**Existentialism**

PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS A PROVISIONAL SYLLABUS, SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Instructor: Brian O’Keeffe

Department of French

310 Milbank

Email: [bokeeffe@barnard.edu](mailto:bokeeffe@barnard.edu)

Office Hours: TBD

**Course Description**

The objective of this class is to read a number of French literary texts by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, and relate these to the underlying philosophy that informs their work. In that regard, we shall be addressing ourselves to plays, novels, and essays. We will begin with a brief introduction to existentialism by way of Camus’s *Mythe de Sisyphe*, and then widen the philosophical frame by taking on the rather enormous question of ‘Being’ as philosophers in the Western tradition have tried to understand it. We will try to listen for echoes of existentialism by reading excerpts from Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, and consider the Heidegger of *Being and Time,* sinceHeidegger, as we shall see, resonates with both Camus and the Sartre of *l’Être et le Néant*.

The course then inspects these writers one by one. Camus we will approach by way of his writing for the theatre (*Les Justes*, which explores the legitimacy of political terrorism, and *Les Possédés*, which takes aim at nihilism). As for Sartre, we will try to do justice to his literary masterpiece, the novel *La Nausée*, in which the protagonist Roquentin narrates the breakdown of his relation to the world itself. The title of de Beauvoir’s *Le Sang des Autres* gives us a strong hint at the ethical orientation of her novel: how to take responsibility for others, especially in a time of bloodshed and violence.

**Course requirements and prerequisites**

(a) This class is open to undergraduates only

(b) Non French majors/minors are entirely welcome!

(c) The sole prerequisite for this class is that students have successfully completed Intermediate French II (or have attained the equivalent level by means of AP examinations, etc.).

**Course assignments**

This is a literature course, so there will be no examinations, quizzes or tests. There will be four essay assignments (no fewer than 5 pages, no more than 10) to be written in response to a set of ‘essay prompts’ that I will provide you. Details on the assignment dates, due dates, and the nature of each homework will be given in class at the appropriate juncture. Participation in class discussion is not only welcome, it is an integral part of the class.

\* There are no ‘re-writes’ for this class, but I will read and comment on preliminary drafts if you wish me to. The time-frame for submitting drafts I will discuss in more detail when the matter arises.

**Breakdown of grading percentages**

First essay assignment 25%

Second essay assignment 25%

Third essay assignment 25%

Fourth essay assignment 25%

**Books to be purchased (at Book Culture)**

NB: GIVEN THE LIKELIHOOD OF ONLINE TEACHING IN THE SPRING, ALTERNATIVE ARRANGEMENTS WILL PROBABLY BE MADE IN RESPECT OF THE SARTRE AND DE BEAUVOIR NOVEL.

To save costs, most of the texts will be provided you as either xeroxes or pdf files, but I will be asking you to purchase the following:

Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée*. Editions Folio, 1972

Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Sang des Autres*. Editions Folio, 1973

\* Please do not buy any books until (a) you have decided to take the class and (b) I have confirmed the enrollment numbers.

\*\* Please endeavor to procure the editions I have specified. If students have many different editions of the same text, it is time-consuming to get us all on the same page!

**Statement of Learning Outcomes**

The intellectual goals of this class are as follows:

Students will be introduced to a major literary and philosophical movement, and explore the main themes of existentialism as they bear upon ethics, politics, and religious faith.

Students will be encouraged to discuss matters of freedom, responsibility, suffering, and death, with due regard for questions of gender, sexual orientation, and religious faith.

Students will acquire a broad, but focused knowledge of 20th-century French literary works and gain the ability to contextualize such works in terms of French philosophy in particular, and European philosophy in general.

Students will learn to read certain texts with due regard to the practice of adaptation and re-writing, since many of the writers who feature on this syllabus engage with other writers, and indeed with broader questions of mythology and legend.

Students will be able to detect, and discuss the contemporary significance of 20th century existentialism as they engage with issues of political violence.

Students will be exposed to the numerous strategies literary and philosophical writers adopt when engaging with the principal topics of existentialism, in particular narrative strategies, rhetorical strategies, approaches to style, and to genre.

Students will learn how to deploy literary and philosophical theory in the close analysis of literary texts.

Students will hone their French language skills as they relate to reading, and to the writing of both intellectually substantial essays, and short, synthetic reports. They will also have the opportunity to enhance their spoken French, since class discussion is an integral part of this course.

**Plagiarism**

Barnard College guidelines require me to point out that the Honor Code must be in the forefront of your minds when you do homework. Please do your own work. Please do not use online translators, lift material from websites without acknowledging your borrowing of such material (and even then, please make sure I have agreed to that practice), or accept help from any other person when you are doing homework. This especially applies to help, however well-intentioned, from classmates or friends who have better French than you. All of these practices would constitute plagiarism as the College, and the French department, understands that term. Instances of plagiarism will result in a zero for the piece of work, the possibility of an F for the entire course, and other repercussions that can be very severe, including an appearance before the Honor Board.

**Accommodations**

Students who will be taking this course and may need certain accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see the instructor as soon as possible. You must be registered in advance with CARDS.

**Statement on Wellness**

It is important for you to recognise and identify the different pressures, burdens, and stressors you may be facing, whether personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic. We as a community urge you to make yourself--your own health, sanity, and wellness--your priority throughout this semester and your career here. Sleep, exercise, and eating well can all be a part of a healthy regimen to cope with stress. Resources exist to support you in several sectors of your life, and we encourage you to make use of them. Should you have any questions about navigating these resources, please visit these sites:

* <http://barnard.edu/primarycare>
* [http://barnard.edu/counseling](http://barnard.edu/counsel)
* <http://barnard.edu/wellwoman/about>

**FAQ: What if I use non-binary gender pronouns?** Because French is a language in which everything is gendered, and because there is no consensus on gender-neutral pronouns, gender-neutral pronouns are not really an option in French. However, please bring this issue to my attention in whatever way makes you feel comfortable, and I will try to use your name instead of pronouns. We can also discuss the range of options (particularly when it comes to writing exercises) during office hours.

**SYLLABUS**

Introduction: existence, freedom, responsibility and absurdity

Camus, *Mythe de Sisyphe*

Part 1: Philosophical Precursors

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Heidegger, *Being and Time*

Part 2: The Philosophy of Existentialism

Sartre, *l’Être et le Néant*

Part 3: Camus

*Les Justes*

*Les Possédés*

Part 4: Sartre

*La Nausée*

Part 5: De Beauvoir

*Le Sang des Autres*