

SYMBOLISM – Conventional Symbols

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”, “token” 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 thing itself.

Some commonly used conventional symbols are as follows:

I. COLORS

- A. Red: sexuality/immorality; vitality, 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. (NOTE: This symbol has often been “deconstructed” by writers who are interested in racial justice.)
- C. White: innocence, life, light, purity, or enlightenment. (NOTE: This symbol has often been “deconstructed” by writers who are interested in racial justice. See also “The Whiteness of the Whale” in *Moby Dick*.)
- D. Green: hope; new life, inexperience, immaturity; “go”; nature
- E. Yellow: rotting, heat, decay, violence, decrepitude, old age, and the approach of death; cowardice
- F. Blue: cool, calm, peaceful; the heavens – or, conversely, “the blues”
- G. Pink: innocence, femininity
- H. Purple: royalty, bruising or pain
- I. Brown: a color somewhere between red and black; it is the color of earth and ploughed land and soil, it represents humility and poverty

II. NATURE

- 1. Light: truth, safety, warmth, knowledge
- 2. Darkness: evil, ignorance, danger
- A. Seasons
 - 3. Spring: birth, new beginning
 - 4. Summer: maturity, knowledge, “prime of life”
 - 5. Autumn: decline, nearing death, growing old
 - 6. Winter: death, sleep, hibernation, or stagnation
 - 7. Christmas season: birth, change for the better
 - 8. Easter season: rebirth, enlightenment
- B. Weeds: evil (hemlock, pigweed, etc), wildness, outcasts of society
- C. Flowers: beauty, youth, strength, gentleness, love
- D. Water: washes away guilt, origin of life, regeneration, vehicle of cleansing (as in baptism)

- E. River: fluidity of life, stream of life and death, change
- F. Moon: changing and returning shape, feminine symbol
- G. Sun: source of light, heat and life; masculine symbol
- H. Cavern: the womb
- I. Mountain: places where heaven and earth meet; stability, safety, often symbolic of human pride
- J. 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
- K. Gold: the perfect metal; a reflection of heavenly light; it suggests the sun-fertility, wealth, dominion; it is a male principle
- L. Pearl: associated with water, it may be regarded as symbolic 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 (sunrise)
- B. North: coldness, alienation, and hostility; it is the abode of death
- C. South: warmth and comfort
- D. West: is the land of evening, old age (sunset)

IV. WEATHER, TIME

- A. Snow: blanket which obscures, covers or even smothers; see also “winter”
- B. Fog/Mist: prevents clear vision or thinking; represents isolation; mystery/confusion; prelude to important revelations
- C. Rain: sadness or despair; conversely, cleansing (water)/new life
- 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
- 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 servants 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
- N. Eagle: pride, majesty; military victory

VI. 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; vulnerability
- B. Bones: strength and virtue
- C. Eyes: windows to the soul or barometer of emotions
- D. Mouth: indicator of character traits

VII. MISCELLANEOUS OBJECTS

- A. Chain: symbolizes the bond which ties together two extremes or beings; slavery or domination
- 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
- D. Mirror: often a solar symbol; vanity; broken mirror = bad luck
- E. Wall: separation between people
- F. Journey: may be a quest for truth, peace or immortality; a journey often serves as a metaphor for life

VIII. 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

References

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