

# Séminaires en français

## Descriptions

- **Existentialism: The Human Condition and The Absurd**
- **Au coeur de l'amitié: A Multidisciplinary Study of the Concept of Friendship**
- **Food and Culture: a French Perspective**
- **La musique française: Reflets d'une culture: French songs as a reflection of a changing French society**
- **Théâtre français: Humour, Amour et autre: Prévert et ses amis**
- **Coffee Changed the World: An Introduction to the XVIIIth Century in France**

## **Existentialism: The Human Condition and The Absurd**

Dominique Butler-Borruat

Far from being a doctrine, Existentialism is fundamentally a philosophical tendency. Born of a reaction against Hegelian rationalism, the different existentialist tendencies come together in the rehabilitation of freedom, subjectivity and individual existence. In this course we will attempt, through our readings, to discern the characteristics of various existentialist concepts. After a brief survey of the precursors and the “founders” of existentialism, we will focus on two members of what has been called the Philosophical School of Paris, namely Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as on Albert Camus. Our first readings by Jean-Paul Sartre will allow us to familiarize ourselves with the main existentialist themes. The study of Albert Camus’ conception of the human condition and the absurd will offer us a diametrically opposed perspective to Sartre’s systematic approach, and de Beauvoir’s critique of Sartre’s conception will shed new light on the concepts of freedom and responsibility.

Students will be asked to write essays on the readings and to participate actively in class discussions.

### **Assigned works:**

Jean-Paul Sartre:

L’Existentialisme est un humanisme

La Nausée (excerpts)

Les Mouches

Le Mur

Albert Camus:

Le Mythe de Sisyphe (excerpts)

Caligula

L’Etranger

Simone de Beauvoir:

Les Bouches inutiles

Tous les hommes sont mortels

### **Film:**

Luis Puenzo

La Peste

### **Audio-visual materials:**

Sartre par lui-même

Simone de Beauvoir

Albert Camus: A Self-Portrait

**Au coeur de l'amitié:**  
**A Multidisciplinary Study of the Concept of Friendship**  
Dominique Butler-Borruat

The abundance of treatises on friendship throughout history, and the profusion of research on the subject nowadays, attest not only to the importance of this human phenomenon--present in all cultures in different forms--but also to the enduring interest in piercing its mystery.

What is friendship? What is at its fundamental core? How and why does it emerge between two or more individuals? Is it a form of love? Does it originate from or against collectivity? Does it have enemies? Does it even still exist in today's world dominated by relations based on self-interest? How does it manifest itself in other cultures?

These are some of the questions which will be discussed in this seminar. We will glean answers from three different fields of investigation, namely psycho-sociology, philosophy and cultural anthropology, which we will consider each in turn.

First, we will discover how friendship manifests itself presently both in the United States and in France. Our readings in psycho-sociology will help us understand the modes through which friendship is constructed, as well as the practices in which it engages. The social dimension of friendship in both these countries will also be highlighted.

Given that any discourse on friendship opens upon the world of *sophia*, of philosophy, we will then go back in time to the ancient Greek city where the Western idea of friendship was born, and we will see how this idea was transmitted and evolved through the Roman and Christian eras, the Renaissance and "l'Ancien Régime", leading us up to today. We will read what the main representatives of the philosophical tradition had to contribute to this concept.

We will then pursue our study by taking a world tour and examining the importance of friendship and its practices in non-Western societies (India, Taiwan, Tibet, Burkina Faso) and conclude our investigation by focusing on the cultural differences at play between the way Americans and French people live their friendships.

Readings will be selected from various sources: chapters of psycho-sociological and cultural anthropological studies, articles from professional journals, excerpts of philosophical treatises on friendship. Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Le dernier ami* will be read in its entirety. Our study will be supplemented by a few songs and a film, *Mon meilleur ami* by Patrice Leconte. Students will be required to actively contribute to class discussions and write several essays, both creative and theoretical.

