I’ve ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet I couldn’t hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I’d never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost all very thin and carrying walking-sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn’t see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. When they sat down most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, with their lips all sucked into their toothless mouths, and I couldn’t tell whether they were greeting me or whether they just had a twitch.

(Camus, 1982: 15)
Modality in literature

(see Simpson, 1993; also Gavins, 2007, 2013)

- boulomaic modality
  *wishes and desires*

- deontic modality
  *obligation and duty*

- epistemic modality
  *thoughts and beliefs*

- perception modality
  *references to the senses*
It was a rustling sound that woke me. After having my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even more dazzling than before. There wasn’t a shadow to be seen and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply that it was painful to the eyes. It was at that point that mother’s friends came in. There were about ten of them in all, and they came gliding gently into the blinding light. They sat down without even a chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I’ve ever seen anyone and not a single detail of either their faces or their clothes escaped me. And yet I couldn’t hear them and I found it hard to believe that they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons tied tightly round their waists, which made their swollen bellies stick out even more. I’d never noticed before what huge paunches old women can have. The men were almost all very thin and carrying walking-sticks. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn’t see their eyes, but only a faint glimmer among a nest of wrinkles. When they sat down most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, with their lips all sucked into their toothless mouths, and I couldn’t tell whether they were greeting me or whether they just had a twitch.

(Camus, 1982: 15)
The style of *The Outsider*

- fixed first person homodiegetic narration
- disorientation and confusion
- Meursault overwhelmed by physical environment
- predominance of epistemic and perception modality
- negatively-shaded narration of ‘uncertainty, bewilderment and alienation’ (Simpson, 1993: 53)
The sun was beginning to burn my cheeks and I felt drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows. It was the same sun as on the day of my mother’s funeral and again it was my forehead that was hurting me most and all the veins were throbbing at once beneath the skin. And because I couldn’t stand this burning feeling any longer, I moved forward. I knew it was stupid and I wouldn’t get out of the sun with one step. But I took a step, just one step forward. And this time, without sitting up, the Arab drew his knife and held it out towards me in the sun. The light leapt up off the steel and it was like a long, flashing sword lunging at my forehead. At the same time all the sweat that had gathered in my eyebrows suddenly ran down over my eyelids, covering them with a dense layer of warm moisture. My eyes were blinded by this veil of salty tears. All I could feel were the cymbals the sun was clashing against my forehead and, distinctly, the dazzling spear still leaping up off the blade in front of me. It was like a red-hot blade gnawing at my eyelashes and gouging out my stinging eyes. That was when everything shook. The sea swept ashore a great breath of fire. The sky seemed to be splitting from end to end and raining down sheets of flame. My whole being went tense and I tightened my grip on the gun. The trigger gave, I felt the underside of the polished butt and it was there, in that sharp but deafening noise, that it all started.

(Camus, 1982: 59–60)
These novels are informed by a vision of absurdity and have at their centre a passive, rationalistic, or hopelessly ineffectual victim-hero, dominated by his situation rather than creating or acting to change it. They have a more or less realistic surface, with somewhat surrealist elements. Realism of detail, rather, underscores the madness of the world, its grotesque comedy.

(Weinberg, 1970: 10)