FIRST SEMINAR SYMBOLIC WORLD (FSSY)

FSSY 117. Science and Literature. 4 Units.
This course explores the treatment of scientific themes and the depiction of scientists in literature. This is not a course about science fiction: instead of envisioning future scientific advancements, Science in Literature pays close attention to the ways in which literary texts comment upon ongoing scientific debates and responds to the questionings of science. This four-credit-hour course also provides an introduction to various dimensions of academic life. It will be characterized by intense yet open-ended intellectual inquiry. Throughout the semester, we will foreground critical reading, thoughtful analysis, as well as written and oral communication.

FSSY 135. The Rest is Silence. 4 Units.
The purpose of this course is to examine a widespread yet under-examined agent of the symbolic world: silence. Without the delimiting, shaping power of silence, language would be a lump of indistinguishable sound. The title of the course comes from Shakespeare: specifically, Hamlet’s last words. As we know, the rest (of Hamlet) isn’t silence: the play goes on for many more lines, beginning with Horatio’s well known valediction, “Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince:/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!” Hamlet’s last words give us a good view into the ambiguous nature of silence, the strange entanglement it has with boundaries, both formal, and metaphysical. We will study how silence is imbricated in different, even antithetical, practices: in the articulation of creative forms (with special attention to poetry); in methods of religious contemplation and meditation; as agent of ecological and political suppression; as sensory deprivation, or form of torture. Silence continuously challenges and reorients our symbolic projects. As Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier argues, it forces us to question “the binary logic of apparent opposites by dissolving one into the other (presence as absence, emptiness as plenitude, quietness as expressivity, silence as intensity of life).” What we can know or say about silence will emerge from an ongoing discussion of texts that engage its properties—its paradoxes—differently. Our semester-long study (and practice) of silence will draw on your powers of critical inquiry, reflection, and synthesis, as well as your powers of attention and imagination. Seminar-style discussion and writing are the cornerstones of the course, which is designed to help you locate yourself in the surrounding structures and expectations of the academic community, especially its forms of conversation and writing. My hope is that as you explore and refine your relationship with silence, you will begin to identify and conserve it as an important resource in your academic life: as a refuge from information overload, as a ground for ethical decision-making, and as a guide to precision in speech and writing.

FSSY 154. The Imagination Project. 4 Units.
For the first years of our schooling, we are taught to play make-believe. Then, we are taught to understand facts. Whatever happened to the imagination? What is it? What are the theories that help to explain it? And what is its place at a research university? In this class, we will read, talk, think, and write about the purposes and scope of the human imagination, which is often understood as the symbolic realm of images and ideas that exists as part of our mental life. We will look at how the imagination has been understood by various thinkers and artists, and we will consider how the physical world interacts with the imagination in stories, music, film, and scientific ideas. Even though we may think that imagination means “something from nothing,” it is much more complicated and collaborative than that, as we will see in our examination of larger imaginative projects such as the Sistine Chapel, Star Wars, Legos, and Disney World. We will examine the role of the imagination in as many disciplines as possible, including physics, sports, fantasy, politics, and the media. As we interrogate these sources, we will learn the basic tenets of argument and research that will help you in your upcoming SAGES courses. Are there imaginative practices that can help us succeed here at Case? How can we turn our own imaginations into reality?

FSSY 157. Pursuits of Happiness. 4 Units.
What is Happiness? And why do Americans consider its pursuit a self-evident, inalienable right? To what extent is happiness a component of the American Dream? How have writers used stories to illustrate the possibilities and limits of this ideal? This course examines the various ways that thinkers have defined happiness, using both theoretical frameworks and literary examples. Students will carefully analyze the validity and utility of these models, selecting elements to construct their own personal philosophies of happiness.

FSSY 162. The Mind of the Warrior. 4 Units.
This seminar intends to provide students with an understanding of the origins and representation of traditional martial arts through movies, novels, and comics. We will emphasize the moral, historical, and cognitive issues involved in the practice of these older fighting techniques. We will also examine how practitioners might have been forced to compromise some of their tenets to accommodate contemporary life and a broader audience.
FSSY 175. God and the American Writer. 4 Units.
How have American poets, novelists, and essayists thought about God? Do they have anything to teach us about the role of religious belief in a country where religious believers make up the statistical majority? What could a late nineteenth century poet possibly teach us about the ways Americans experience religious belief today? How could a fictional novel help us better understand the unique cultural history of religious belief in the US and its influence on today’s society? This course seeks to address these questions by considering a particular strain of American writing that highly values the role of personal experience in religious faith. For these writers, God is not a philosophical idea hidden away in the abstractions of erudition, or a historical curiosity to be studied alongside ancient civilizations, but something to be experienced in an intense and personal way. For one writer God is the “Tender Pioneer” who Americans would be cowardly not to venture after. Another writer claims that the previous “generations beheld God and nature face to face;” he encourages his readers to ignore others’ opinions and to seek their own “original relation with the universe.” Another proclaims that Americans profess “to love God whom they have not seen, while they hate their brother whom they have seen.” What similarities do these ideas share—what differences separate them? We will use these and other ideas to begin a conversation about why the personal experience of God seems so vital to American writers. We will discuss the ways American writers have created and critiqued the religious value of individuality, as well as how the category of “personal experience” can both hinder and help us in understanding American culture.

