12AP Literature & Composition:
Summer Reading Response

Over the summer, you read Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,* Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City,* an "Existential Primer," and three excerpted existential theories. Respond to the prompt below while adhering to the guidelines.

Prompt:

In a 3-5 page paper, use the assigned existential theory as a means to interrogate the central characters in both Chopin's *The Awakening* and McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*. In other words, what meaning and insight can be generated about the central characters in the assigned fictional novels through the existential theory?

Guidelines:

a. Develop a **unifying thesis statement** that addresses the prompt above;
b. use ample evidence from **at least 2 of the 3** existential excerpts*,* Chopin's *The Awakening,* **and** McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* to support your claim;
c. **DO NOT CITE EVIDENCE FROM THE "EXISTENTIAL PRIMER."** The primer is merely to offer an introduction to existentialism;
d. organize the paper into an introduction, at least two body paragraphs, and a conclusion;
e. write 3-5 pages;
f. maintain a formal and sophisticated written style;
g. do not use any other materials or sources to help you write this paper other than those given to you for this assignment;
h. you do not need a works cited page;
i. format the paper using MLA 9 guidelines;
j. **deliver a hardcopy of the paper to Dr. Hahn on the first day of class—no exceptions**.

An Existentialism Primer

As you may have gathered from the name, existentialists are primarily concerned with existence. They are not interested in what happened before you were born, or what will happen after you die, but they are merely concerned with what is going on now and how/why we make choices and how we live with the choices that we have made.

Here are the basic tenets of existentialism (*adapted from the "Discussions in Existence"*):

1. Existence precedes essence.

Basically, this means that humans exist before they have a purpose or meaning. From conception, you did not have a pre-determined goal in life. Whereas the Westminster Confession of Faith (a Christian document) answers the question, "What is the chief duty of man," with, "To enjoy and glorify God forever," existentialists say humans have no prior essence. Although this would seem to suggest that all existentialists were atheists (and many of them were) some were actually able to fit a concept of God into their framework (albeit a very hands-off one.)

Now you may reasonably ask, "Does this apply to all things?" As Sartre explained with regards to a paper cutter, a paper cutter has an essence before it exists. When a man needs to cut paper, he sets off to create the proper instrument. He thinks about how to create, what materials to use, and so on and so forth. Then, he creates the paper cutter, and uses it to fulfill its purpose.

For humans, however, existence precedes essence. And lest you think, "So life is meaningless, why should I live it," the existentialist has an immediate answer: You are free to choose your essence or who you want to be. And thus:

2. We are condemned to be free.

Since we as humans ultimately have no pre-set significance, *you and I are free to choose what we want to be.* That isn't so hard to understand, right?

Sadly, the vast majority of humans hate being free, and that is because with freedom comes responsibility. If you choose to do something, and freely, then you alone are responsible for the consequences. Many people try to avoid this freedom in numerous ways. For example, a person who loves to eat might say, "I inherited some genes from my parents." Therefore, it isn't their fault that they are obese--blame the parents. Or if a murderer tried to argue, "It's just who I am," they are assuming they have a nature that somehow disposes them to kill. Another attempt to avoid responsibility is to play off environment. If a child fails a test at school, it isn't his fault because he stayed up until midnight, and his dog died the next morning, and his teacher really

hates him. If he failed, it's because his environment made him fail, or so he would have you believe. But the existentialist denies all these things. We are free to do almost whatever, whenever we want, if we so choose. But you see, we don't always choose. We just let someone or something else choose for us, and then we have engaged in what is called "bad faith" or "self-deception," both of which are attempts to rid oneself of freedom and therefore responsibility (but ultimately, even if you choose not to decide, you have still made a choice.)

What about the lady who had her legs amputated because she experienced a tragic car accident? Surely she isn't responsible for that? The existentialist thinks so. She chose to get into the car and drive, and the car accident was the result. She is responsible for freely getting into the car, and nothing else. Maybe she was going to get groceries for her three children. That doesn't absolve her of responsibility for her consequence. She could have chosen to go at 4:30, or 5:00, but she chose 3:00, and that led to the car accident. No one made her choose 3:00 except herself.

But she is still free, even with her legs amputated. She is free to figure out how to move on from this experience. Will she be bitter the rest of her life, or will she use this moment to warn others of the dangers of driving? It's up to her because she's free to choose, and whichever she does choose, she is responsible for the outcome.

