

Literary Symbolism

Symbol

a word or phrase which in turn signifies, or has a range of references, beyond itself. Scales, for example, symbolize justice; a dove, peace; a goat, lust.

Christian symbolism

Symbol	Meaning/ connotations
angel	messenger from God, purity
apple	original sin, temptation/Eve
bread	life, sacrifice, forgiveness, the body of Christ
clay	fallibility, human nature
cross	crucifixion, sacrifice, death, resurrection (if the cross is empty)
crown	sovereignty
dove	peace, forgiveness, new beginnings
fig leaf	shame
garden	Garden of Eden
lamb	innocence, sacrifice, Christ
one	unity, three persons of the Trinity in one
red	sin, blood
serpent	the Devil, temptation
seven	creation of the world (seven days)
ten	commandments
thorns	pain, suffering
three	Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Ghost), three crosses on Golgotha
tree	Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil
twelve	disciples of Christ
water	cleansing, new life
wine/blood	death, sacrifice, forgiveness, suffering, blood of Christ
white	purity, godliness, forgiveness

Writers use a variety of symbols as carriers of meaning. These include the following:

Agricultural symbolism

Symbol	Meaning/ connotations
spring	sowing seed/new life and hope
summer	crops growing/fullness
autumn	crops harvested and ploughing/ripeness and reaping
winter	resting land/death and sleep

Seasonal symbolism

Symbol	Meaning/ connotations
spring	new life, hope, youth, growth, beginnings
summer	sun, warmth, joy, ease, colour, fullness
autumn	ripeness/maturity before decline, sadness, mellowness, nearing the end
winter	death, despair, loneliness, emptiness, colourless, cold, old age, the end

Colour symbolism

Symbol	Meaning/ connotations
black	death, darkness, unknown, sadness, fear
blue	coolness, sadness, peace
gold	money, power, rarity, sovereignty
green	nature, youth, innocence
grey	uncertainty, mystery
orange	fire, warmth, brightness, joy
pink	femininity, flesh, softness
purple	royalty, wealth
red	danger, fire, heat, immorality, passion
white	purity, spirituality, peace, surrender, cowardice, ice, heat
yellow	sun, joy, warmth, cowardice

General symbolism

Symbol	Meaning/ connotations
books	education, knowledge
chain	bondage, restriction, suffering, interdependence
clock/calendar	time
crown	monarchy, power
day/light	hope, sanity, clarity
farm	nature, productivity
gate/door	entry, exclusion
hearth/fire	warmth, domesticity
junction	time of choice, options
lily	purity
mountain	obstacle, challenge, hardship
mist/fog	uncertainty, mystery
night/dark	despair, madness, unknown
ring	eternity, cyclical, exclusivity, belonging
road	journey, passage of time
rose	beauty, optimism, love, secrecy
sleep	death
snow	cold, purity, harshness
sunrise	new beginning
sunset	ending
thorn	pain
throne	authority, sovereignty
tree	life, family, origins, nature

• SYM BOLS

Compiled By: Dr. Louis

A symbol is the use of a concrete object to represent an abstract idea. The word symbol is derived from the Greek verb “symballein” which means “to put together and the related noun “symbolon” which means “mark”, “taken” or “sign”.

The term, symbol, when used in literature is often a figure of speech in which a person, object, or situation represent something in addition to its literal meaning. Conventional or traditional literary symbols work in much the same way, and because they have a previously agreed upon meaning, they can be used to suggest ideas more universal than the physical aspect itself.

A symbol may appear in a work of literature in a number of different ways to suggest a number of different things. Most commonly, a symbol will present itself in the form of 1) a word, 2) a figure of speech, 3) an event, 4) the total action, or 5) a character.

Some conventional symbols are as follows:

I. **COLORS**

- A. Red: immoral; the color of the life principle, blood, passion, emotion, danger, or daring; often associated with fire
- B. Black: seen as a cold and negative aspect suggesting passivity, death, ignorance, or evil; black hens are used in witchcraft as are black cats
- C. White: innocence, life, light, purity, or enlightenment
- D. Green: inexperience, hope; new life, immaturity; a combination of blue and yellow, it mediates between heat and cold and high and low; it is a comforting, refreshing human color; it is the color of plant life
- E. Yellow: rotting, heat, decay, violence, decrepitude, old age, and the approach of death
- F. Blue: cool, calm, peaceful; an insubstantial color in the real world except as translucency, the void of heavens
- G. Pink: innocence, femininity
- H. Purple: royalty, bruising or pain
- I. Brown: a color somewhere between russet and black; it is the color of earth and ploughed land and soil, it represents humility and poverty
- J. Orange: symbolizes the point of balance between the spirit and the libido; it may be the emblem of divine love or extreme lust
- K. Violet: composed of red and blue, it is the color of temperance, clarity of mind

II. **NATURE**

A. Seasons

- 1. Spring: birth, new beginning
- 2. Summer: maturity, knowledge
- 3. Autumn: decline, nearing death, growing old
- 4. Winter: death, sleep, hibernation, or stagnation
- 5. Christmas season: birth, change for the better



6. Easter season: rebirth, enlightenment
7. Light: truth, safety, warmth, knowledge
8. Darkness: evil, ignorance, danger

B. Trees

1. Apple: temptation, loss of innocence
2. Chestnut: foresight
3. Oak: strength, wisdom
4. Pear: blossoming, fleeting nature of life
5. Poplar: linked to the underworld, to pain, sacrifice, and grief, a funeral tree, symbolizes the regressive powers of nature
6. Sycamore: a sign of vanity and to climb it is to thrust in vain things
7. Pine: symbol of immortality because of its evergreen foliage



C. Weeds: evil (hemlock, pigweed, etc), wildness/outcasts of society

D. Flowers: beauty, youth, strength, gentleness

1. Anemone: transience
2. Chrysanthemums: solar symbol; represents perfection, an autumn flower,
3. Rose: budding youth, romance, potential, fragility
4. Sunflower: Sturdiness
5. Violet: shyness, something petite
6. Lily: evokes unlawful passion, temptation, the election of one's choice

E. Water: washes away guilt, origin of life, regeneration, vehicle of cleansing

F. River: fluidity of life, stream of life and death

G. Moon: changing and returning shape, feminine symbol

H. Sun: source of light, heat and life; a masculine symbol

I. Cavern: the maternal womb

J. Mountain: places where heaven and earth meet; stability, safety, often symbolic of human pride

K. Rubies: represents good fortune; it was believed that they banished sorrow and warded off evil spirits

L. Sapphires: contemplation, purity

M. Silver: relates to the moon, to water and the female principle; it may also symbolize the object of all desires and the harm they cause

N. Gold: the perfect metal; a reflection of heavenly light; it suggest the sun-fertility, wealth, dominion; it is a male principle

O. Pearl: associated with water, they may be regarded as symbols of knowledge and wealth

III. **DIRECTIONS**

A. East: land of birth or rebirth; of the Sun and Venus; it is associated with renewal, youth, feasting, song and love

B. North: is the side which lies on the sun's right hand and lies on either side of life; it symbolizes night sky and night wind and is the home of the Moon and the Milky Way. North represents coldness, alienation, and hostility; it is the abode of death

C. South: is the side which lies on the Sun's left hand and is the hand of fire; represents warmth and comfort

- D. West: is the land of evening, old age, and the descending passage of the sun



IV. WEATHER, SEASON, TIME

- A. Snow: blanket which obscures, covers or even smothers
B. Fog/Mist: prevents clear vision or thinking; represents isolation; mist is often the symbol of the indeterminate phase in development when shapes have yet to be defined; they are preludes to important revelations or prologues to manifestations
C. Rain: sadness or despair or new life; a symbol of celestial influences the Earth receives
D. Wind and Storms: violent human emotions
E. Lightning: indicates the spark of life and the powers of fertilization; it can be either life-giving or death dealing, so it is a sign of power and strength
F. Morning: the time of God's blessings; the beginning of when all is still uncorrupted; a symbol of purity and promise
G. Rainbows: also intermediaries and pathways between Heaven and Earth; mostly are generally heralds of good and are linked with cycles of rebirth, they may also serve as prologues to disturbance
H. Thunder: the voice of God or gods

V. ANIMALS



- A. Dove: peace, purity, simplicity
B. Fox: slyness, cleverness
C. Raven: death, destruction; they often play prophetic roles or function as a conductor of the soul
D. Lion: a solar symbol, power, pride
E. Peacock: pride, vanity
F. Serpent/Snake: temptation, evil
G. Mouse: shyness, meekness
H. Hawk: sharp, keen eyesight
I. Owl: wisdom, rational knowledge; messenger of death
J. Salmon: instinct; sacred wisdom
K. Cats: are often viewed as serpents of the underworld; they also symbolize cunning, forethought, and ingenuity
L. Lamb: serves as a manifestation of the power of Spring and renewal, sacrificial element, the children of God
M. Cuckoo: jealousy and parasitism, it lays eggs in the nests of other birds; laziness