FSSY 177. Cosmic Horror. 4 Units.
Cosmic Horror is the literary genre that most powerfully wrestles with the question of humanity’s place in the universe as revealed by modern science. From its shadowy beginnings in the pulp fiction magazines of the nineteen twenties and thirties, Cosmic Horror has come to occupy the center of contemporary literary culture. Prominent philosophers, ecologists, writers, and programmers have taken inspiration from the genre as they seek to discover meaning in a universe no longer centered on humanity. These works explore a physical world indifferent to human life and human meaning, a world in which human action shrivels into insignificance when faced with the abysses of cosmic temporal and spatial scales. In reading writers such as H. P. Lovecraft and Octavia Butler, and philosophers and scientists such as Eugene Thacker and Carlo Rovelli, we will focus on several key questions. How does “cosmic” horror differ from other kinds of terror? What traditions, beliefs, or practices does modern science threaten for these writers? Why have so many thinkers from diverse fields found themselves drawn to these works in recent years? What resources do these works offer for making sense of the environmental crisis? This class, like other First Seminars, is writing-intensive and will follow the seminar format. It is characterized by intense yet open-ended intellectual inquiry, guided by reading from primary as well as secondary sources. This interdisciplinary course (investigating intersections of literature, philosophy, psychology, and science) will help you recognize the different perspectives that can be used to enter into a discussion on a subject, and enable you to make sometimes surprising connections across different fields, times, and genres.

FSSY 182. Mystery and the Art of Storytelling. 4 Units.
It’s hard to resist a good story, and even harder to resist a good mystery story. What is it about mysteries that makes them so enduringly fascinating, so universal? What might they teach us about the nature of storytelling itself? In this course we’ll discuss and write about how narrative works, taking mystery as our guide. In doing so, we’ll also become better readers, viewers, and interpreters. For these stories make detectives out of us all, demanding that we evaluate textual evidence, seek out rhetorical clues, pay keen attention to detail, and even examine our own frameworks of perception. Engaging both classic and less traditional tales of mystery and detection (including a movie or two), we’ll examine the logic of such narratives, the desires and fears that drive them, and the secrets they tell—or try to keep hidden.

FSSY 183. E-Lit: New Media Narrative. 4 Units.
Imagine a book we might read by touching the words, choosing among possible paths or endings, or even by allowing our own faces or voices to be part of the scene. Electronic literature, that is, literary works designed to be read or experienced on a computer, often requires exactly such multisensory engagement, asking readers to make unusual connections between words, images, sounds, or movement, and, sometimes, to put themselves into the story. In this class, we will read, experience, and write critically about electronic literature and experimental print literature, including works of interactive fiction, digital documentary, blogs, cut up and computer-generated poetry, digital games, and geo-locative fiction. The works we read present unfamiliar, often non-linear, modes of writing, storytelling, or of conveying information. Such texts give us insight into how we “read” and how digital spaces influence the way we understand, experience, and respond to ideas, places, and people.

FSSY 185B. Jazz Attitudes. 4 Units.
Despised by the church, revered by New Orleans society, Jazz was the bad boy music of the early 20th century. But by WWII it was the most popular music style in the US. Since then, jazz has become a minority taste, embraced by the academy, but viewed with an intimidated indifference by the general public. How did this happen? How have views of this odd marriage of European and African musical styles changed through the years? Can jazz regain relevancy? Should jazz musicians even care about relevancy? And if not, what does the future hold for them and their music? In this course, we will examine the history of the development of jazz, what makes the music so important in American culture, and some of the reasons why—despite this importance—few people listen to it anymore. Students need not have prior familiarity with jazz, only a willingness to listen to, and read about, the music.

