# Lecture 4: Terminology of Literary Movements

Part II: Symbolism, Surrealism, Nihilism, and Absurdism

## Thematic Overview

During the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, major shifts occurred in literary philosophy. Earlier movements like Realism and Naturalism aimed to describe physical reality directly through clear, logical language. In contrast, the four movements studied here broke away from simple logic and linear storytelling:

- **Symbolism:** Shifted focus away from material objects toward inner feelings, spiritual ideas, and subtle senses.
- **Surrealism:** Challenged rational thinking by exploring dreams and the power of the unconscious mind.
- **Nihilism:** Questioned traditional religious values, moral codes, and the belief in universal human purpose.
- **Absurdism:** Responded to the destruction of two world wars, examining how individuals can create a meaningful life in an indifferent universe.

## 1. Symbolism: Suggestion and the Inner World

### Historical Context

Symbolism developed in France between 1870 and 1890 as a reaction against scientific materialism—the belief that human life is driven strictly by physical facts and environment. Symbolists argued that the physical world is only a collection of visible signs, while true reality lies within human emotions and spiritual states.

### Key Concepts and Vocabulary

- **The Symbol:** Rather than a simple picture with one fixed meaning, a symbol here is an open-ended image meant to inspire personal feelings and ideas.
- **Suggestion over Description:** Expressing ideas indirectly instead of naming them directly. As Stéphane Mallarmé noted, naming an object directly takes away most of the poetic magic.
- **Sensory Blending (Synesthesia):** A technique where one sense is described using terms from another sense (e.g., describing a musical tone as a color or a scent as a texture).
- **Verbal Music:** Choosing words carefully for their rhythm, tone, and sound harmony, rather than just their plain definition.

### Key Figures

- **Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867):** His book *The Flowers of Evil* suggested that nature is filled with symbols connecting the physical world to spiritual states.

- **Paul Verlaine & Arthur Rimbaud:** Poets who created a more fluid and musical poetic style by experimenting with language and sensory experiences.
- **William Butler Yeats (1865–1939):** An Irish poet who combined traditional folklore and rich symbols to build modern poetry in English.

## 2. Surrealism: Unlocking the Subconscious Mind

### Historical Context

Surrealism started in Paris during the early 1920s following World War I. Writers believed that strict social rules and over-reliance on logic led to the war. Inspired by Sigmund Freud's theories, they aimed to unite dream states with waking reality, creating a new reality called *sur-reality*.

### Key Concepts and Techniques

- **The Unconscious Mind:** The hidden part of human thoughts and memories, viewed by Surrealists as the true home of creativity.
- **Automatic Writing:** A technique where the author writes as quickly as possible without checking grammar, logic, or moral rules.
- **Unexpected Combinations:** Placing completely unrelated objects or concepts together to shock the reader into a new way of thinking (such as "an umbrella and a sewing machine together on a table").
- **Dream Logic:** Creating stories that follow the unpredictable and symbolic flow of dreams rather than standard cause-and-effect rules.

### Key Figures

- **André Breton (1896–1966):** The primary theorist who wrote the *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), defining the movement as pure mental freedom.
- **Paul Éluard & Louis Aragon:** Poets who used bold images to express emotional and artistic freedom.
- **Aimé Césaire (1913–2008):** A writer from Martinique who used surrealist methods to challenge colonial ideas and celebrate cultural identity.

## 3. Nihilism: The Crisis of Values and Authority

### Conceptual Definition

Coming from the Latin word *nihil* (meaning "nothing"), Nihilism is a way of thinking based on rejecting established beliefs, universal moral codes, and traditional religion. Rather than being a formal school of writing, it acts as a recurring theme in modern literature.

### Main Types of Nihilism

- **Moral Nihilism:** The belief that moral claims (good vs. bad) have no objective truth and are simply rules made by society.
- **Existential Nihilism:** The perspective that human life has no ultimate purpose or inherent value in a neutral universe.

- **Political Nihilism:** A 19th-century movement in Russia that called for dismantling existing political and social structures to rebuild society on rational grounds.

> **Literary Example:** In Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862), the character **Bazarov** represents nihilism. He trusts only practical science and empirical facts while dismissing art, romance, and traditional customs.

## 4. Absurdism: Living in a Meaningless World

### Historical Framework

Absurdism gained popularity during the mid-20th century following World War II. Seeing widespread destruction made many writers feel that human progress was not straightforward and that traditional logic could not explain human suffering.

### Core Concepts

- **The Absurd:** Defined by Albert Camus as the conflict between human desire for order and meaning, and a silent universe that provides no answers.
- **The Absurd Hero:** A person who recognizes that life lacks built-in meaning, rejects false comfort, and chooses to live passionately and courageously anyway.
- **Theatre of the Absurd:** Plays that broke traditional drama rules—using circular plots and unnatural dialogue—to reflect the confusing nature of life.

### Key Figures

- **Albert Camus (1913–1960):**
  - *The Myth of Sisyphus (1942):* An essay showing how Sisyphus—condemned to roll a stone up a hill forever—symbolizes humanity. Camus argues Sisyphus can be happy because his choice to keep going is a personal victory.
  - *The Stranger (1942):* A novel about Meursault, a man detached from social expectations who accepts the quiet indifference of the world.

## Summary Comparison Table

| Movement | View on Truth | Main Literary Strategy | Main Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Symbolism** | Truth is hidden and spiritual | Suggestive imagery and word music | Emotional and mystical moods |
| **Surrealism** | Truth lies in the subconscious mind | Automatic writing, strange pairs | Mental freedom and bold images |
| **Nihilism** | Objective truth and values do not exist | Ideological debates between characters | Social critique and moral conflict |
| **Absurdism** | Searching for ultimate truth is useless | Circular plots, tragicomedy | Living courageously despite total uncertainty |