

Myth of Sisyphus: First class lesson plan**Material to prepare:**

- “Absurdity and suicide” print outs
- Yiyun Li, *Things in Nature Merely Grow*, excerpt
- Writing prompts
- Syllabi for students

Introductions of the course: 10 min

- Instructor introduction: MFA, non-fiction, first year: my writing practice - experimental theory driven nonfiction
- Reason that I want to teach this course.

Introduction of the class: 30 min.

- Name, program, year
- what are you working on (project, story, *fascination*) – one thing you are obsessed about
- why are you drawn to Sisyphus/this course

Background on the text: existentialism, nihilism, and absurdism: 15 min

- How many of you are familiar – gauge interest.
- Introduction to absurdism, existentialism, and nihilism – three strands of philosophical thoughts of the meaning of life. *With the advent of modernity and the modern condition and the feigning of religious life, people/philosophers started to ask and theorize what is the meaning of life. God is dead.*
- Nihilism: late 19th century, tied to Russian nihilist, radical movement, and Nietzsche put a name to it. God is dead. Read Dostoyevsky, writing against the Nihilism types.
- Existentialism: early mid 20th 1984, (Nietzsche as a predecessor) Kierkegaard, father of existentialism. Sartre, De Beauvoir
- Absurdism: mid 20th century, Camus. Inspired literary works and the arts.

At the core of these ideas:

Nihilism: nothing has meaning, nothing matters

Existentialism: Meaning is what you make it. No predetermined meaning. Sartre: being and nothingness. It is being, being is meaning. Outside being there is nothing. (Following Heidegger’s being and time.)

Absurdism: Meaning doesn’t exist at all.

- But all these ideas are inter-related, it’s not definitive.

Read “Absurdity and Suicide” together, one person per paragraph, read aloud: 20 min.
While encouraging to highlight, underline, and take notes. Finding what you think is the most striking sentence.

Discussion: 20 min (Let the student’s interest guides the discussion, but key idea to touch upon is below)

- First sentence: suicide is the one true philosophical problem.
- The absurd
- Get to suicide/hope as two ends of the spectrum for Camus.

- Leading student to see Camus' central seeking: *What is the main question Camus is asking?* – is it possible to live life without appeal.

(Using whiteboards during the discussion to define a few key terms collectively:)

- The absurd
- Suicide/death and hope
- Central question Camus asks in this text: *“Does its absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide.” Is it possible to live without appeal, without meaning.*

Re-articulate Camus' question: Is it possible to live without appeal, without meaning. And quick hypothesis to this question. 10 min – this is what we will find out together and encourage students to come up with your own thinking while we read along.

Creative writing exercise on meaning (and quick sharing):

Meaning — Turns this into writing.

Give students pre-written writing prompt.

- Human's seeking for meaning, can this ever be tamed. The meaning of life. How you would define meaning. (Moral systems, inner compass?) – *Writing story, a poem, a personal essay, a think piece in contemplation of meaning.*
- Invite student to think: is meaning a part of human condition? – like hunger?
- Or is meaninglessness a psychological condition – the feeling of absurd – or a subjective experience?
- Is there a transcendental purpose – a singular meaning, like religion.

Further reading: skim and read *Things in Nature Merely Grow* excerpt in class if have time, leave with student as optional after class reading if run out of time. But before they read, the ask students to consider the following

- Thought: is Yiyun Li for/against Camus?
- Notice craft-wise how Yiyun Li articulate her ideas while narrating experience.
- Voice of this memoir – not a recount, not a storytelling, but delivering of a story kneaded in thoughts.