

philosophy 336: existentialism

fall 2007 syllabus

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September 4th–December 14th
MWF 2:30—3:20
office hours: by appointment

course overview

This course is an exploration into the major themes in existential philosophy. Rather than reading text books, I have decided to approach the material by exploring existentialism in one of the places where it “lives”, within the realm of a literary movement. Thus, the reading list for this class will more resemble that of a literature class. We will read the works of several influential authors who have been associated with the Existentialist movement.

purpose of course

The purpose of this course will be to extract major existentialist themes as they are found in important works of literature, and to see if there is a coherent philosophical view underlying those themes. By the end of the course, students should be able to approach a piece of literature, successfully identify existentialist philosophical themes (if there are any) in that work, and critically discuss those themes.

course readings

The books are available at Amherst Books, but they are also all available through Amazon and other online book vendors. When possible, I have made available the readings on the course website either as links to full-text versions, or as pdfs. Note: *it is crucial to purchase the correct editions of these books*, as I have intentionally chosen particular translators over others.

required texts:

- Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, ISBN: 0679720200
- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, ISBN: 0-679-73452-X
- Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, ISBN: 0679732764
- Søren Kierkegaard, *The Seducer's Diary*, ISBN: 0691017379
- Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ISBN: 0691020264
- Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, ISBN: 0-375-70196-6

Course website

www.people.umass.edu/jamesj/courses/existentialism/index.html

The course website contains supplementary materials for the course as well as a collection of related links.

course requirements

Students will have three additional responsibilities beyond the required course readings. First, regular participation in class discussions will be expected. Second, each student will be required to write 3 short discussion papers. Short papers will be 3-5 page responses to a series of questions that will be posted in the assignments section of the website. The questions will relate to that unit's readings. Third, each student will

write an 8-10 page term paper. Term papers may be an expansion of one of the short papers, an extension of some issue that develops in discussion, or on an independent topic of choice. Topics should be approved before proceeding with the term paper.

grading

The grade for the course will be based on the following:

- 10% will come from participation in class discussions.
- 60% will come from the 3 short papers: 20% for each paper
- 30% will come from the term paper

cheating

Don't do it. The university's policy concerning academic honesty can be found at www.umass.edu/dean_students/rights/acad_honest.htm.

Students are responsible for knowing this policy and knowing what constitutes an act of academic dishonesty.

The difference between plagiarism and good research is sometimes as little as adding some quotation marks and a parenthetical citation. Be advised that I have no tolerance for plagiarism.

schedule

The following is a tentative schedule of the reading assignments.

Unit One: the Anti-hero

- **Notes from Underground**
- **The Stranger**
- **The Invisible Man**

Unit Two: Spheres of Existence: the aesthetic and ethical

- **Either Or (excerpts)**
- **The Seducer's Diary**
- **The Moviegoer**

Unit Three: Spheres of Existence: the religious

- **Fear and Trembling**
- **In the Penal Colony**
- **Frailty (movie)**