

PHI 104: Existentialism and Literature: De Beauvoir/Rankine/COVID-19 Essay Assignment
Kirsten Jacobson

5-page essay due by 11:59 p.m. on Monday, May 4th (or earlier) via our Blackboard folder

**** If you would like me to give you feedback on your essay, please indicate this interest (and your email address of choice) at the top of your essay, and I will send you comments by email.****

Choose one of the following questions (or get approval via email from me to write on a question of your own creation that focuses on some other aspect of these readings). Write a 5-page double-spaced essay on that topic (in one of the file formats that Blackboard allows). Follow proper essay format (e.g., have a thesis statement, introductory and concluding paragraphs, and a well organized and coherent development of your argument in which each body paragraph focuses on one central and pertinent point). Further writing guidelines follow the questions.

1. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir describes a series of “character types” that do not adequately take up the full character of human freedom. Choose one or more of the following “character types” (the sub-person, the serious person, the nihilist, the adventurer, the passionate person, the critical thinker, or the artist), and explain **how this type of person fails to take up his or her freedom fully and adequately**. Doing so will demand that you also address **what it would mean to take up one’s freedom more adequately**. In doing so, use examples from Rankine’s *Citizen* and/or from one or more of articles on COVID-19 to illustrate de Beauvoir’s analysis. Lastly, give your own critical assessment of the characterization made by de Beauvoir regarding the nature of our freedom and our attempts—successful or unsuccessful—to take it up.
2. Using examples (and, where relevant, arguments) from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and also from either *Citizen* and/or from one or more of the articles on COVID-19, explain how and why other people are essential to our experience of ourselves and also to the meaning of the world and the things within that world. Additionally, explain why de Beauvoir makes the related argument toward the end of Part II of her book that **willing others to be free** is essential to **willing our own selves free**. Lastly, give your critical assessment of the characterizations made by de Beauvoir and Rankine or your chosen article author(s) of the interpersonal character of our existence.
3. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir argues that the inherent character of childhood makes it challenging for us to take up our adult responsibilities and freedom. In light of such realities, de Beauvoir argues that, following our childhood, **we go through a “crisis of adolescence”** and also that we need to be involved in “an apprenticeship of freedom.” In spite of this existential “need,” we often fail, according to de Beauvoir, to take up our freedom fully, and we, thus, problematically end up taking values for granted, rejecting values altogether, accepting values without considering other persons, etc. Explain and give your own critical assessment of **why this tension between childhood and adulthood exists**. In doing so, use portions of the texts of Rankine and/or one or more of the articles on COVID-19 to illustrate de Beauvoir’s assessment of human valuation, and especially to address de Beauvoir’s argument that we initially see values in childhood in a radically different way than we do in adulthood.
4. De Beauvoir talks about the dangers of treating ourselves or other people like mere objects. (She discusses this in the section on childhood as well as in her discussions of the serious person and the passionate person.) She also talks about the dangers of losing ourselves in something like “pure subjectivity.” (She discusses this in the crisis of adolescence as well as in her descriptions of the nihilist and the adventurer.) Pick one of these problems (or both, if you’d like) and explain her point clearly. Connect this issue to examples from the writings of Rankine and/or one or more of the articles on COVID-19. Lastly, offer your own critical assessment of de Beauvoir’s argument regarding the **danger of being either overly object-like or overly subjective**, focusing especially on the fallout that this has for people around us.

Note for all 4 options: In offering your critical assessment, you might take yourself to be answering the basic question: does this analysis of the human experience seem accurate to you, and why or why not? Also note that “critical” does not automatically imply an attitude of dismissal or disagreement. One can offer a critical assessment of a position in which one is supportive of or in agreement with that position. Remember that whether you agree or disagree with the author’s analysis, you must give reasons for your position and must do so in terms that directly engage with her point.

Additional Essay Writing Guidelines:

- Your essay should be approximately 5 double-spaced typewritten pages. A standard 12-point font and standard margins should be used.
- Your essay must begin with a proper introductory paragraph that includes a concise thesis statement. An introductory paragraph should let your reader know substantially what you are going to be talking about. In other words, it should do the work of giving your reader a basic map of what you’ll be covering; it should not be filler or inessential material about the books or authors. Your thesis statement should tell your reader what point you are going to make and argue to support.
- Make sure your references to claims made by the author are documented with a proper form of textual citation. Here is one example of what this could look like: “Further writing guidelines follow the questions” (Jacobson 1). Including a citation pertains to quotations you use, but also to indirect, but pivotal references you make to an author’s position. For example, you might make and cite the following claim about what John Doe says on page 101 of a particular text: Doe argues such and such about such and such (Doe 101). Avoid using excessively long quotes. Be sure to explain what the quote means or why it is relevant. Do not use a quotation to make an argument for you.
- As your syllabus already makes clear, the work you submit for this class must be your own. This assignment is asking for your own carefully considered reading and interpretation of the texts and does not require (or even recommend) you to consult secondary literature. If, however, for any reason you do consult secondary works—whether in the form of books, websites, essays, etc.—you must identify and appropriately cite these materials in your written work. Presenting the work of another as if it were your own is plagiarism—a serious academic offense.
- Try to make one main point in each paragraph. Arrange your paragraphs in such a way that they unfold as much as possible in a logical order.
- Keep the paper topic in mind throughout your entire paper. Avoid introducing topics that are not relevant or not necessary for answering the question.
- Make your points simply and clearly. You do not need to use “fancy” language or sentence structures. You should also avoid casual language or slang.
- Avoid using contractions (e.g., don’t, can’t, he’ll, it’s, etc.) in essay papers.
- Do not confuse our discussions about certain topics with what the author has said—unless, of course, we were explaining explicitly (and correctly!) what that author said.