COURSE DESCRIPTION:

"I have tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know."

"I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent: that's all I can say."

-Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

What comes first: existence or essence? It’s not quite like the chicken and the egg. Up until a few philosophers came around, it was essence for sure. But then that changed, and the world with it. No longer was literature embedded in a safe, meaningful world where character and plot were unified in perfect harmony. Instead, the meaning of life was questioned, and literature that dealt with that quandary took on a distinctive form with elements all its own. In this course, we will deal with absurdity and existentialism in its many forms, from the tentpole stories of Kafka, Sartre, and Camus, to the Theatre of the Absurd movement, to Ellison and Vonnegut. By the end of the course, you will be deeply familiar with all of the issues and questions raised when raising the biggest question of all, giving your critical and fluid thinking a work-out like they’ve never seen.

Official description: Seminar surveying recent works in a genre or topic, to introduce students to poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction or a combination of selections focusing on a particular theme. Participants will develop skills of interpretation and analysis through reading and writing about contemporary literature. Required for the minor.

Course Pre/co-requisites
Prerequisite: WRT 102

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Students, you will:

- Understand the basic terminology and elements of literature
- Begin to ask the big questions and track how others asked them
- Develop analytical and critical responses to literature
- Research how this genre relates to the time period in which it appeared; develop awareness of its context
- Understand the theoretical concepts that undergird absurdist/existentialist literature
- Learn to argue the specifics of the issues at hand, and make connections
COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Attendance and Make Up Policy
One unexcused and undiscussed absence will not affect your grade, but two will bite 5% off your Participation score, even if you are the most vocal student. Three unexcused, undiscussed absences gives you 10% off. Four or more unexcused absences and you forfeit Participation. Two latenesses make an unexcused absence.

Required Readings

To buy/borrow:
The Myth of Sisyphus by Albert Camus
The Stranger by Albert Camus
The Wall: and Other Stories by Jean-Paul Sartre
The Castle: The Graphic Novel by David Zane Mairowitz (from Franz Kafka)
Nine Plays of the Modern Theater: Waiting for Godot; The Visit; Tango; The Caucasian Chalk Circle; The Balcony; Rhinoceros; American Buffalo; The Birthday Party; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead by Harold Clurman
Man’s Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl
Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison
Cat’s Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut

To read for free on Project Gutenberg or on Blackboard:
“Existentialism is a Humanism” by Jean-Paul Sartre
Notes from the Underground by Fyodor Dostoevsky (excerpts)
“Black Skin, White Masks” by Simone de Beauvoir
“Man Goes to See Doctor” by Adam Gopnik
Nonsense and modern existential poetry

Major Assignments
Compare/Contrast Essay (3 pages)
Analysis Essay (3-4 pages)
Interpretive Essay (4-5 pages)
Interpretive-Research Essay (4-5 pages)

GRADING:

Participation - 25%
Compare/Contrast - 15%
Analysis - 20%
Interpretive- 20%
Interpretive-Research - 20%
MEETING SCHEDULE:

I. Compare/Contrast

1: The Quandary
Tuesday - Discussion: The philosophical question, requirements of course, “The Myth of Sisyphus”
1/26 Assignment: “Existentialism is a Humanism” (online) and The Wall - “The Wall”

Thursday - Discussion: Philosophy’s intersection with literature, Jean-Paul Sartre and his purposes
1/28 Assignment: The Wall - “Erostratus” and “Childhood of a Leader”

2: The Existential Hero
Tuesday - Discussion: Defining literary terms and terms of existentialism, hero and anti-hero
2/2 Assignment: The Myth of Sisyphus - “An Absurd Reasoning” (excerpt)

Thursday - Discussion: Camus and absurdism, close reading, happiness and suffering
2/4 Assignment: The Stranger

3: The Crisis
Tuesday - Discussion: Storytelling, set-up and conflict, conventional storytelling
2/9 Assignment: The Myth of Sisyphus - “An Absurd Reasoning” (excerpt)

Thursday - Discussion: Camus vs. Sartre
2/11 Assignment: Paper #1

II. Analysis

4: Bureaucracy, Imprisonment, and Guilt
Tuesday - Discussion: Kafka, and roots of existentialism, “Before the Law,” video of “A Country Doctor”
2/16 Assignment: The Castle: The Graphic Novel

Thursday - Discussion: Kafkaesque, tone, and unconventional storytelling
2/18 Assignment: Notes from the Underground (excerpts)

