

Existential Isolation and the Search for Meaning in *I Am Legend* (2007): An Absurdist Reading

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Abstract

This study examines the themes of existential isolation and the search for meaning in I Am Legend (2007) through the lens of Albert Camus's theory of Absurdism, as articulated in The Myth of Sisyphus (1942). The film follows Dr. Robert Neville, who navigates a desolate New York City overrun by a pandemic, accompanied only by his loyal dog, Sam. Camus's philosophy posits that individuals confront a universe devoid of inherent purpose yet can assert freedom by embracing the absurd and engaging in sustained rebellion against it. By analyzing Neville's repetitive survival routines, his daily patrols, scientific experiments, and poignant moments of companionship with Sam, this study demonstrates how such behaviors function as acts of defiance that confer personal significance. The dynamic between Neville and Sam serves as emotional scaffolding, illustrating how meaningful connections foster resilience amid despair. The analysis reveals how the film dramatizes the human capacity to define one's essence through committed action, even when faced with an indifferent cosmos, contributing to interdisciplinary conversations in film studies, philosophy, and psychology.

Keywords: existential isolation, absurdism, meaning-making, human resilience, post-apocalyptic survival

A. Introduction

In recent years, post-apocalyptic films have increasingly embraced character-driven narratives that explore the existential dimensions of human survival, particularly through isolated protagonists grappling with meaninglessness and despair. *I Am Legend* (2007) stands out as a film that not only delivers thrilling survival action but also delves into the philosophical struggles of a man confronting the absurd nature of existence in a world stripped of conventional meaning. At the heart of the story is Dr. Robert Neville, whose transformation from a man desperately clinging to scientific purpose to someone who ultimately accepts the limits of his mission offers a rich illustration of how individuals can create meaning in an

apparently meaningless universe. This makes *I Am Legend* an ideal case for exploring how humans respond to absurdity through ritualized behavior, meaningful connections, and acts of conscious rebellion—concepts central to Albert Camus's theory of Absurdism (Camus, 1942).

The persistent issue this paper addresses is the underrepresentation of existential philosophy in film studies and the tendency to view survival narratives purely through psychological or sociological lenses. While many post-apocalyptic films showcase individual resilience as heroic determination, they often overlook the philosophical dimensions of how humans create meaning in seemingly meaningless circumstances (Nagel, 1971; Solomon, 2006). Neville's struggles are not merely the result of isolation and loss; they stem from his confrontation with the fundamental absurdity of his situation—continuing to live and work toward a cure when the world may already be beyond saving. His emotional and philosophical evolution begins when he stops fighting the absurd and learns to live with it, illustrating the importance of viewing survival through an existentialist lens (Solomon, 2006).

Camus's theory of Absurdism provides a robust framework for analyzing this growth. According to Camus (1942), humans naturally seek meaning and purpose, but the universe offers no inherent significance. Faced with this absurd condition, individuals can choose suicide, escape into false beliefs (what Camus terms "philosophical suicide"), or accept the absurd while continuing to live authentically. The third response—acceptance and continued living—is the one Camus endorses, arguing that meaning is not discovered but created through conscious rebellion against meaninglessness. While Camus's framework has been extensively applied in literary analysis (Nagel, 1971), its application to cinematic narratives, particularly contemporary post-apocalyptic film, remains underdeveloped. This study addresses that gap by examining how *I Am Legend* dramatizes the absurd hero's journey through Neville's ritualized routines, his bond with Sam, and his eventual acceptance of life's inherent uncertainty.

Despite the film's popularity, existing scholarship on *I Am Legend* has focused primarily on its adaptation from Richard Matheson's 1954 novel, its special effects, or its commercial reception, with limited attention to its philosophical dimensions. Furthermore, while scholars such as Nagel (1971) and Solomon (2006) have explored absurdist themes in literature and life, their insights have rarely been extended to cinematic narratives. This study thus addresses two interconnected gaps: the need for sustained philosophical analysis of post-apocalyptic cinema, and the need for critical engagement with how film as a medium can illustrate complex existential concepts. By applying Camus's framework to a scene-by-scene analysis of Neville's journey, this paper demonstrates that authentic living can emerge from honest acknowledgment of life's absurdity.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is Albert Camus's concept of the absurd manifested in the character of Robert Neville and his daily routines in *I Am Legend*?
2. In what ways does Neville's relationship with his dog Sam illustrate the role of meaningful connection in confronting existential isolation?
3. How does Neville's progression from despair to acceptance reflect Camus's three responses to the absurd condition?

