

**Department of English
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Existentialism and Literature
ENGE2220/UGED2172**

Professor: Prof. Eli Park Sorensen
Office Location: Fung King Hey 315
Phone: 3943 8550
Email: eliparks@cuhk.edu.hk
Office Hours: After class or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course looks at the close relationship between existentialist philosophy and literature. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that focuses on human existence and the challenges of choice, freedom, and responsibility in the modern world. We will explore a variety of existentialist positions—including those of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and de Beauvoir—to understand how existentialist thought constitutes an important intellectual context for many themes in modern literature, including authenticity, alienation, and anxiety. Authors to be discussed include Kafka, Dostoevsky, Ionesco, Camus, Beckett and others. Students interested in literary representations of the existential challenges of the human condition are welcome to attend this course.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- analyze and synthesize some of the most distinct themes and concepts in the existentialist movement
- analyze and evaluate various approaches to reading existentialist themes in modern literature
- appreciate the importance, relevance, and value of existentialist themes in modern literature
- produce a well-reasoned critical essay

TEXTS

The final list of works will be distributed to students at the beginning of the course. It will include *some* of the following works:

- Arrabal, Fernando. *Picnic on the Battlefield* (1959)
- Auster, Paul. *The New York Trilogy* (1987/excerpt, “Ghosts”)
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947/excerpt, “Part 1”)
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot* (1953/excerpt, “Act 1”)
- Camus, Albert. *The Stranger* (1942/excerpt, “Part 1”)
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942/excerpt, “Chapter 2: The Absurd Man”)
- *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (film, dir. Woody Allen, 1989)
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment* (1866/excerpt, “Part 1”)
- *Groundhog Day* (film, dir. Harold Ramis, 1993)
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time* (1927/excerpt, “Chapter 1”)
- *Inception* (film, dir. Christopher Nolan, 2010)
- Ionesco, Eugene. *Rhinoceros* (1959/excerpt, “Act 1”)
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day* (1989/excerpt, “Prologue”)
- *Jules et Jim* (film, dir. Francois Truffaut, 1962)
- Kafka, Franz. *The Castle* (1926/excerpt, “Arrival”)
- Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (1956/excerpt, Chapter 1)
- Kierkegaard, Soren. *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844/excerpt, “Anxiety as the Presupposition of Hereditary Sin”)
- Murakami, Haruki. “Drive My Car” (2014)
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science* (1882/excerpt, § 125, 341, 342, 343)
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883/excerpt, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One”)
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea* (1938/excerpt, Part 1)
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Time* (1943/excerpt, “Chapter 2: Bad Faith”)
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1946)
- *The Truman Show* (film, dir. Peter Weir, 1998)

CLASS TOPICS

- Choice and Responsibility
- The Ethics of Existence
- Alienation and Guilt
- Authentic Living, Das Man, Subjects and Objects
- Language and Presence
- The Absurd and the Meaning of Life
- Repetition, Waiting, Boredom
- Memory, Regret, and Existence

ASSESSMENT

- A) Class preparation, participation and presentation: 30%
- B) Exam: 20%
- C) Essay: 50%

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

Grade A / Excellent : Outstanding performance on ALL learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would surpass the normal expectations at this level and typical of standards that may be common at higher levels of study. The 'A' grade should be reserved for truly excellent work that exceeds the level expected for the majority of students and are expected to be achieved only by a small minority

Grade A- / Very Good : Generally outstanding performance on ALMOST ALL learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would fully fulfill the normal expectations at this level and occasionally reaches standards that may be common at higher levels of study.

Grade B+ / Good (Plus): HIGH performance on all learning outcomes, OR HIGH performance on some learning outcomes which compensates WELL for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply WELL the principles or skills learned in the course in a comprehensive manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level WELL.

Grade B / Good: SUBSTANTIAL performance on all learning outcomes, OR SUBSTANTIAL performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a MORE COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

Grade B- / Good (Minus): GOOD performance on all learning outcomes, OR GOOD performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

Grade C+ / Fair (Plus): VERY SATISFACTORY performance on the majority of learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a SOMEWHAT SUSTAINED manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

Grade C / Fair: SATISFACTORY performance on the majority of learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to partially apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

Grade C- / Fair (Minus): SOMEWHAT SATISFACTORY performance on A NUMBER OF learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to SOMEWHAT apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the BARE basic requirement at this level.

Grade D+ / Pass (Plus): BARELY SATISFACTORY performance on a A FEW learning outcomes. Addresses the task inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in some areas while responding minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

Grade D / Pass : ALMOST BARELY SATISFACTORY performance on VERY FEW learning outcomes. Addresses the task inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in very few areas while responding very minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

Grade F / Failure : Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements. Fails to address the task and likely does not understand what the task requires. In other words, the work completely misses the point.