

Symbolism

How to Use Symbolism in Writing



Symbolism is a literary device that uses symbols to imbue meaning in a story.

What is Symbolism in Writing?

If you're looking to give your writing more power and meaning, symbolism is the shot of hundred-proof you're seeking. Symbolism is a figure of speech that uses symbols to represent an idea, emotion, or set of beliefs. As a result, symbols in your writing can convey your message more effectively than with sometimes *pedestrian* direct language alone.

Symbols are often used to get certain aspects of a story's mood or tone across to a reader without being too blatant.

Symbolism is often used in story-telling to key the reader into important concepts like death, rebirth, love, or even doom, but the author doesn't want to spell it out for the reader too plainly. Symbols can be used to impart these concepts to the reader while moving the plot forward.

Symbols can also be used to identify themes and subplots in a story.

Symbolism

Writers might give characters certain symbols which show them at different stages in their journey—following these symbols as a reader will help you understand where the character is in their journey and what sorts of changes they're going through.

How does symbolism work?

Symbolism works by substituting one distinct image for another concept. It works by showing, rather than telling. For example, instead of stating that challenging economic times were starting to arise, an author might state that the weather was becoming increasingly stormy. At the literal level, the reader interprets this as dark clouds, rain, and thunder. At the figurative level, they interpret it as a symbol of the general turmoil affecting the character's fortunes.

Symbolism relies on shared cultural understanding, and context is often important because symbols vary by culture, religion, time period, tradition, location, and even writing form. For example:

- In Irish culture, the harp is a symbol of national identity and pride. Within ancient Greek art, however, the harp is used as a symbol of wisdom.
- In the United States and many western European countries, purity is commonly symbolized by the color white. But in India, red is the color of purity.
- The color yellow is associated with fun, joy, and playfulness in the United States. In Japan, it's associated with courage. So while dressing a character in yellow might clearly tell Japanese readers that the character is brave, this symbol could go right over American readers' heads—or just make them think the character is a fun, joyful person
- In some contexts, the letter x can symbolize incorrectness or an error, in other contexts it can stand for an unknown quantity.
- In western literary tradition, the color green can symbolize envy, but it can also symbolize luck, or it can symbolize wealth, or it can symbolize fertility and new growth.

When repeated, symbols can become motifs. For example, if your characters fight with each other just before a tragedy strikes, every time tragedy strikes, then an argument becomes shorthand for something bad is on the way. In this case, the symbol of the argument is a motif that foreshadows tragedy.

Symbolism examples

Symbolism is found everywhere; it's found in architecture, art, literature, city planning, historical events, religion and just about every other area of life. For example, NASA's Apollo missions, the series of missions that landed the first humans on the moon, were named for the Greek god Apollo. These missions were instrumental in enlightening humanity about what lies beyond our planet. They were given that name because in Greek mythology, Apollo rides his chariot across the sun. This became a symbol for the monumental scale and importance of the program's vision.

Examples of symbolism in literature

Every type of art uses symbolism in some way, and you can find symbols in every form of writing too. Here are some examples you might have encountered in literature.



Symbolism

Edgar Allen Poe's raven

One of the most famous examples of symbolism in western poetry is the raven in Edgar Allen Poe's poem "The Raven." The raven's persistent tapping at the speaker's door represents his constant and long-lasting grief over the death of the beloved Lenore.

The act of sewing in *The Color Purple*

In Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, sewing is a symbol of the collective power of women and what they can accomplish when they work together toward a common and beautiful goal—the creative freedom and economic independence.

The black box in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"

In Shirley Jackson's most famous short story, the black box represents the villagers' sinister adherence to the lottery itself. Villagers aren't entirely sure of the origins or purpose of the black box, just like they aren't sure of the origins or purpose of the murderous lottery, yet it continues.

Cigarettes in *Persepolis*

In Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis*, the cigarettes that the teenage Marjane smokes are a symbol of her rebellion against her mother and against the expectations of culture on young women.

The plant in *A Raisin in the Sun*

In Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama's plant is a symbol of her persistent love and affection for her family, specifically her children. She continues to care for the plant, just as she does for her children, despite the fact that she feels that she doesn't always have enough to give.

Bound feet in *The Warrior Woman*

In *The Warrior Woman* by Maxine Hong Kingston, bound feet are a symbol of the restrictions placed on Chinese women and the cultural control over their bodies.

Fences in August Wilson's *Fences*

Fences play a central role in August Wilson's play *Fences*, of course. This is a symbol that serves many purposes. To Rose, a fence around the backyard represents her desire to keep her family close, but to Bono, a fence is a tool to keep people away.

The color blue in Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*

In Joan Didion's memoir *Blue Nights*, which chronicles the death of her daughter Quintana, the writer describes the blue light in the evening hours of summer, a symbol of her daughter's departure.

