*Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy*
**ISSN (E):** 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
**Website:** usajournals.org


# AMERICAN SOCIETY AFTER WORLD WAR II AND THE LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF ALIENATION

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**Abstract**

This article examines how post-World War II American society produced new literary forms of alienation. The study argues that alienation in post-war American prose was not merely a private psychological condition, but a response to historically specific social pressures: Cold War anxiety, bureaucratic expansion, racial exclusion, suburbanization, and the rise of mass consumer culture. Using qualitative socio-literary analysis, the article considers the cultural background of the period alongside selected works by J. D. Salinger, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, Sloan Wilson, and Joseph Heller. The results show that post-war fiction transformed alienation into a central narrative principle through isolated protagonists, fragmented moral perception, resistance to institutional norms, and a persistent crisis of self-definition. The discussion demonstrates that American literary alienation differs from purely philosophical existentialism because it is mediated through concrete social structures: the school, the corporation, the army, the city, and the racial order. The article concludes that post-war American literature converted the problem of alienation into a cultural diagnosis of a society outwardly prosperous but inwardly unstable.

**Keywords:** Post-war American literature, alienation, existentialism, Cold War culture, identity, conformity, American fiction.

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## INTRODUCTION

The decades following the Second World War occupy a paradoxical place in American cultural history. On the surface, the United States emerged from the war as a global political and economic power. Industrial productivity expanded, suburban life became a dominant social ideal, and the language of prosperity entered public imagination. Yet the same historical period also generated anxiety, disillusionment, and an acute sense of personal estrangement. The victory narrative of the post-war years was accompanied by the fear of nuclear destruction, the ideological pressure of the Cold War, racial conflict, the bureaucratization of work, and the spread of standardized middle-class values. These contradictions shaped the literary imagination of the period.

In post-war American fiction, alienation became one of the most recognizable forms through which writers explored the gap between public success and private instability. Unlike the alienated figures of nineteenth-century romanticism, post-war protagonists often inhabit ordinary modern spaces: schools, offices, hotels, suburbs, military institutions, and urban streets. Their estrangement is not caused only by metaphysical loneliness; it is also produced by the social systems that define acceptable behavior. In this context, literature became a means of exposing the emotional cost of conformity and the fragility of individual identity within a society that increasingly valued adjustment, efficiency, and consumption.

The research problem of this article is the following: how did post-war American literature represent alienation as both an existential and socio-cultural condition? The aim is to analyze the relationship between American society after World War II and the literary representation of alienation in selected prose works. The objectives are: first, to identify the major social conditions that intensified the literary theme of alienation; second, to examine how selected novels represent alienated consciousness; and third, to clarify how American writers transformed existential concerns into culturally specific literary forms.

The scholarly relevance of this problem lies in the fact that post-war American alienation cannot be reduced to imitation of European existentialism. Sartrean existentialism provided a philosophical vocabulary for freedom, contingency, absurdity, and selfhood; however, American literature often translated these concepts into social and historical situations. In this sense, alienation became a

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bridge between philosophy and social criticism. The works of Salinger, Ellison, Bellow, Wilson, and Heller reveal protagonists who are isolated not only because they ask metaphysical questions, but because American society itself generates forms of invisibility, standardization, and moral displacement (Salinger, 1951; Ellison, 1952; Bellow, 1956; Wilson, 1955; Heller, 1961).

## METHODS

This study uses qualitative socio-literary analysis combined with comparative textual interpretation. The methodological focus is not statistical measurement but the close reading of literary motifs, narrative situations, character construction, and socio-cultural references. The selected primary texts include J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Saul Bellow's Seize the Day, Sloan Wilson's The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, and Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (Salinger, 1951; Ellison, 1952; Bellow, 1956; Wilson, 1955; Heller, 1961). These works were chosen because they represent different but interconnected forms of post-war alienation: adolescent estrangement, racial invisibility, urban and economic anxiety, corporate conformity, and bureaucratic absurdity.

The theoretical framework is informed by existentialist and sociological approaches. Sartre's concept of the individual confronted with contingency and freedom provides one philosophical background, while mid-century American social criticism, especially the works of C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, Reuel Denney, and William H. Whyte, helps contextualize the pressures of organization, conformity, and other-directed behavior (Sartre, 1964; Mills, 1951; Riesman et al., 1950; Whyte, 1956). The procedure consists of three stages: first, identifying the socio-cultural context of post-war America; second, analyzing textual representations of alienation; and third, interpreting the relation between individual crisis and social structure.

## RESULTS

The first major finding is that post-war American literature represents alienation through a conflict between individual perception and socially approved language. Holden Caulfield in The Catcher in the Rye repeatedly rejects the vocabulary of

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respectability, success, and adult social performance (Salinger, 1951). His famous opposition to "phoniness" is not simply adolescent rebellion; it is a critique of a culture in which social roles appear artificial and emotionally dishonest. The narrative voice itself becomes a form of resistance, because Holden's fragmented, conversational style refuses the polished discourse of institutional maturity.