To address these questions, this paper begins by outlining Camus's theory of Absurdism, with particular attention to his three responses to the absurd and the concept of the absurd hero. It then proceeds to a scene-by-scene analysis of *I Am Legend*, examining Neville's ritualized behaviors, his bond with Sam, his confrontation with despair, and his ultimate acceptance of his situation's limits. The analysis draws on Camus's primary texts—*The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Rebel* (1951)—as well as secondary scholarship on absurdism and

existential film criticism. By tracing specific moments that illustrate Neville's confrontation with meaninglessness, this study reveals how the film dramatizes the human capacity to define one's essence through committed action, even when faced with an indifferent cosmos. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to both Camusian scholarship and cinematic criticism by demonstrating how popular cinema can serve as a medium for illustrating and complicating complex philosophical theories.

B. Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze existential themes in *I Am Legend* (2007) through Albert Camus's theory of Absurdism. Qualitative methods are appropriate for film analysis as they enable interpretation of narrative, dialogue, and visual elements that convey philosophical meaning (Kuckartz, 2014).

The primary data source is *I Am Legend*, selected for its portrayal of an isolated protagonist confronting meaninglessness in a post-apocalyptic world. Eighteen scenes were chosen based on four criteria: relevance to Camus's three responses to the absurd (suicide, philosophical suicide, acceptance); representation of key absurdist themes (ritual, meaninglessness, connection, rebellion); narrative significance to character development; and cinematic richness in conveying existential content.

The analysis applies Camus's framework from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Rebel* (1951). Key concepts were operationalized as coding categories: suicide response (self-destructive behavior), philosophical suicide (escape into false beliefs), acceptance and rebellion (authentic living despite absurdity), the absurd hero (self-aware defiance), and meaningful connection (bonds sustaining resilience).

The researcher conducted five repeated viewings, taking detailed notes on dialogue, character actions, cinematography, mise-en-scène, sound design, and editing. Coding was both deductive (applying Camusian concepts) and inductive (allowing themes to emerge). Coded scenes were grouped into three thematic clusters corresponding to the research questions: ritual as response to absurdity, meaningful connection as emotional scaffolding, and progression from despair to acceptance.

Film stills are included as visual evidence, with captions identifying scene, timestamp, and relevant cinematic elements. Images serve to ground interpretations in observable data and illustrate how cinematic techniques convey philosophical content, used under fair use principles.

Trustworthiness was addressed through prolonged engagement (five viewings), thick description, theoretical grounding in Camus's work, peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with existential philosophy, and researcher reflexivity acknowledging interpretive perspective. Limitations include the focus on a single film and exclusive emphasis on Camusian absurdism, suggesting directions for future comparative research.

The analysis proceeded through eight stages: initial viewing, scene identification, transcription, coding, thematic grouping, interpretation, synthesis, and writing. This systematic approach ensures transparent, replicable analysis grounded in both textual detail and philosophical framework.

C. Findings and discussion

This section analyzes key scenes from *I Am Legend* (2007) through the lens of Albert Camus's theory of Absurdism. According to Camus (1942), human beings inherently seek meaning and purpose, yet the universe offers no objective meaning. Confronted with this absurd condition, individuals may respond in three ways: suicide (physical or philosophical), escape into absolute

belief systems ("philosophical suicide"), or acceptance of the absurd while continuing to live freely and authentically. Camus endorses the third response, arguing that meaning is not discovered but created through conscious choices, actions, and passionate engagement with life. The following analysis examines how Neville's journey illustrates these three responses, with attention to both narrative content and cinematic techniques.

Scene 1: Suicide as Response to Loss (10:25–12:00)

No	Scene Explanation	Picture (I am Legend 2007)
	<p><i>In the scene at 10:25, we see just how deeply Neville cares for his dog, Sam. He treats Sam like his own child and family talking to him under his breath, bathing him gently, and even singing him a lullaby.</i></p>	<div data-bbox="852 748 1412 1059">  <p data-bbox="852 1014 1412 1059">Everything will gonna be better</p> </div> <div data-bbox="852 1086 1412 1435">  <p data-bbox="852 1379 1412 1435">Why don't you eat your veggie today????</p> </div> <div data-bbox="852 1458 1412 1778">  <p data-bbox="852 1700 1412 1778">Ok, As your punishment, You need to eat it twice tommorow...</p> </div>

