

## Existentialism through Literature (Prospective Course)

### Course Description

We shall explore existentialist thought by focusing on literary texts that illustrate existentialist themes and views. The main question we shall consider is: according to existentialist thought, what is the human condition? Answering this question will involve examination of the notions of consciousness, freedom, angst, despair, guilt, and bad faith, as well as consideration of how human beings relate to one another. The course will be structured as follows. First, we shall examine the basic existential predicament as it is portrayed by Dostoyevsky, Camus, and Kafka. Second, we shall consider more specific features of this predicament—e.g., the natures of freedom, guilt, and our relations to others—through the fiction of Sartre, Richard Wright, and Simone de Beauvoir. Finally, given the understanding we have developed of the existential predicament, it is pertinent to ask whether a fulfilling life is possible according to the existentialist outlook. To this end, we shall examine the notions of bad faith and authenticity as illustrated by Sartre and Richard Wright.

### Required Texts

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *She Came to Stay*.

Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea*.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *No Exit and Three Other Plays*.

Wright, Richard. *The Outsider*.

**Schedule of Readings** [each "\*" corresponds to 1-3 class sessions]

### Introduction

*What is Existentialism?*

\* Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism"; Paul Vincent Spade, "The Gambler", "Vertigo"

### Unit 1: Becoming Aware of the Existential Predicament

*The "Death of God"*

\* Dostoyevsky, "Grand Inquisitor"

*Becoming Human*

\* Camus, *The Stranger*

*Becoming Inhuman*

\* Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

### Paper Prompt for Unit 1:

\* *The Stranger*: What makes Meursault a "stranger"? What is the transformation that Meursault undergoes in Part II of the novel? In what ways does Meursault become less of a stranger and more human as a result of this transformation? Finally, what does this transformation show more generally about what it is to be human?

## Unit 2: Features of the Existential Predicament

### *Freedom and Contingency*

- \* Sartre, *Nausea*

### *Guilt*

- \* Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground"

### *Problem of Others*

- \* Sartre, "No Exit"
- \* Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay*
- \* Wright, "The Man Who Killed a Shadow"

### **Paper Prompts for Unit 2:**

- \* *Nausea*: What is an "adventure"? How do adventures differ from what Annie calls "perfect moments"? Why does Roquentin eventually claim "There are no adventures – there are no perfect moments" (p. 213)? What does the desire to have adventures (or perfect moments) indicate about our existential predicament and the notions of contingency and freedom? Is Roquentin's decision at the end of the novel an attempt to have an adventure; why or why not?
- \* *She Came to Stay*: Explain why Françoise feels threatened by Xavière. What does this say about Françoise's shared project with Pierre? What might Françoise's conflict with others illuminate about the nature of existential projects more generally?
- \* Wright: The protagonist of "The Man Who Lived Underground" comes to discover an insight about guilt. What is the insight? Describe how the insight is revealed in the various incidents that occur underground. He wants to share the insight at the end of the story, but those he tries to share it with don't want him to share it. Why? What does the story reveal more generally about guilt and the individual's relation to society?
- \* "No Exit": The characters of Sartre's play repeatedly come into conflict with one another, and it seems that these conflicts are unavoidable. Likewise, the characters are often dependent on others (whether their present company or those they left behind). Explain what these conflicts and dependencies illustrate about the human condition. Sartre himself once claimed that he didn't endorse the slogan "Hell is other people" because he thought that healthy relationships with others are possible, but it's not clear his philosophical views allow for this possibility. Evaluate whether conflict with others is inevitable.

## Unit 3: Coping with the Existential Predicament

### *Fleeing Freedom*

- \* Sartre, "Intimacy"

### *Embracing Freedom*

- \* Wright, *The Outsider*

### **Paper Prompt for Unit 3:**

- \* *The Outsider*: Damon Cross comes as close as we see to a character that is aware of his existential predicament and chooses the existential ideal of freedom. Yet, his project of choosing freedom ultimately ends in failure and regret. Why is this? Did he fail to live up to the existentialist ideal, and if so, how? Does existentialism hold out any hope for a good life?