

Core 101–Symbols and Conceptual Systems

Professor Anthony Kemp, Department of English

THH 443 kemp@usc.edu

Office Hours: TBA

Lecture TTh 2-3:50 THH 115

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

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

August

T 24 Euripides, *The Baccae*

Th 26

T 31

September

Th 2 John's Gospel, online

T 7

Th 9

2. Materialism

T 14 Bacon, handout

Th 16 Condillac, *Logique*, handout

T 21 Holbach, *System of Nature*, handout

3. Romanticism

Th 23 Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," handout

T 28 Shelley, "Ozymandius," handout

Th 30 Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," "Self-Reliance"

October

T 5 Yeats, "The Second Coming," handout **First Paper Due**

FIRST PAPER DUE: Monday, October 1

MIDTERM EXAM: Monday, October 8

4. Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud

Th 7 Hegel **Midterm Exam**

T 12 Marx, handout

Th 14 **Fall Recess**

T 19

Th 21 Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*

T 26

Th 28

November

T 2

Th 4 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Dora*

T 9

Th 11

5. Decadence

T 16 Rimbaud, Letter, handout

Th 18

T 23 Huysmans, *Against Nature*

Th 25 **Thanksgiving**

T 30

December

Th 2

Th 9 **Final Exam 2-4** **Second Paper Due**

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.