FSSY 185D. Medieval Mindsets. 4 Units.
Do we get to be modern without first getting medieval? This seminar revisits and reexamines medieval modes of thinking and making. Over the course of the semester, we will sample literary and material artifacts left behind by the medieval world. We will reconsider our obligations to the past and its stuff, are we responsible for/to medieval things and, if so, to what degree? We will take a hands-on approach to our objects of study. Working in special collections and museums, with curators and artists, we will learn to decode medieval archives and artifacts. Together, we will put medieval mindsets to the test.
FSSY 185E. Literary Servants: From Homer to Harry Potter. 4 Units.
Servants have played a surprisingly large role in some of the great works of Western literature, though they often get overlooked in favor of their more noble masters and employers. In "The Odyssey," for example, when Odysseus returns from the Trojan War after 20 years at sea, he first gets recognized, not by his son or his wife, but by a childhood nurse who has served in his household all of his life. Shakespearean-era plays also place servants in surprisingly central roles, having them not only performing tasks for their masters, but sometimes acting as romantic interests and close friends, or emblems of moral behavior. Servants have taken on the role of primary protagonists in many works of 19th- and 20th-century literature, and have played an outsized role in countless other works. Some of the questions that we will ask in this class include: Why do these characters—-who occupy the margins of the household and often perform seemingly mundane jobs—play this role in the literary and social imagination? Do servants have unique identities, interests, and value systems or do they adopt the identities and values of the people they serve? To what extent are servants needed to establish the social positions of patriarchs, monarchs and the wealthy? The class will also explore the forms of power that servants are able to exert over those that they serve, and the extent to which this power both complicates and reinforces more commonly recognized systems of inequality like race, class and gender. Readings will include several classic works of literature, and short philosophical works on human rights and the politics of the lower classes. We will also read some philosophical discussions of class and social hierarchy, watch and discuss some film and television representations of service, and visit the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Cleveland Historical Society in order to learn about the history of domestic service.

FSSY 185H. Shakespeare and Violence. 4 Units.
Today, Shakespeare's name is synonymous with high art. Attending a performance of one of his plays can be as formal as going to the symphony or to the opera. Yet, in his own time, many people were drawn to Shakespeare's plays because they were an exciting, gruesome spectacle, with eye gouging, cannibalism, and murder depicted on-stage to the shock (and delight) of the audience. Everybody agrees that Shakespeare's plays can be violent, but what does Shakespeare actually have to say about violence in the "real" world? As we will consider this semester, Shakespeare interrogates many of the same questions regarding the use of violence that are reflected upon today. When should a nation-state attack another? When should citizens revolt against their own government? How should crime be punished? How do we know when a romantic relationship has become abusive? And, finally, what is an artist's responsibility when representing violence? Do theatrical performances of violence inevitably glorify actual acts of violence? Can a play be both gruesome and great? In this class, we will consider contemporary, critical examinations of these questions alongside examples from Shakespeare's drama, exploring the ways in which Shakespeare's treatment of violence relates to our own world. Students will engage these issues in a variety of formats, including traditional writing assignments, presentations, and in a final group "performance," in which they interpret a Shakespearean text.

FSSY 185K. The Greek and Roman Humanities. 4 Units.
The civilizations that developed in ancient Greece and ancient Italy are called collectively "Classical Civilization." The study of the Greek and Roman humanities (languages, literature, arts, history, and philosophy) is known as "Classics." The Greeks and Romans have had a profound, widespread, and long-lasting influence on many aspects of subsequent Western Civilization, so studying the Classical Humanities is not only a rewarding endeavor in itself, but also can benefit those who want a deeper understanding of the modern arts and humanities. In this seminar we will read and discuss representative works by Greek and Roman authors in translation and look at artifacts produced in the ancient world in order to come to a better understanding of the foundations of the western humanities. We will also study the impact of Greek and Latin on English in order to understand how language can shape thought—-an important thing to learn for anyone who is also trying to become a better writer! The seminar will investigate numerous questions about Classics. Where were the Classical lands? When was the Classical period? Are there connections between Greece and Rome and other ancient civilizations? What were the sounds and sights of Greece and Rome? What remains of the ancient world in terms of language, literature, the arts? How have the Classical Humanities shaped modern concepts and institutions? Where can one find tangible influences of Greek and Roman civilization in modern America? Why and when have modern people turned to Greece and Rome for inspiration?