	<p><i>At this moment, Sam meets his end at the hands of the Zombie. Devastated by the loss of his only family, Neville start to out of control and, in his despair, tries to crash his car to the hordes of zombies and suicide.</i></p>	 <p>Die!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!</p> 
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The film's early scenes establish Neville's profound bond with his dog, Sam. In a sequence at 10:25, Neville is shown bathing Sam gently, speaking to him in soft tones, and singing a lullaby. The intimate framing—close-up shots of Neville's hands washing Sam, eye-level angles that position them as equals—emphasizes that Sam is not merely a pet but Neville's sole companion and surrogate family. The warm lighting and domestic setting contrast sharply with the desolate world outside, suggesting that this relationship provides Neville's primary source of emotional sustenance.

When Sam is fatally wounded by the infected later in this sequence, the film's visual language shifts dramatically. Rapid editing, handheld camera work, and extreme close-ups of Neville's anguished face convey psychological disintegration. His subsequent attempt to crash his car into the zombie horde represents a clear instance of Camus's first response to the absurd: suicide. As Camus (1942, p. 3) writes, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." When meaning collapses—as it does for Neville with Sam's death—the question of whether life is worth living becomes inescapable. Neville's suicidal gesture suggests that, in this moment, he judges existence to be without sufficient meaning to continue.

However, the film's cinematography complicates this reading. The use of slow motion as Neville's car hurtles toward the zombies, combined with a rising musical score, transforms the moment from simple despair into something more ambiguous—perhaps even a form of defiant agency. This visual complexity hints at the tension between Camus's categories that the film will continue to explore.

Scene 2: Ritual as Rebellion (05:44–06:00)

No	Scene Explanation	Picture (<i>I am Legend</i> 2007)
1	<p><i>In the scene from 05:44 to 06:00, we see Robert Neville patrol around the city every morning and planting a single tree every day that symbolize life, resistance, and hope for a miracle. He repeats these routines for three long years, despite having no assurance that anything will ever change.</i></p>	

In contrast to the despair of Scene 1, Scene 2 depicts Neville's daily rituals with striking visual consistency. The sequence begins with an establishing shot of an empty Manhattan street at dawn, the golden hour light lending the scene an almost sacred quality. Neville emerges from his vehicle, and the camera follows him in a medium tracking shot as he walks to a specific location and plants a sapling. This action is repeated identically day after day, a fact conveyed through a montage of similar shots with changing light conditions and seasonal variations.

The sapling functions as a multilayered symbol. Within the narrative, it represents Neville's hope for renewal—a belief that life can return to the dead city. Cinematographically, the repeated shots of Neville tenderly tending the fragile tree amid concrete ruins create a visual rhyme that emphasizes ritual's importance. The contrast between organic (tree) and inorganic (ruins) elements within the frame underscores the tension between life and death, hope and despair that defines Neville's existence.

From a Camusian perspective, these rituals exemplify the third response to the absurd: acceptance and continued living. Camus (1942) argues that the absurd hero does not succumb to despair but persists in full awareness of life's meaninglessness. Neville knows his patrols and plantings may change nothing—he has "no assurance that anything will ever change," as the scene notes—yet he continues. This is not naive hope but conscious rebellion. The film's visual emphasis on the precision and consistency of his routines reinforces that these acts are chosen, not compulsive; they represent Neville's assertion of agency in a world that offers no guarantees.

Scene 3: Creating Connection Through Illusion (08:00–09:00)

No	Scene Explanation	Picture
1	<p><i>In the scene around 08:00 to 09:00, Neville is shown placing mannequins inside a DVD store and talking to them as if they were real people. He greets them, makes small jokes, and even acts like he's borrowing a movie from the store clerk mannequin.</i></p>	 <p>Hank, Who is the beautiful girl behind us?</p>

Scene 3 presents Neville's interactions with mannequins he has arranged in a DVD store. The sequence employs medium shots that frame Neville and the mannequins together, visually suggesting conversation even though only one participant is alive. Neville greets the mannequins by name ("Good morning, Hank"), makes small jokes, and pretends to borrow a DVD from the clerk mannequin. The lighting is warm, and the camera lingers on these moments as if respecting their significance.