The scarlet letter

Perhaps one of the most famous symbols in the western literary canon is the scarlet letter in Nathaniel Hawthorne's eponymous novel. Hester Prynne is marked with the red letter A, a symbol that represents the way the community sees her, as an adulterer. By the end of the story, however, the letter becomes a symbol of Hester's independence and freedom, even her virtue.

Trees in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

In Betty Smith's novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, trees and their ability to grow in harsh conditions, through city concrete, without sunlight, in terrible heat, represents the tenacity and resilience of the book's main character Francie as well as her family and neighbors who live in the Brooklyn tenements.

How to use symbolism in your plot

Here are a few tips for using symbolism in your own work.

1. Worry about it on the second draft

The first and most important tip, for the sake of writing, is to get through your first draft without worrying too much about your symbols. Editing your book can wait.

This is the kind of thing that can get writers tied up in a never-ending first draft, constantly going back to make sure that everything is consistent.

Write your first draft all the way through, pausing as infrequently as possible.

Then, when you revise, take the time to work on your symbols. Make a sheet of characters, settings, and themes with their associated symbols.

2. Tie a specific universal meaning to your symbols

Make sure you keep your symbols consistent across the board.

If green represents money and greed for some characters but life, prosperity, and nature for others, the meaning will get muddled and fall apart.

If rainbows appear in times of sadness, happiness, anger, and excitement, it's difficult to pin down the significance of that symbol.

This is where your symbolism planning sheet comes in handy.

Use that list to make sure the symbols you've chosen retain their meaning.

The meanings might change and evolve as the characters do, and that's totally fine! But the meanings shouldn't change randomly, or out of inconsistency on your part.

3. Using symbols for foreshadowing

Symbols are a great way to foreshadow events in your story. After all, the whole point of symbolism is getting across figurative meaning without being too direct.

Stories aren't fun if the writer is spoon-feeding it to you.

It's fun to be able to go back and notice that actually, the flies in chapter one signaled that character's oncoming death.

If you want to use your symbols to foreshadowing, double-check your symbols when you revise.

Make sure you've set that symbol up with that character or theme so that when it reappears later, your reader can recognize it.

4. Be Subtle

You don't want to beat your reader over the head with symbolism.

So how can you hit that symbolism sweet spot and craft images that connect with readers without being too blatant? First, ask yourself what you want to communicate through symbolism. Do you want to subtly suggest that your main character's friend is someone the reader shouldn't trust? Maybe you want to express that your personal essay about baking pies with your little sister is about something much bigger than getting your ingredient ratios right. Is your goal to make a profound statement about how certain things we take for granted can have unexpected, far-reaching results?

Using symbols to establish irony

When using symbols in your writing, you don't have to go with the obvious.

You can use symbolism to create irony or establish new worlds and paradigms. For example, because the color red is often a symbol of danger, you might choose to create a world in which a deep red sky signifies a peaceful land instead of one in peril.

You can also use symbols for contrast. In one scene flowers may represent blossoming love, when one character gives flowers to another. In another scene, they may represent death or grief as one character lays flowers on a grave.

Sources

This article has been derived from¹ the following sources;

- Symbolism - How To Use Symbols With Confidence In Stories - <https://self-publishingschool.com/symbolism/>
- What Is Symbolism and How to Use It in Your Writing - <https://www.writtenwordmedia.com/what-is-symbolism/>
- What Is Symbolism? And How You Can Use It In Your Writing - <https://writingcooperative.com/what-is-symbolism-and-how-you-can-use-it-in-your-writing-2adce3e5767c>
- What Is Symbolism? Examples of Symbolism as a Literary Device - <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/symbolism/>



An Exercise in Symbolism

1. Analysing Other Works

Go through a movie or book and pick out the most important scenes. Identify some of the symbols being used and what the underlying idea they are being used to convey. What recurring imagery is being used? Is associated with particular characters and events.

2. Writing with symbolism

Write a story, scene, or memoir of up to 3000 words that makes use of symbolism. The story can be any genre and point of view you like.

A group of characters are gathered for an event. What, if any, symbols are associated with the event, with the individual characters, or with the group?

If you are short on ideas, choose one or two items in each category below, and use them in your story;

Objects	Characters	Minor Events
A pack of worn cards.	The girl with the strange mark on her shoulder.	Someone refuses a drink.
A locket with a photo in it.	The enraged chihuahua.	Someone has dressed up for the occasion.
A ring.	The child with a stick.	Someone says, "But you didn't hear that from me."
A shadow.	The goat.	Midnight.
A black candle.	The woman who everyone looked at twice.	Someone decides to follow their heart.
An answerphone message.	The volunteer.	Something is presented.
Some old binoculars.	The quiet person in the corner.	Someone gets a good telling off.
A mirror.		
A roughly drawn map.		

For those of you who like deadlines; Your story is due on the 18th of April at 5:00pm. No extentions will be granted ... although bribery may work.

¹ "Shamelessly copied and pasted from" would probably be a more accurate description.