The second finding is that alienation is strongly connected to invisibility and exclusion. In Ellison's Invisible Man, the protagonist's alienation is not abstract loneliness but a historically grounded condition produced by racial structures (Ellison, 1952). He is "invisible" because society refuses to recognize his full human complexity. This form of alienation differs from the alienation of the white middle-class protagonist because it is intensified by race, ideology, and social power. The novel therefore expands existential alienation into a critique of American democracy and its failure to acknowledge Black subjectivity.

The third finding concerns the alienation produced by work, money, and bureaucratic modernity. In Bellow's Seize the Day, Tommy Wilhelm experiences the city and the marketplace as spaces of pressure rather than freedom (Bellow, 1956). His crisis is existential, but it is mediated through economic failure, family judgment, and urban impersonality. Similarly, Wilson's The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit presents the corporation as a social machine that demands adjustment at the expense of inner truth (Wilson, 1955). The gray flannel suit becomes a symbol of standardized masculinity and the loss of individuality within the post-war professional class.

The fourth finding is that post-war literature frequently represents institutions as absurd systems. Heller's Catch-22 dramatizes alienation through circular logic, military bureaucracy, and the collapse of rational explanation (Heller, 1961). The protagonist Yossarian confronts a world in which institutional language no longer serves truth but protects the system from moral accountability. Alienation here is not withdrawal from society; it is the recognition that society itself has become absurdly organized. This marks a specifically American transformation of existential absurdity into institutional satire.

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## DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that alienation in post-war American literature is both existential and social. Sartrean existentialism emphasizes the individual's confrontation with freedom, contingency, and the absence of predetermined essence. Post-war American fiction shares this concern, but it relocates the existential crisis within historically concrete environments. The American protagonist is often alienated because the surrounding culture offers ready-made identities: the successful student, the corporate employee, the patriotic soldier, the obedient consumer, or the racially defined subject. These roles promise stability but often intensify inner division.

This transformation is especially visible when comparing the American texts with Sartre's Nausea (Sartre, 1964). Antoine Roquentin's alienation arises from a radical awareness of existence itself; he experiences objects, his body, and social routines as contingent and strange. In American post-war literature, the strangeness of existence is frequently filtered through social forms. Holden Caulfield's disgust is directed toward social hypocrisy; Ellison's narrator experiences invisibility through racial misrecognition; Tommy Wilhelm's anxiety emerges through economic failure; Yossarian confronts the irrationality of military administration. Thus, the metaphysical problem of being becomes a cultural problem of living under modern American institutions.

The sociological writings of the period help explain this literary development. Mills described the alienation of the white-collar class in modern bureaucratic society, while Riesman, Glazer, and Denney analyzed the emergence of the "other-directed" personality, shaped by peer approval and social adjustment (Mills, 1951; Riesman et al., 1950). Whyte's critique of the organization man similarly exposed the pressure to subordinate individuality to institutional belonging (Whyte, 1956). These social critiques correspond closely to the literary figures of the period: protagonists who feel that the self is being absorbed by systems of performance, efficiency, and public acceptability.

However, the literature also reveals that alienation can become a form of critical insight. The alienated protagonist sees what socially adjusted characters often cannot see: hypocrisy, injustice, absurdity, and emotional emptiness. Holden's instability enables moral protest; Ellison's invisibility becomes the basis for

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narrative self-definition; Yossarian's refusal to accept military logic becomes an ethical position. In this sense, alienation is not only a symptom of crisis but also a mode of resistance. Post-war American literature therefore turns alienation into a literary instrument for diagnosing the contradictions of American modernity.

## CONCLUSION

This article has argued that post-war American literature represents alienation as a complex response to the contradictions of American society after World War II. Although the period was marked by prosperity and national confidence, its fiction repeatedly exposed anxiety, estrangement, and moral uncertainty. Through the figures of Holden Caulfield, Ellison's invisible narrator, Tommy Wilhelm, Tom Rath, and Yossarian, American writers dramatized the individual's struggle to preserve authenticity within systems of conformity, racism, bureaucracy, and consumer culture.

The main conclusion is that American literary alienation should be understood as a culturally transformed form of existential consciousness. It shares with Sartrean existentialism a concern with freedom, absurdity, and self-definition, but it translates these concepts into specifically American conditions. The theoretical significance of this finding is that it clarifies how existentialism becomes a literary and cultural paradigm rather than a fixed philosophical doctrine. The practical significance lies in showing how post-war novels can be read as cultural documents that reveal the hidden tensions of modern American life. A limitation of this article is that it focuses mainly on selected prose texts; future research may expand the analysis to drama, poetry, women writers, African American literature beyond Ellison, and Beat literature.

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