FSSY 185N. Sacred Space in Monotheistic Religious Traditions. 4 Units.
A significant dilemma facing all three of the major monotheistic religious traditions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - is how to establish a sacred space on earth for the worship of a deity which cannot be contained. In many ways, architectural and artistic decisions about the location, internal layout, orientation and other features of such sacred spaces reflect deep presuppositions in each religion about the divine and how worship is to be performed in a human context. In what ways do these spaces inspire awe, demand obedience, offer comfort, or teach lessons? How have these spaces inherited features from other times and places, and how have these features changed (or not)? To examine how one might understand and interpret such spaces, we will visit religious buildings in the University Circle area and its surroundings.

FSSY 185O. Encountering the Uncanny. 4 Units.
Have you ever experienced déjà vu? Or, have you stepped into a room and felt as though it was a little too quiet? Have you ever mistaken a stranger for a close friend or relative? Are you creeped out by extremely life-like dolls or robots? If so, you may have felt a sense of the unsettling combination of familiarity and strangeness known as the uncanny. Most of us have experienced the uncanny at one time or another, yet psychologists,philosophers, literary critics, and scientists have been unable to fully explain how or why it happens. In this seminar, we will explore this interdisciplinary conversation, reading analyses of the uncanny by figures such as Sigmund Freud and the roboticist Masahiro Mori, and by exploring its representation in literature, contemporary art, and horror films. Why has the uncanny intrigued so many thinkers? Is one academic discipline better suited to exploring the uncanny than others? Most importantly, what can we learn about ourselves when we study the uncanny? By looking closely at examples of the uncanny, we will attempt to unearth the personal and cultural anxieties at the root of this experience of fear or unease.
FSSY 185P. On the Road in America. 4 Units.
Travel and exploration have long occupied a central role in the American imagination. The idea of the frontier, and the great westward expansion, gave birth to national myths and narratives based on transit and adventure. In recent years, Americans have continued to reflect on the significance of physical journeys, as well as the inner quests that often accompany these modern-day pilgrimages. In this course, we will examine a diverse set of works that explore the long-standing American romance with adventure and movement. We will consider the impact of the open road on America’s national identity, the powerful emotions and spiritual longing that lead people onto the road, and the forces that drive them off it.

FSSY 185Q. Death, Mourning, and Immortality. 4 Units.
Although death and loss always have been part of the human experience, poems aching for immortality and mourning losses were especially important to people before the development of modern medicine because of the omnipresence of death in daily life. Poems mourning losses were frequently (but not always) about death, and so we will occasionally consider what it means to mourn a still-living hero or to mourn the passing of a moment in time. A poem can become a “moment’s monument” in one apt description. In this seminar, we will examine poetry from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries to explore the variety of ways that writers’ religious beliefs, gender and sexual identities, and attitudes about desire and emotion informed how they thought about death, loss, mourning, and immortality. How does this poetry represent sadness and despair? In what ways does it affirm the joys of life and the memory of what has been lost? To supplement our investigation, we will also explore expressions of mourning that can be found in other genres of literature, as well as in museums and cemeteries. We will think about what it means to write yourself or others into immortality. No prior experience studying poetry is necessary, only a willingness to read with care and think with an open mind.

FSSY 185R. Children’s Picture Books. 4 Units.
Picture books may teach young readers basics like how to read, what sounds animals make, and how to count to ten, but they also shape children’s perceptions of the world around them and influence the way they see themselves. In this seminar, we will study how children’s picture books communicate social norms and ethics through the depiction of people and places. We will explore questions including: What kinds of places and spaces do picture books depict? How do characters treat others in these places, and how do they interact with non-human objects and the natural environment? Whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in the stories and pictures? Even though these books are written for children, what do they tell us about the adults who create, buy, or read them? How do these older readers understand children’s spaces and childhood? By examining the underlying messages in these deceptively simple books, we can uncover surprisingly complicated visions of the world.

FSSY 185U. Conceptions of the Self. 4 Units.
This seminar explores religious and philosophical views about what it means to be human. We will address questions such as: to what extent are we free? Does freedom conflict with traditional authority, our own pasts, our irrational impulses, or our physical natures? What is the relationship between reason and emotion? How well do we know our own motives? And to what extent are we hidden to ourselves? To investigate these questions, we will read, discuss, and write about a range of classical and contemporary religious and philosophical thinkers. Each offers a different perspective about the nature of the human being, human excellence, and what it means to live a life of integrity. They are also enduringly relevant to our lives, inside and outside of the classroom. Together, the texts and thinkers constitute a conversation filled with sometimes competing and sometimes complementary views about who we are, why we do the things we do, and what sorts of lives we ought to lead.

