When we first open up a book we immediately start asking questions about what it means—how we can make sense of the words, how we can make sense of the world those words construct for us. Often we resort to identifying “symbols” in order to do so. In fact, if there were no symbols at all—in the largest possible sense of a thing that stands for something else—then we wouldn’t have any literature either.

In this seminar we will read a set of modern novels from Europe and North America that showcase extreme forms of symbolic thought and language. At the same time we will consider a range of influential writings on symbolization and figure. By the end of the class you will have mastered symbol and figure as interpretive concepts, especially in relation to the major trends of literary modernism; in addition, you will have a strong grounding in the theoretical underpinnings of and major issues in symbolic thought and language.

Concerning class requirements, to wit:

As your teacher, I will present you with a selection of the most important issues in and approaches to the study of culture. In return, you will provide me with lively, engaged conversation for two hours a week. Alongside being willing to air your questions and discuss your take on the readings, you need to listen to and carefully consider the ideas set forth by other members of the class.

The course is quite writing intensive. There will be one close reading paper, one position paper incorporating a theoretical perspective, and a final essay exam. Remember that good writing consists largely of good reading, and that you are expected to pay the same kind of critical attention to your own writing as to Nabokov, Woolf, and Melville. I am always willing to meet with you to go over drafts or talk through the direction of a paper.

Finally, remember that I have office hours specifically in order to be available to YOU. I encourage you to avail yourselves of the opportunity to discuss your reading, your writing, or just to play a friendly game of backgammon.

On grading, viz.:

Close reading paper - 20%
Position paper - 25%
Final exam - 25%
Class participation and attendance - 30%
**Required texts and readings:**

The following texts are readily available at the COOP and other fine bookstores and have been put on reserve at Lamont:

Alasdair Gray, *Lanark*
Franz Kafka, *The Trial*
Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*
Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man*
Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defense*
Leo Tolstoy, *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy*
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

All other readings will be distributed in the class or are available in the sourcebook. The reading load averages 100-200 pages a week.

**Schedule:**

Part One: Pattern and Paranoia

Jan. 9
Film screening: Elia Kazan, *On the Waterfront.*

Jan. 16
Ferdinand de Saussure, from *Course in General Linguistics*; Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”; Vladimir Nabokov, “Signs and Symbols.”

Jan. 23
Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*; Sigmund Freud, from *On Dreams.*

Jan. 30
Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defense.*

Feb. 6

Feb. 13

Part Two: Fictions of Human Relatedness

Feb. 20

*Paper #1 (close reading, 4-5 pp.) due.*
Feb. 27

March 5
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* part 1; Anne Carson, “The Symbolon.”

March 19
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* parts 2-3.

Part Three: Symbolism as Such

March 26

*Paper #2 (6-8 pp.) due.*

April 2
Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man* chapters 16-30.

April 9
Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man* chapters 31-45.

April 16
Andrei Bely, *Petersburg* chapters 1-5; Arthur Rimbaud, “Vowels”; Jean Moréas, from “Symbolist Manifesto.”

April 23