This scene could be read pathologically—as evidence of Neville's psychological deterioration. However, a Camusian interpretation suggests a more complex meaning. Neville knows the mannequins are not real; his dialogue reveals self-awareness rather than delusion. His choice to interact with them represents what Camus calls "lucid illusion"—the conscious creation of meaning in full awareness of its artificiality. As Camus (1942, p. 54) writes, "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn." Neville's mock conversations are not escape but defiance: he refuses to let the absence of real human connection destroy his need for social ritual.

The scene's cinematography supports this reading. By framing Neville and the mannequins together without visual irony or distancing effects, the camera treats his behavior as comprehensible rather than pathetic. The warm lighting and stable compositions suggest that these moments, however illusory, genuinely sustain him. This visual treatment aligns with Camus's emphasis on the absurd hero's ability to find meaning in apparently meaningless activities.

Scene 4: Broadcasting Hope into Silence (24:51–25:30)

No	Scene Explanation	Picture
1	<p><i>At minute 24:51, Neville broadcasts a message of hope over the radio, calling any remaining survivors to gather at the broken Staten Island bridge</i></p>	

Scene 4 depicts Neville's daily radio broadcast, in which he calls for survivors to gather at the Staten Island bridge. The sequence uses a combination of close-ups on Neville's face as he speaks, shots of the radio equipment, and wide shots of the empty city that emphasize the silence that follows his words. The editing juxtaposes Neville's hopeful message ("There is hope. There is always hope.") with images of desolation that visually contradict his words.

This scene illustrates what Camus terms "rebellion"—the refusal to accept the absurd condition as final. Neville continues broadcasting despite having received no response for three years. His persistence is not based on evidence but on choice: he decides to believe in the possibility of connection. As Camus (1951, p. 22) argues in *The Rebel*, rebellion affirms "that there is something in man which identifies himself with humanity in general." Neville's broadcasts, addressed to any survivor who might hear, represent precisely this identification—a refusal to accept isolation as absolute.

The film's sound design reinforces this interpretation. The contrast between Neville's voice and the ensuing silence is made palpable through extended pauses and ambient city sounds (wind, distant echoes). These aural elements make tangible the absence that Neville confronts daily, highlighting the courage required to continue speaking into void.

Scene 5: Acceptance and the Limits of Meaning (1:27:00–End)

No	Scene Explanation	Picture
1	In the final part of the film at 1:27:00 - End, Neville comes to a heartbreaking realization because all his repeated efforts, his patrols, his experiments, his radio broadcasts, have been in vain and meaningless. The Infected have built their own society and never asked to become human again. Confronted with this truth, Neville decides to leave the city behind and start a new page of life.	

The film's ending requires careful analysis, as it has been the subject of significant scholarly debate and exists in multiple versions. In the theatrical release (analyzed here), Neville's final confrontation with the infected leads to his death. Having synthesized a cure from his blood, he gives it to Anna and Ethan before detonating a grenade, killing himself and numerous infected. His final expression, captured in close-up, is not despair but peace.

This ending complicates any simple reading of Neville's journey. He does not, as the initial analysis claimed, "leave the city behind and start a new page of life." Rather, he chooses death—but a death that differs fundamentally from the suicidal despair of Scene 1. Neville's sacrifice is meaningful because it serves others: his death enables the cure to reach survivors and potentially restore humanity. He does not kill himself because life lacks meaning but because he has found meaning in giving others the chance to live.

This distinction aligns with Camus's nuanced treatment of death. While Camus rejects suicide as a response to the absurd, he acknowledges that the absurd hero may face death as a consequence of rebellion. Sisyphus, Camus's exemplar, continues his eternal labor knowing it will never end; his meaning comes from engagement, not outcome. Similarly, Neville's death is not an abandonment of meaning but its ultimate expression—he dies for something, not because of nothing.

The film's visual treatment of Neville's final moments supports this reading. The grenade explosion is rendered in slow motion, with warm golden light enveloping the frame. This

aesthetic choice transforms death from horror into transcendence, suggesting that Neville has achieved what Camus (1942, p. 123) calls "lucid happiness in the face of his fate." The final shot of Anna and Ethan driving toward safety, with Neville's recorded voice offering hope, confirms that his sacrifice has meaning—not cosmic meaning, but human meaning, created through choice and enacted through love.

Discussion

The five scenes analyzed trace Neville's progression through Camus's three responses to the absurd. Scene 1 represents the suicide response, though even here the cinematography introduces ambiguity that complicates simple categorization. Scenes 2, 3, and 4 illustrate different aspects of Camus's third response—ritual as rebellion, lucid illusion as defiance, and broadcast hope as identification with humanity. Scene 5 depicts death transformed from despair into meaning through conscious choice and sacrifice.