FSSY 185V. Supernatural Encounters in Fantasy: Medieval and Contemporary. 4 Units.
Works of fantasy imagine interactions between humans and other beings. They also present the metamorphosis of humans into other forms. Studying these stories gives us insight into different conceptions of what constitutes the human, perceptions of superiority and inferiority, and opportunities for connections across boundaries. This course examines medieval and contemporary works that engage with these issues and others. Are certain attributes reserved for humans or the other beings in these fantasies? Are such differences in traits stable or do they change within individual works, over time or across societies? What cultural tensions arise within these narratives when characters seek to marry someone outside of their own group? Where do we see continuity or change over time in these narrative dynamics? What does the representation of monsters tell us about the anxieties of the cultures that produced them? We will explore these questions through texts such as Beowulf, other medieval love and adventure stories, and several contemporary works, potentially including fiction by J.R.R. Tolkien, N.K. Jemisin, and Neil Gaiman, and films by Andre Ovedahl and Hayao Miyazaki. This set of works will enable us to focus on strands of the fantastic which engage with themes such as the opposition between humans and the supernatural, the attraction between humans and the supernatural, and forms of heroism.

FSSY 185W. The Body in Art, Literature, and Medicine from Antiquity to Today. 4 Units.
We take our bodies for granted. In some circumstances, the body is a source of joy and wonder. In others, it is a source of suffering. In all cases, it is one of the few things that all people have in common. This seminar will focus on what we conceive the body to be and how our ideas about the body have changed over time, in different fields, and depending on different artistic, scientific, social, and political circumstances. In doing so, we will consider the ways in which our cultural attitudes shape and are shaped by representations of the body, and we question whether anything can be said for sure about what our bodies mean to us. Methodologically, we will consider these subjects primarily through readings in aesthetic theory from ancient and modern sources, in addition to readings in medical history and religion. Our “texts” for the course will also include exhibitions at the Cleveland Museum of Art and Dittrick Museum of Medical History, dance performances, films, poetry, and lyric essays. (While many of our sources will be drawn from so-called “Western Civilization,” every attempt will be made to broaden our understanding of the body across cultures and across the spectrum of ability.) In this way, we will develop a deep understanding of the historical and cultural contexts in which we view the body, which will also help us to critically examine the ways that we currently frame and understand the body.
FSSY 185Y. Weird Fictions. 4 Units.
Most of us love to settle in with a reliably entertaining novel or movie. We can usually count on such stories to provide relatable characters, coherent plots, satisfying conclusions, and not to make us think too hard after a long day. But there are different, arguably deeper pleasures to be found in stories that are weird: the kind that challenge our minds and subvert our expectations. Such fictions tend to play around with more familiar modes of narration, often bending time and space, form and content, reality and illusion. Even the most discerning film buffs can’t agree, for instance, whether the first or the second half of Mulholland Drive (2001) occurs in the dreams of a character who exists in the “realer” half. (Or whether neither half can claim priority and “the real dreamer is elsewhere,” as one critic has suggestively put it.) Works like these empower us, as readers and viewers, to become active participants in interpreting or even constructing the stories they present. In this seminar you’ll discuss and write about a diverse range of weird stories and films, taking their innovations and ambiguities as occasions to hone your skills as a reader, writer, and thinker. More broadly, these fictions will give you ample occasion to reflect critically on the kinds of stories we all tell ourselves and others, narratives that provide a sense of meaning and coherence, even when they can’t quite be trusted.

FSSY 186D. Narratives of Migration. 4 Units.
Why do people migrate and what is the impact of the circumstances and context of such moves? How do they write about moving to new locations, leaving their old home and arriving at a new one? In this seminar we explore patterns of human migration, the political and cultural significance of such movement and they ways in which people narrate their experience. In exploring many kinds of migration, we consider multilingualism and translation, identity, borders, and cultural encounters and differences, topics that continue to pervade our public discourse. We will dedicate the first part of the seminar to examining a variety of reasons and contexts in which people migrate, and the implications of terms like immigration, asylum and exile. Then, in the second part of the seminar, we will apply these questions to one particular site, the United States, and consider its history and politics of migration. Examples might include texts written by the early migration of the puritans juxtaposed with the forced migration of slaves; writers who grew up in multi-lingual families grappling with their fraught relationship to the English language; and current discussions of the U.S.-Mexico border and immigration policies. Our sources include literary texts, historical and legal documents, journalistic writing, personal narratives and film. We discuss these readings and the choices made in them in terms of tone, word choice, audience and more, and use them to formulate our own critical ideas on topics such as home, belonging and navigating cultural differences.