**Food and Culture: a French Perspective**  
**Aspects de la culture française vus à travers la nourriture**  
Carolyn Anderson-Burack

Food has long been celebrated and enjoyed as an important aspect of French culture. What are the origins of this celebrated cuisine? How are French attitudes towards food different from our own? How are these attitudes reflected in French literature?

We will also look into nutrition and health issues. Do the French have different ideas about what foods are considered "healthy"? What are their concerns about the safety of what they eat, such as genetically modified foods? What is the so-called "French paradox"?

Through readings from a variety of sources, we will attempt to answer these and other questions. After reading about the development of the French interest in gastronomy starting with the Gauls, we read texts from La Fontaine, Dumas, Baudelaire, Proust, and Duras among others. Other readings will be current articles from newspapers and magazines such as *France-Amérique* and *Sciences et Avenir*. Readings, discussions and written work will be in French. Students will give two oral presentations and complete a final research project. Students will also prepare two French meals. Course evaluation will be based on both creative and analytical papers, oral presentations, class participation and preparation.

**La musique française: Reflets d'une culture**  
**French songs as a reflection of a changing French society**  
Carolyn Anderson-Burack

This course will examine French songs of the last few decades to see -and hear- how they reflect a changing French society. The themes we will study include racism, war and protest, the importance of one's birthplace, and, of course, *des chansons d'amour*. Although lyrics will be our primary reading material, additional texts on each theme will come from a variety of sources. We will address the following questions: what defines these songs as specifically or inherently French? How is French music influenced by American music and vice versa? How do French and English love songs differ? We will look at cross-cultural fertilization and compare versions of a few American classics that were translations of hit songs from France and conversely, French songs that were translated from English. How are social issues like immigration and cultural and racial tensions reflected in popular French music? By comparing different versions of a song we will also consider the contribution of the performer. Students will write a number of short papers, give a presentation and prepare a final project.

## **Théâtre français: Humour, Amour et autre: Prévert et ses amis**

Mireille Belloni

Jacques Prévert's opus mirrors the changes and upheavals of the mid-20th century in France. Be it in his poems, film-scripts or songs, he helps us to trace and understand the social and artistic developments of his time: the Surrealist movement, the cubists, the advent of the first socialist government in France, the Second World War. His dedication to social justice, to the anti-war movement and to the protection of nature, colored by humor and a humanistic approach, permeates his writings, even his celebrated love poems. We will also read other poets (Aragon, Eluard) and prose-writers (Queneau, Allais) who tackled these questions in the same period.

The course will draw on Prévert's and others' multi-faceted literary production as a support to introduce students to the historical background of that period; as a means to become acquainted with other artists of the time who were friends with Prévert (Picasso, Doisneau); and as a vehicle to help students to increase their knowledge of, and ease with, the language.

The final project will be a public performance of some of Prévert's texts, and will use the many talents of the participants (researching, performing, singing, illustrating and helping with the multi-media presentation).

Students taking this course must be prepared to come to all extra sessions and rehearsals. Final grade will take into account four papers, participation, progress and performance.

## **Coffee Changed the World: an introduction to the XVIIIth century in France**

Mireille Belloni

What do coffee beans, the telescope and the Marquis de Sade have in common? In some ways, they are all linked to the intellectual climate in Western Europe in the XVIIIth century which led to the American and French Revolutions.

Using coffee as a common thread, this introductory course on the XVIIIth century in France will concentrate not so much on military history as on the impact of increased communication (the development of road systems; colonial trade; travels; newspapers) on the exchange and circulation of ideas that would lead to the fall of the French monarchy. Students will be asked to reflect on the way communication systems shaped events in the XVIIIth century and draw parallels with the present...

Besides descriptive and literary articles, we will refer to music, theater and painting as they illustrate the social changes of the time.

Course evaluation will be based on oral presentations, class participation and preparation, regular web-based discussion, and written work (essays and individual project).