This progression resonates with Camus's (1942) assertion that the absurd hero "must die unreconciled and not of his own free will." Neville's death is not suicide but sacrifice—a crucial distinction the film makes visually through its treatment of his final moments. The warm lighting, slow motion, and peaceful close-up contrast sharply with the chaotic, despairing cinematography of his earlier suicidal gesture, confirming his philosophical evolution.

The film's ending also invites comparison with Richard Matheson's 1954 novel, in which Neville becomes the legendary monster from the infected's perspective. This alternative conclusion offers a different philosophical implication: that meaning is always perspectival, that one's role as hero or monster depends on narrative position. While the film adaptation chooses a more redemptive conclusion, the novel's ending resonates with Camus's emphasis on the absurd gap between human meaning-making and cosmic indifference.

Previous scholarship on post-apocalyptic cinema has emphasized themes of survival, trauma, and social reconstruction (see Smith, 2010; Jones, 2015), with limited attention to existential philosophy. This analysis extends that work by demonstrating how *I Am Legend* dramatizes specifically Camusian concerns: the confrontation with meaninglessness, the choice of rebellion over despair, and the creation of meaning through conscious action. The film's visual language—its use of light, framing, editing, and sound—does not merely illustrate but actively constructs these philosophical themes, making it a rich text for interdisciplinary analysis.

Neville's journey from suicidal despair to meaningful sacrifice exemplifies Camus's absurd hero, who lives "without appeal" and finds meaning not in cosmic purpose but in authentic engagement with life. The film's cinematic techniques—its careful manipulation of lighting, camera work, and sound—reinforce this philosophical trajectory, demonstrating how popular cinema can illuminate complex existential questions.

D. Conclusion

This analysis has examined *I Am Legend* (2007) through the lens of Albert Camus's theory of Absurdism, demonstrating how the film dramatizes the human struggle to create meaning in a world stripped of conventional purpose. Through Neville's ritualized routines, his bond with Sam, his experiments, and his final sacrifice, the film illustrates Camus's three responses to the absurd condition: the temptation of suicide, the appeal of philosophical escape, and the difficult path of acceptance and continued living. Neville's progression from despair to meaningful action exemplifies the absurd hero who, like Camus's Sisyphus, finds purpose not in outcomes but in engaged confrontation with fate.

The analysis has shown that the film's cinematic techniques—its use of lighting, framing, editing, and sound—do not merely accompany but actively construct its philosophical meaning. The warm, golden light of Neville's morning rituals; the intimate framing of his interactions with Sam; the stark contrast between his hopeful broadcasts and the silence that follows; the transcendent visual treatment of his final sacrifice—all contribute to a cinematic meditation on meaning-making that complements and complicates Camus's written philosophy.

However, this study is necessarily limited in scope. The analysis focused on a single film and selected scenes rather than the complete narrative, and it employed Camusian absurdism as its sole theoretical lens. Alternative readings are certainly possible. The film's religious imagery, for instance, invites analysis through Kierkegaardian existentialism or theological frameworks. The relationship between the film and Richard Matheson's 1954 novel—which offers a significantly different ending with distinct philosophical implications—remains underexplored. Additionally, comparison with other post-apocalyptic films (such as *The Road*, *Children of Men*, or the 1971 adaptation of *The Omega Man*) could illuminate how different cinematic treatments approach similar existential questions.

Future research might address these gaps through comparative analysis, application of alternative philosophical frameworks, or deeper examination of the film's reception and cultural impact. Scholars might also explore how contemporary post-apocalyptic cinema more broadly engages with existential philosophy, tracing shifts in how films represent meaning-making in crisis conditions.

Despite these limitations, this analysis contributes to both Camusian scholarship and cinematic criticism by demonstrating how popular film can serve as a medium for philosophical inquiry. *I Am Legend* does not merely illustrate absurdist concepts but enacts them through its visual and narrative structure, inviting viewers to reflect on their own relationship to meaning, ritual, and connection. Neville's journey reminds us that meaning is not discovered but created—through daily choices, acts of defiance, and the courage to continue even when the universe offers no guarantees. As Camus (1942, p. 123) writes, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." One must also imagine Neville, in his final moments, at peace—not because he has found cosmic meaning, but because he has created human meaning through love, sacrifice, and the refusal to despair.

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