

Core 101–Symbols and Conceptual Systems

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Office Hours:

Lecture MW 2-3:50 WPH 211

Lab ?

Course Description

A symbol is a token of identity. It is a concrete object, or a verbal description of such an object, that stands for a concept that cannot be represented or described, except abstractly, at great length, with great difficulty and obscurity, or with transgression. A symbol is a substitute for what is symbolized, because the symbolized is in various ways unutterable, inconceivable, sublime, holy, dangerous, or repulsive. What is that dark thing that the symbol represents? The answer depends on the conceptual system within which the symbol operates, and human conceptual systems have been many, and are generally each at war with all of the others. Each conceptual system claims exclusively to be the correct description of the ultimate nature of the world in which humanity finds itself.

So, this course is to be a study of a number of conceptual systems and the ways in which symbols operate within them. I have chosen those conceptual systems that have had the greatest influence on how you conceive of yourselves and the world. The goals of the course are to make your own conceptual system conscious to yourself, and to allow you to recognize its constituent elements, the ideas and assumptions you have taken from others. You will also, perhaps, gain some knowledge of systems utterly foreign to you; you may develop some sympathy for these, or you may be appalled by them. You may also find that elements of your own system lead to conclusions you do not wish to reach. You may be shaken in your allegiance to your own conceptual system, or confirmed in it. You will, I hope, understand it, perhaps for the first time.

Learning Objectives

1. Reflect on what it means to be human through close study of human experience throughout time and across diverse cultures. The writers we will be studying are each struggling to find new ways of being human. So should you.
2. Cultivate a critical appreciation for some of the most profound and innovative forms of human expression. We will be reading examples of almost every genre of literature.
3. Understand and engage critically with the cultural and intellectual movements that these works propose, examine, oppose. Thought, like matter, is clumpy. As matter tends to constellate into planets, stars, solar systems, galaxies, so ideas tend to constellate into movements.
4. Learn to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively. With this in mind, we will write two substantial long-form papers. I will give extensive written instructions on what works and what does not. The goal is to learn from the first paper, in order to improve your thinking and writing substantially in the writing of the second. Every student should budget at least one hour to go over your first paper with me.

Introduction: How Do Symbols Work?

August 20

Readings:

Homer, *Odyssey*, Aeolus' island and Polyphemus episodes, handout

Vico, *The New Science*, handout

John's Gospel, the Samaritan woman at the well episode, handout

Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, the sparrow in the mead hall, handout

1. Two Religious Conceptual Systems: A God Comes to Visit

August 22-September 5

Readings:

Euripides, *The Baccae*

John's Gospel, online

UNIVERSITY HOLIDAY

Monday, September 3

Labor Day

2. Materialism

September 10-19

Readings:

Bacon, handout

Condillac, *Logique*, handout

Holbach, *System of Nature*, handout

3. Romanticism

September 24-October 3

Readings:

Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," handout

Shelley, "Ozymandius," handout

Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," "Self-Reliance"

Yeats, "The Second Coming," handout

FIRST PAPER DUE: Monday, October 1

MIDTERM EXAM: Monday, October 8

4. Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud

October 8-31

Readings:

Marx, handout

Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*

Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Dora*

5. Decadence

November 5-26

Readings:

Rimbaud, Letter, handout

Huysmans, *Against Nature*

UNIVERSITY HOLIDAY

Wednesday, November 21

Thanksgiving

Inconclusions: The Difficult World

November 28

SECOND PAPER DUE: Wednesday, November 28

FINAL EXAMINATION: Friday, December 7, 2-4

Required Book List

Euripides. *The Bacchae* in *Euripides V*. Eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. University of Chicago Press.

Emerson. *Nature and Selected Essays*. Ed. Larzer Ziff. Penguin.

Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Francis Golffing. Random House.

Nietzsche. *Twilight of the Idols and The Antichrist*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Penguin.

Freud. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. Norton.

Freud. *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. Ed. Philip Rieff. Touchstone.

Huysmans. *Against Nature*. Penguin.

Evaluation

There will be two papers, a midterm and a final exam. Each will count for one quarter of the grade. Papers will be a minimum of five pages in length and are to comply with my written instructions, which will be provided to each student.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct: Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Support Systems: Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255 Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX compliance – (213) 740-5086 Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response.
<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

Student Support & Advocacy – (213) 821-4710 Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC – <https://diversity.usc.edu/> Tabs for Events, Programs and Training, Task Force (including representatives for each school), Chronology, Participate, Resources for Students