"Wait a minute," you might say. "Am I absolutely free? Does that mean if I were to close my eyes and wish myself to Hawaii, I am free to go there?" No, not necessarily. What the existentialist means by "free" is **"free within a certain system."** These things that could "hold us back" in the system are referred to as facticity. Let's take Sartre's example of the artist: an artist has red, blue, and yellow for her colors. Now, is she free to make a green tree with *just* the red paint? No, not that kind of free. But she is free to combine blue and yellow to make green for her tree, if she wants to have a green tree. Maybe she wants a purple tree, which is entirely up to her. If I, for example, wanted to become a basketball player at this point in my life, could I become one simply because of my unrelenting passion, desire, and determination? My kindergarten teacher said I could, but what could hold me back?: age, height, lack of athletic prowess, etc.

3. Life is absurd.

Albert Camus was another French existentialist who lived alongside Jean-Paul Sartre, and "life is absurd" is his major contribution to existentialism. How is life absurd, though? By that, Camus means that we live despite knowing we will die. Have you ever noticed that? Some people believe that, if he or she is going to die anyway, he or she might as well commit suicide and get it over with. But Camus rejected this belief and tried to answer it.

Try holding your breath. Go as long as possible. Is your heart beating faster? Chest pounding? Want to give in? What just happened? Your body wants you to live. Your heart was trying to get oxygen to your body, but if you have no new supply, it pumps harder. Your heart doesn't want you to die, because if it did, it would stop beating. And yet it keeps going, and going, and going, and going. If you held your breath long enough, your brain would have shut down, causing you to pass out and start breathing again for the sheer reason of staying alive. *Despite knowing you will die, your body strives to live. Life and existence is absurd!* So how are you going to deal with it? Are you going to give up, or are you going to live despite this morbid knowledge? And how are you going to live?

Existentialism – What It Is and Isn't

Existentialism takes into consideration these underlying concepts:

- Human free will.
- Human nature is chosen through life choices.
- A person is best when struggling against his or her individual nature, fighting for life.
- Decisions are not without stress and consequences.
- There are things that are not rational.
- Personal responsibility and discipline are crucial.
- Society is unnatural and its traditional religious and secular rules are arbitrary.
- Worldly desire is futile.

Existentialism is broadly defined in a variety of concepts and there can be no one answer as to what it is, yet it *does not* support any of the following:

- wealth, pleasure, or honor make the good life
- social values and structure control the individual
- accept what is and that is enough in life
- science can and will make everything better
- people are basically good but ruined by society or external forces
- "I want my way, now!" or "It is not my fault!" mentality

There is a wide variety of philosophical, religious, and political ideologies that make up existentialism, so there is no universal agreement in an arbitrary set of ideals and beliefs. Politics vary, but each seeks the most individual freedom for people within a society.

BELOW ARE THE EXCERPTS YOU MUST CITE IN YOUR PAPER

EXCERPT #1

Excerpted from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

By Albert Camus (pronounced cah-MOO)

"The Myth of Sisyphus" is a short section of a book called The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays.

The gods had condemned [1]Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.

If one believes Homer, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. According to another tradition, however, he was disposed to practice the profession of highwayman. I see no contradiction in this. Opinions differ as to the reasons why he became the futile laborer of the underworld. To begin with, he is accused of a certain levity in regard to the gods. He stole their secrets. Aegina, the daughter of Aesopus, was carried off by Jupiter. The father was shocked by that disappearance and complained to Sisyphus. He, who knew of the abduction, offered to tell about it on condition that Aesopus would give water to the citadel of Corinth. To the celestial thunderbolts he preferred the benediction of water. He was punished for this in the underworld. Homer tells us also that Sisyphus had put Death in chains. Pluto could not endure the sight of his deserted, silent empire. He dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror.

It is said that Sisyphus, being near to death, rashly wanted to test his wife's love. He ordered her to cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square. Sisyphus woke up in the underworld. And there, annoyed by an obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness. Recalls, signs of anger, warnings were of no avail. Many years more he lived facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth. A decree of the gods was necessary. Mercury came and seized the impudent man by the collar and, snatching him from his joys, lead him forcibly back to the underworld, where his rock was ready for him.

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth. Nothing is told to us about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them. As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it, and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms

[1] **Sisyphus**: In order to spite his brother Salmoneus, Sisyphus seduced Salomoneus' daughter Tyro and had two children with her; she killed them when she learned the reason for his love. Sisyphus then committed an impious act for which he was condemned to Hades where for eternity he had to push an enormous boulder to the top of a hill. Near the top, the stone was fated to roll down again.

outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth- clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. This word is not too much. Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy arises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are our nights of Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. Thus, Oedipus at the outset obeys fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well." Sophocles' Oedipus, like Dostoevsky's [2]Kirilov, thus gives the recipe for the absurd victory. Ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism.

One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. "What! by such narrow ways?" There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the felling of the absurd springs from happiness. "I conclude that all is well," says Oedipus, and that remark is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile suffering. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.