      The Myth of Sisyphus - “Appendix”

5: Debasement, Decay, and Hope
Tuesday - Discussion: Dostoevsky and the nature of man
2/23 Assignment: Man’s Search for Meaning (p. 1-32)

Thursday - Discussion: The Holocaust and existentialism/absurdism, nature of evil in literature and life
2/25 Assignment: Man’s Search for Meaning (p. 32-93)

6: Reflection and Outlook
Tuesday - Discussion: Frankl and memoir conventions, application of Camus and Sartre to life
3/1 Assignment: *Man’s Search for Meaning* - Part II
Read paper prompts

Thursday - Discussion: Optimism vs. pessimism, making meaning, existential psychology

3/3 Assignment: Write Analysis paper

III. Interpretation

7: The Drama of Nothingness
Tuesday - Discussion: Introduce Theatre of the Absurd movement

3/8 Assignment: *Waiting for Godot*

Thursday - Discussion: Identity, the search for the self, the search for a higher power in Beckett

3/10 Assignment: *Myth of Sisyphus* - “Absurd Man”
*Rhinoceros*

Spring Break

8: The Absurdly Comic
Tuesday - Discussion: Theatre and anti-theatre, Ionesco’s humor, and Camus’s absurd men

3/22 Assignment: *The Balcony*

Thursday - Discussion: Genet’s world of fantasy, sex, and power

3/24 Assignment: *The Birthday Party*

9: Threat and Violence
Tuesday - Discussion: Pinter, allegory, and anxieties in the modern world

3/28 Assignment: *American Buffalo*

Thursday - Discussion: Mamet, masculinity, and the working class’s existentialism

3/30 Assignment: *The Myth of Sisyphus* - “Absurd Creation”
Post theses on Blackboard

10: Creation and Joy
Tuesday - Discussion: Quoting, paraphrasing, and the perfect thesis
4/5 Assignment: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Thursday - Discussion: Stoppard, agency, character, and homage
4/7 Assignment: Write Interpretive papers

IV. Interpretive-Research

11: The Existential Other
Tuesday - Discussion: Introduce issues of gender/race to existentialism, the components of research
4/12 Assignment: “Black Skin, White Masks”
*Invisible Man*
Thursday - Discussion: de Beauvoir and Ellison, history of the era  
4/14 Assignment: Invisible Man

12: Subversion
Tuesday - Discussion: The quandary, the hero, and the crisis, from the other side  
4/19 Assignment: Invisible Man, TBD Poetry

Thursday - Discussion: Poetry and rebellion in the face of circumstances  
4/21 Assignment: Invisible Man

13: The Political and Satirical
Tuesday - Discussion: “Donald Rumsfeld” poetry, the concept of satire in the face of war and nuclear fear  
4/26 Assignment: Cat’s Cradle

Thursday - Discussion: Vonnegut’s structures and themes, literary devices  
4/28 Assignment: Cat’s Cradle

Week 14: The Modern and Surreal
Tuesday - Discussion: Surreal humor, its difference from the absurd  
5/3 Assignment: Cat’s Cradle

“Man Goes to See Doctor”

Thursday - Discussion: Gopnik and the present day crisis, finding meaning in this course  
5/5 Assignment: Write Interpretive-research papers, send by e-mail 5/15
CLASS PROTOCOL:
No cell phones. A cell phone going off in the class makes me mark you late. See above “Attendance” for how latenesses affect your grade.

CLASS RESOURCES:
Blackboard
Writing Center

DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES (DSS) STATEMENT
If you have a physical, psychological, medical or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact Disability Support Services, ECC (Educational Communications Center) Building, room 128, (631) 632-6748. They will determine with you what accommodations, if any, are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY STATEMENT
Each student must pursue his or her academic goals honestly and be personally accountable for all submitted work. Representing another person's work as your own is always wrong. Faculty are required to report any suspected instances of academic dishonesty to the Academic Judiciary. Faculty in the Health Sciences Center (School of Health Technology & Management, Nursing, Social Welfare, Dental Medicine) and School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures. For more comprehensive information on academic integrity, including categories of academic dishonesty, please refer to the academic judiciary website at http://www.stonybrook.edu/uaa/academicjudiciary/

CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT
Stony Brook University expects students to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people. Faculty are required to report to the Office of Judicial Affairs any disruptive behavior that interrupts their ability to teach, compromises the safety of the learning environment, or inhibits students' ability to learn. Faculty in the HSC Schools and the School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures.