

Symbolism

Definition of Symbolism

Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities, by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense.

Symbolism can take different forms. Generally, it is an object representing another, to give an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. Sometimes, however, an action, an event or a word spoken by someone may have a symbolic value. For instance, “smile” is a [symbol](#) of friendship. Similarly, the action of someone smiling at you may stand as a symbol of the feeling of affection which that person has for you.

Symbols do shift their meanings depending on the [context](#) they are used in. “A chain,” for example, may stand for “union” as well as “imprisonment”. Thus, symbolic meaning of an object or an action is understood by when, where, and how it is used. It also depends on who reads the work.

Common Examples of Symbolism in Everyday Life

In our daily life, we can easily identify objects that can be taken as examples of symbolism, such as the following:

The dove is a symbol of peace.

A red rose, or the color red, stands for love or [romance](#).

Black is a symbol that represents evil or death.

A ladder may stand as a symbol for a connection between heaven and earth.

A broken mirror may symbolize separation.

Short Examples of Symbolism in Sentences

Ching Chua gave his wife a red rose. (In Chinese culture, the color red symbolizes property and happiness.)

David stopped his car at the red signal. (In other cultures, the color red is symbol of blood, passion, and danger.)

Rebels raised a white flag to negotiate. (During war, the color white symbolizes making peace with the enemy. Otherwise, it represents purity and life.)

The Red Cross is working around the world. (The symbol of the cross represents Christianity, and the red cross in particular represents aid in times of need.)

The Muslim forces raised their flag with a crescent on it. (The crescent moon represents Islam.)

He turned green when found a wallet. (Green color is often associated with greed, jealousy, and monetary affairs.)

They dressed in black to the funeral of their friend. (The color black is associated with death.)

The yellow boat turned into the channel, to make the tourists happy. The color yellow color is the symbol of deterioration and infidelity, as well as the symbol of freshness and happiness.)

He was disappointed when the mirror broke. (Broken mirror is an symbol of separation.)

He gave a red rose to his wife on Valentine Day. (Red rose is a symbol for love.)

He, after a long time, saw a silver lining in the shape of the arrival of his brother. (Silver edge/lining of clouds symbolize hope and optimism.)

You have a sixth sense like an owl. (Owl symbolizes wisdom.)

You work like an ox. (The ox symbolizes hard work and stamina.)

When he saw a bat in dream, he grew white with fear. (Bats are the symbol of death.)

Examples of Symbolism in Literature

To develop symbolism in his work, a writer utilizes other figures of speech, like metaphors, similes, and [allegory](#), as tools. Some symbolism examples in literature are listed below with brief analysis:

Example #1: *As you Like It* (By William Shakespeare)

We find symbolic value in Shakespeare's famous [monologue](#) in his play *As you Like It*:

“All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;

they have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,”

These lines are symbolic of the fact that men and women, in the course of their lives, perform different roles. “A stage” here symbolizes the world, and “players” is a symbol for human beings.

Example #2: *Ah Sunflower* (By William Blake)

William Blake goes symbolic in his poem *Ah Sunflower*. He says:

“Ah Sunflower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun;
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveler’s journey is done;”

Blake uses a sunflower as a symbol for human beings, and “the sun” symbolizes life. Therefore, these lines symbolically refer to their life cycle and their yearning for a never-ending life.

Example #3: *Wuthering Heights* (By Emily Bronte)

Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* presents almost every [character](#), house, surroundings, and events in a symbolic [perspective](#). The word “Wuthering,” which means “stormy,” represents the wild nature of inhabitants. The following lines allow us to look into the symbolic nature of two characters:

“My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it; I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath a source of little visible delight, but necessary.”

The phrase “foliage of leaves” for is a symbol for Linton’s fertile and civilized nature. On the contrary, Heathcliff is likened to an “eternal rock,” which symbolizes his crude and unbendable nature

Example #4: *Wild Asters* (By Sara Teasdale)

Sara Teasdale in her poem *Wild Asters* develops a number of striking symbols:

“In the spring, I asked the daisies
If his words were true,
And the clever, clear-eyed daisies
Always knew.

Now the fields are brown and barren,
Bitter autumn blows,
And of all the stupid asters
Not one knows.”

In the above lines, “spring” and “daisies” are symbols of youth. “Brown and barren” are symbols of [transition](#) from youth to old age. Moreover, “Bitter autumn” symbolizes death.

Example #5: *The Rain* (By William H. Davies)

“I hear leaves drinking rain;
I hear rich leaves on top
Giving the poor beneath
Drop after drop;
Tis a sweet noise to hear
These green leaves drinking near.”

In this beautiful poem, William Davies who has used the symbol of rain to show the different classes of society. He does this by describing the way the upper leaves benefit from the rain first, and then hand down the rest to the lower leaves. The same way, rich people pass on the leftover benefits to the poor people.

Example #6: *My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold* (By William Wordsworth)

“My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old, ...”

In this poem, the poet uses rainbow as a symbol of hope and general wellbeing throughout his life.

Example #7: *XXIII, Crossing Alone the Nighted Ferry* (By A. E. Housman)

“Crossing alone the nighted ferry
With the one coin for fee,
Whom, on the wharf of Lethe waiting,
Count you to find? Not me.”

The poet has used the symbol of a river to represent life and the past memories associated with it.

Function of Symbolism

Symbolism gives a writer freedom to add double levels of meanings to his work: a literal one that is self-evident, and the symbolic one whose meaning is far more profound than the literal. Symbolism, therefore, gives universality to the characters and the themes of a piece of literature.

Symbolism in literature evokes interest in readers as they find an opportunity to get an insight into the writer’s mind on how he views the world, and how he thinks of common objects and actions, having broader implications.

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