BHP 222: Honors Seminar: Existentialism in Literature

Course Description

This course introduces students to Existentialism as a 20th-century movement with roots going back to the 19th century and as a philosophy that has special relevance and importance for understanding today's world. Reading and discussion are based on topics of special concern to Existentialist philosophers: lying and the nature of reality, faith and reason, revaluation of values, and the meaninglessness of life. As such this course explores the most fundamental questions of human existence: What is anxiety? What is alienation? What is the link between freedom and responsibility? How can one be authentic? What does it mean to act in bad faith? What is the absurd?

Course objectives

* To develop an understanding and appreciation of existentialism as a philosophical as well as a literary phenomenon.
* To become familiar with the core issues of existentialism and to write sophisticated analyses of those issues backed by secondary research.
* To recognize existentialist issues and contextualize them effectively in a wide variety of genres.
* To get comfortable leading a critically nuanced conversation about existentialist topics.

Student learning outcomes

By the end of this course you will be able to:

* Recognize the core themes of existentialism and their historical development
* Trace the expression of those themes in a variety of genres including short stories, novels, drama, film and television both orally and in writing
* Analyze and critique philosophical arguments based on a close reading of the text.
* Formulate sophisticated arguments about existentialist literature and philosophy backed by research.

Required Texts:

1. Kafka, *The Trial* (Oxford)
2. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Grove Press)
3. Camus, *The Fall* (Vintage)
4. Solomon, *Existentialism* (Oxford)
5. Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (Grove Press)

Recommended Texts:

1. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Intro* (Oxford)
2. Vaughn, *Writing Philosophy* (Oxford)

All other materials are available on canvas at canvas.rider.edu

Requirements and Grading Criteria:[[1]](#footnote-1)

1- **Attendance:** Consistent attendanceis mandatory, and promptness is expected. No unexcused absence is acceptable, and more than **two** absences for any reason will be considered grounds for a serious final grade penalty and possible failure. Since this is a three-hour seminar that meets once a week, you cannot miss class without running the big risk of falling behind.

2- **Preparation and Participation – 35%:** In preparation for our weekly class meetings, you are required to (a) complete the reading assignment, (b) prepare three questions for class discussion, and (c) write a short (100-200 word) response to at least two of your questions. Your three questions and (two) responses should be typed and saved as a single Word/PDF doc. Before each class, please submit your questions/responses on Canvas (and please bring a hard copy to class that you can reference during discussion).

3- **Presentation – 25%:** Each student is required to give a 20min presentation critically analyzing one of the assigned readings.

4- **Formal Writing – 40%:** Each student will write a 4,000 – 5,000 word argumentative/research paper. Detailed guidelines will be provided under “Assignments” on canvas.

Final grades will be computed as follows:

A (90-100); B (80-89); C (70-79); D (60-69); F (0-59)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Technology

**NO** electronic devices (laptops, tablets, phones, etc.) are permitted during class.

Academic Honesty

From the *Academic* *Policy Manual* (06-07): Academic dishonesty includes any unauthorized collaboration or misrepresentation in the submission of academic work. In all written work, whether in class or out of class, the student’s name on the work is considered to be a statement that the work is his or hers alone, except as otherwise indicated. **Students are expected to provide proper citations for the statements and ideas of others whether submitted word for word or paraphrased.**

Please note that all ideas, phrases, sentences taken from the internet and other sources and incorporated into your own writing must be cited to avoid plagiarism. Disregard for this rule will result not only in failure, but also in a letter being placed in your permanent file.

Please note that incorporating material from class-discussions, lectures and our suggestions for improvement does NOT constitute academic dishonesty in this class.

Anyone who feels they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact us to arrange an appointment to make accommodation arrangements. We rely on the office of Student Accessibility and Support Services in verifying the need for accommodations and developing accommodation strategies. If you have not previously contacted the office of Student Accessibility and Support Services, we encourage you to do so: by telephone at 609-895-5492, by email at accessibility@rider.edu, or in the Joseph Vona Center, Room 8.

**Schedule:**

Week 1: Introduction: What is existentialism? Solomon, “Introduction” (xi-xx);

 Bradbury, “And the moon be Still as bright”

 Rec: “Philosophy as a way of life” (Flynn)

Week 2 : Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*;

Ortega, “Man Has No Nature”(canvas)

Week 3: Kierkegaard, from *The Present Age*; from *The Journals*; from *The Rotation Method*; “Is There Such a Thing as the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical”; “Truth is Subjectivity;” from *The Concept of Anxiety*; “Concerning the Dedication to ‘The Individual’”; “What Do I Want?” (Solomon)

Week 4: Dostoevsky, from *Notes from Underground*; “The Grand Inquisitor” (Solomon)

 Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning (canvas)

 Rec: “Becoming an individual” (Flynn)

Week 5, 6: Nietzsche, from *The Gay Science*; from *Thus Spoke*

*Zarathustra*; from *Beyond Good and Evil*; from *On the Genealogy of Morality*; from *Twilight of the Idols*; “On the Will to Power”; “On Eternal Recurrence” (Solomon)

From *Human, All to Human* (canvas); from *The Gay Science* (canvas); from

 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*”(canvas);

 “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” (canvas)

Week 7: Sartre, *Portrait of the Anti-Semite* (canvas); Camus, *The Fall*

**Illumira Video Browser screening: *Doctor Who* “Heaven Sent” (Season 9)**

Week 8: *The Fall* contd; from “The Myth of Sisyphus” (Solomon);

 *Doctor Who* “Heaven Sent”

Rec: “Authenticity” (Flynn)

Week 9, 10:Unamuno, from *The Tragic Sense of Life* (Solomon);

 Kafka *The Trial*

Week 11: Buber, from *I and Thou* (Solomon); Le Guin, “Estraven the Traitor” (canvas);

 “The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas” (canvas)

Week 12: Scranton, “We’re Doomed. Now What?” (canvas); *Doctor Who* “Gridlock”

 Rec: “Existentialism in the 21st century” (Flynn)

Week 13 (5/2): In-class writing workshop

1. Guidelines for the Presentation and Formal Writing assignments will be available on Canvas. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. +/- will be applied when a student’s grade is 2 points from the upper/lower threshold for any letter grade. For example: B+ (88-89); B (83-87); B- (80-82). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)