- VI. **WALLS**: barriers between people, both physical and mental; a barrier that shuts out the world

VII. HUMAN BODY PARTS

- A. Blood: symbolizes all the integral qualities of fire and the heat and vitality inherent in the sun; it also corresponds to vital and bodily heat
B. Bones: they represent both the framework of the human body, but since they contain marrow, they symbolize strength and virtue

- C. Hands: strength or weakness
- D. Eyes: windows to the soul or barometer of emotions
- E. Mouth: indicator of character traits
- F. Neck: long slender neck is associated with sexuality
- G. Knee: main source of bodily strength according to ancient traditions
- H. Right and Left: to look to one's right hand is to look to the protector; this is the place of the elect at the Last Judgment, the damned will go to the left

VIII. CLOTHING

- A. Cape: or any circular garment or vestment with a hole in the middle suggests a celestial and ascendant symbolism. When monks or nuns withdraw from the world, they cover themselves in a cape or cloak, which symbolizes a withdrawal into oneself or into God.
- B. Cloak: is a symbol of human trickery, and the different personalities humans can assume
- C. Mask: externalize demonic tendencies



IX. OBJECTS











- A. Chain: symbolizes the bond which connect Heaven and earth or ties together two extremes or beings
 - B. Key: a key has the power and authority of letting in and shutting out; to hold a key means to have been initiated. It not only shows the power to enter a place, town, or house, but to accede to a spiritual state or abode or to a level of initiation
 - C. Ladder: ladders are symbols of ascension and realization of potential; they are also symbols of intercommunication and the comings and goings between Heaven and Earth
 - D. Mirror: often a solar symbol; an unbroken mirror can be a sign of a happy marriage: a broken mirror would indicate a separation or destruction of the union
 - E. Tower of Babel: confusion, human pride, resulted in multiple languages
- X. **JOURNEY**: may be a quest for truth, peace or immortality; a journey often serves as a metaphor for life

XI. SETTING

- A. The forest: usually a place of evil or mystery
- B. An isolated setting: alienation, loneliness
- C. A garden: paradise of a haven
- D. Window of a room: freedom or lack thereof
- E. A park: a place for retreat and renewal
- F. The town: place where rules are on their best behavior
- G. Bed: consummation of marriage
- H. Parlor: vanity

References

- Chevalier, J. & Gheerbrant, A. (1996). *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*. New York: Penguin.
- Hancock, E. (1972). *Techniques for Understanding Literature*. Belmont, CA.

Color	Symbolism
	Red Excitement, energy, passion, desire, speed, strength, power, heat, love, aggression, danger, fire, blood, war, violence, aggression, all things intense and passionate.
	Yellow Joy, happiness, optimism, idealism, imagination, hope, sunshine, summer, gold, philosophy, dishonesty, cowardice, betrayal, jealousy, covetousness, deceit, illness, hazard.
	Blue Peace, tranquility, calm, stability, harmony, unity, trust, truth, confidence, conservatism, security, cleanliness, order, loyalty, sky, water, cold, technology, depression, appetite suppressant.
	Orange Energy, balance, warmth, enthusiasm, vibrant, expansive, flamboyant, demanding of attention.
	Green Nature, environment, healthy, good luck, renewal, youth, vigor, spring, generosity, fertility, jealousy, inexperience, envy, misfortune.
	Purple Royalty, spirituality, nobility, spirituality, ceremony, mysterious, transformation, wisdom, enlightenment, cruelty, arrogance, mourning.
	Gray Security, reliability, intelligence, staid, modesty, dignity, maturity, solid, conservative, practical, old age, sadness, boring
	Brown Earth, hearth, home, outdoors, reliability, comfort, endurance, stability, simplicity, and comfort.
	White Reverence, purity, simplicity, cleanliness, peace, humility, precision, innocence, youth, birth, winter, snow, good, sterility, marriage (Western cultures), death (Eastern cultures), cold, clinical, sterile.
	Black Power, sexuality, sophistication, formality, elegance, wealth, mystery, fear, evil, anonymity, unhappiness, depth, style, evil, sadness, remorse, anger, underground, good technical color, mourning, death (Western cultures).