



Course Outline

2026-2027 Catalog

ENGL 31 - Existential Literature: A Literary Approach to Self Integration

Catalog Description

Transfer Status: CSU/UC

Unit(s): 3.00

Lecture: 51.00 Contact hours/102.00 Out of class hours/153.00 Total hours/3.00 Unit(s)

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Course Description: Through a variety of short stories, novels and poems dealing with existential themes, this course will help the student explore the literary, psychological, philosophical and theological implications of defining and taking responsibility for oneself in the quest for self-actualization. Graded only.

Objectives

Upon successful completion of this course, the student should be able to:

1. Analyze and compare ideas across course texts.
2. Form and support an argument using evidence from multiple course texts.
3. Analyze and interpret the choices of characters represented in world existential literature.
4. Question and assess the applicability to our own lives of major existential principles; facing potential meaninglessness or nothingness, acting from a position of more or less blindness, and accepting the full responsibility for the consequences of choices and attempting to learn from them.
5. Question and assess the potential use of existential concepts to find healthier attitudes or responses to questions and problems surrounding substance abuse, sexuality, mental health, stress management, sustainable living, aging, death and dying.
6. Evaluate the authenticity of literary characters' choices considering their subjective circumstances and how well the characters maintain the integrity of their social, psychological and physiological well-being.

Course Content

Topic Titles / Suggested Time Topic

Lecture

<u>Topics</u>	<u>Lec Hrs</u>
Introduction to Key Existentialist Concepts. Read: Excerpts from Barret's <i>Irrational Man</i> and Sartre's "Existentialism Is a Humanism"	3.00
Existence Before Essence	3.00
a. The subjective and the personal vs. objective and the impersonal	
b. The sensory system as a conduit to the world and perception as a process for the discovery of reality	
Read: First Half of Camus' <i>The Stranger</i>	
The Impotence of Reason	6.00
a. The absurd and received concepts of mental, physical and spiritual health	
Read: Second half of Camus' <i>The Stranger</i>	
Alienation and Anxiety	6.00
a. Alienation from God, nature, others, and our true selves	
b. The absurd person as liberated from stress versus Kierkegaard's "angst"-ridden person.	
Read: Excerpts from Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus" and Kierkegaard's Journals and "The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical"	
The Encounter with Nothingness	6.00
a. The inevitability of death and decay	
b. Substance abuse and unhealthy coping mechanisms	
c. Confronting the reality of aging and death	
d. Confronting the reality of global injustice	
Read Nietzsche excerpts form <i>Irrational Man</i> , Sartre excerpts form <i>Being and Nothingness</i> and excerpts from Aime Cesaire's <i>Discourse on Colonialism</i> .	
Freedom and Existential Responsibility	6.00
a. Metacognition as a means of becoming "self-surpassing"	
b. Healthy, self-affirming choices	
c. Existential freedom, the environment and society, and responsibility	

Topics

Lec Hrs

Read: Sartre excerpts from *Being and Nothingness*, Kierkegaard excerpts from *Sickness Unto Death*, and Nietzsche excerpt on "Eternal Return of the Same" and from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Authenticity Versus Inauthenticity

6.00

- a. Fulfillment of potential versus denial of potential
- b. Self/Other Judgment as equally valuable information to be taken in
- c. Escaping the pitfalls of learned helplessness
- d. The ways systemic racism/sexism complicate authenticity

Read: Sartre's *No Exit I* and excerpts from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Sex Which is Not One* and Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*

Good Faith Versus Bad Faith

6.00

- a. Honesty about the possibilities of self with both self and other versus self-deception and the denial of the ambiguous self
- b. Healthy intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships
- c. Physical and emotional relationship between bad faith and bad health
- d. The ways systemic racism and sexism/heterosexism complicate good faith and bad faith in relationships

Read: End of Sartre's *No Exit* and Audre Lorde's "The Uses of the Erotic as Power"

Self-Other Relationships and the Ethics of Ambiguity

6.00

- a. Objectifying the self or other as existential inauthenticity

Read excerpts from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

Ambiguity, Chance, and the Absurd as Liberating Concepts

3.00

- a. Questioning the emphasis on meaning, purpose, and goals as opposed to full presence and passion within the absurd
- b. Finding the courage to be your authentic self and avoid the self-created barriers of bad faith
- c. Loving and embracing others without the need to label or understand them and doing the same for yourself

Read: Review of key moments in all course texts addressed above with a focus on final applications.

Total Hours: 51.00

Methods of Instruction

- A. Collaborative Group Work
- B. Group Discussions
- C. Guest Speakers
- D. Homework: Students are required to complete two hours of outside-of-class homework for each hour of lecture
- E. Lecture
- F. Reading Assignments
- G. Journal and essay writing to deepen student inquiry into readings.

Methods of Evaluation

- A. Oral Presentation
- B. Journal
- C. Short papers
- D. Essays and research papers
- E. Book reports
- F. Class Discussion
- G. A minimum of 4,000 words required writing, maintenance of a personal reflection journal

Examples of Assignments

Reading Assignments

1. Read Kierkegaard's "Is There Such a Thing as the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?". As you annotate the text, critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of his arguments and the evidence on which they are based. Then in a 500 word minimum journal entry, identify the utility and potential problems his arguments might create when we apply them to real-life ethical choices. Share with the class.
2. Read Lu Xun's "Iron House Parable" and use Sartre's "Existentialism as Humanism" to critically evaluate the ethical dilemmas presented by Lu Xun in a reading journal entry of more than 500 words, where you also use Lu Xun to critically evaluate and question the ethical arguments made by Sartre and share with the class.

Writing Assignments

1. Write a formal character analysis (at least 750 words) of one character or an analytical comparison/contrast of two characters in Sartre's *No Exit*. Explain to the class how these characters represent the conflict between bad faith and good faith and authenticity and inauthenticity.
2. Read the excerpts from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and analyze and critically evaluate (in at least 750 words) the arguments she makes about a specifically feminine relationship to existentialist concepts like authenticity, good faith, and courage before the void. In what ways does she support and further develop Sartre's arguments, and in what ways does she undermine them? Share your findings with the class.

Out-of-Class Assignments

1. Choose a novel from the assigned reading list, and prepare an in-class 10-minute presentation for the class explaining how the major existentialist concepts we have covered so far are exemplified in that novel and what you think the overall message of that novel is and why.
2. Attend at least one local theater production and write an analysis (500 words) of the way the play and the particular interpretation of it by the director, scene designers and actors represent key Existentialist concepts that we've addressed up to that point in the semester.

Recommended Materials of Instruction

Sartre, Jean Paul. (2004). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale University Press, *Annotated Edition*. 9780300115468.

Jean Paul Sartre. (1989). *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Vintage Press, *Reissue Edition 1989*. 9780679725169.

Albert Camus. (2018). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, *Translation Edition*. 978-0525564454.

Albert Camus. (1989). *The Stranger*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, *Matthew Ward Translation*. 978-0679720201.

William Barrett. (1990). *Irrational Man*. Anchor Books, *1990 Reprint*. 978-0385031387.

Franz Fanon. (2008). *Black Skin, White Mask*. Grove Press, *Revised Edition*. 978-0802143006.

Simone de Beauvoir. (2018). *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Open Road Media, *Reissue Edition*. 978-1504054225.

Other Learning Materials

Specific texts and individual authors to be determined by the instructor.

Minimum Qualifications

English (Masters Required)

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