All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is a thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious,

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[2] **Kirilov**: A character in Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed* who believed that men would become gods by overcoming their fear of death.

secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is, but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which become his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Albert Camus (pronounced Ca-moo) was born on November 7, 1913, in Mondavi, French Algeria. Camus became known for his political journalism, novels and essays during the 1940s. Camus won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957 and died on January 4, 1960, in Burgundy, France.

EXCERPT #2

Excerpt from *Existentialism is Humanism* (1946)
By Jean-Paul Sartre

Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its "subjectivity," using the word as a reproach against us. But what do we mean to say by this, but that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table? For we mean to say that man primarily exists – that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be. Not, however, what he may wish to be. For what we usually understand by wishing or willing is a conscious decision taken – much more often than not – after we have made ourselves what we are. I may wish to join a party, to write a book or to marry – but in such a case what is usually called my will is probably a manifestation of a prior and more spontaneous decision. If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. The word "subjectivism" is to be understood in two senses, and our adversaries play upon only one of them. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism. When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we

find ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole. If I am a worker, for instance, I may choose to join a Christian rather than a Communist trade union. And if, by that membership, I choose to signify that resignation is, after all, the attitude that best becomes a man, that man's kingdom is not upon this earth, I do not commit myself alone to that view. Resignation is my will for everyone, and my action is, in consequence, a commitment on behalf of all mankind. Or if, to take a more personal case, I decide to marry and to have children, even though this decision proceeds simply from my situation, from my passion or my desire, I am thereby committing not only myself, but humanity as a whole, to the practice of monogamy. I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself, I fashion man.

Jean-Paul Sartre, (born June 21, 1905, Paris, France—died April 15, 1980, Paris), French novelist, playwright, and exponent of Existentialism—a philosophy acclaiming the freedom of the individual human being. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964, but he declined it.

EXCERPT #3:

***The Second Sex* (1949)**
By SIMONE de BEAUVOIR

Excerpted from "Chapter 1: Biological Data"

Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her. From a man's mouth, the epithet "female" sounds like an insult; but he, not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear: "He's a male!" The term "female" is pejorative not because it roots woman in nature but because it confines her in her sex, and if this sex, even in an innocent animal, seems despicable and an enemy to man, it is obviously because of the disquieting hostility woman triggers in him. Nevertheless, he wants to find a justification in biology for this feeling. The word "female" evokes a saraband of images: an enormous round egg snatching and castrating the agile sperm; monstrous and stuffed, the queen termite reigning over the servile males; the praying mantis and the spider, gorged on love, crushing their partners and gobbling them up; the dog in heat running through back alleys, leaving perverse smells in her wake; the monkey showing herself off brazenly, sneaking away with flirtatious hypocrisy. And the most splendid wildcats, the tigress, lioness, and panther, lie down slavishly under the male 's imperial embrace, inert, impatient, shrewd, stupid, insensitive, lewd, fierce, and humiliated. Man projects all females at once onto woman. And the fact is that she is a female. But if one wants to stop thinking in commonplaces, two questions arise. What does the female represent in the animal kingdom? And what unique kind of female is realized in woman?...

...But it is also true that there are conditions without which the very fact of existence would seem to be impossible. Presence in the world vigorously implies the positing of a body that is both a thing of the world and a point of view on this world: but this body need not possess this or that particular structure. In L'être et le néant (Being and Nothingness), Sartre disputes Heidegger's affirmation that human reality is doomed to death because of its finitude; he establishes that a finite and temporally limitless existence could be conceivable; nevertheless, if human life were not inhabited by death, the relationship of human beings to the world and to themselves would be so deeply upset that the statement "man is mortal" would be anything but an empirical truth: immortal, an existent would no longer be what we call a man. One of the essential features of man's destiny is that the movement of his temporal life creates behind and ahead of him the infinity of the past and the future: the perpetuation of the species appears thus as the correlative of individual limitation, so the phenomenon of reproduction can be considered as ontologically grounded. But this is where one must stop; the perpetuation of the species does not entail sexual differentiation. That it is taken on by existents in such a way that it thereby enters into the concrete definition of existence, so be it.

Simone de Beauvoir was a French writer who laid the foundation for the modern feminist movement. Also an existentialist philosopher, she had a long-term relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre. Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris, France, in 1908. De Beauvoir published countless works of fiction and nonfiction during her lengthy career—often with existentialist themes—including 1949's *The Second Sex*, which is considered a pioneering work of the modern feminist movement. De Beauvoir also lent her voice to various political causes and traveled the world extensively. She died in Paris in 1986 and was buried with Sartre.