

Conventional Symbols in Literature

A **symbol** is a setting, object, character, or event in a story that carries more than the literal meaning and therefore represents something significant to understanding the meaning of a work of literature. In other words symbols always have a **literal** (concrete) meaning and a **figurative** (abstract) meaning. Conventional symbols have a previously agreed upon meaning. Example:

SERPENT

Literal meaning: A serpent is a slithering reptile that hisses

Symbolic meaning: the devil, especially the devil's aspect of deceit and deception

Conventional source: Genesis, the Garden of Eden

Some conventional symbols are as follows:

COLORS

Red: blood, passion, emotion, danger, or daring

Black: passivity, death, evil

White: innocence, purity, light

Green: new life, fertility, hope

Yellow: caution, decay, decrepitude, old age

Blue: peace, serenity, eternity

Pink : innocence, femininity

Purple : royalty

Brown : earth, soil, humility and poverty

Orange : heat, sun

Gold: riches, sacredness

NATURE

Spring: birth, new beginning

Summer: maturity, knowledge

Autumn: decline, nearing death, growing old

Winter: death, sleep, hibernation, or stagnation

Christmas season: birth, change for the better

Easter season: rebirth, enlightenment

Dawn: illumination, hope

Light: truth, safety, warmth, knowledge

Darkness: evil, ignorance, danger

Apple: temptation, loss of innocence

Weeds : evil, wildness/outcasts of society

Flowers: beauty, youth, strength, gentleness

Rose: budding youth, romance

Water: purification, cleansing

Evergreen tree: immortality

WEATHER

Fog/Mist: isolation; confusion, obscurity

Rain: sadness or despair

Wind and storms: violent human emotions

Lightning : power and strength

Morning : purity and promise

Rainbows : heralds of good fortune, heaven

Thunder : God's wrath, punishment

ANIMALS

Dove : peace, purity, simplicity

Fox: slyness, cleverness

Raven: death, destruction, impending doom

Lion: strength, power, authority

Peacock: pride, vanity

Mouse : shyness, meekness

Hawk : sharp, keen eyesight

Owl : wisdom

Cats : cunning, forethought, and ingenuity

Lamb : sacrifice element, the children of God

Eagle: freedom

Donkey: humility, patience, stupidity

Buzzard/Vulture: warning of impending death

CLOTHING

Cape: withdrawal into oneself or into God.

Cloak: human trickery

Mask: demonic tendencies

SETTINGS

Forest: usually a place of evil or mystery
Desert: isolation: alienation, loneliness
Garden: paradise of a haven

Window: freedom or lack thereof
Door: opportunity
Park: a place for retreat and renewal

OBJECTS

Skull: death
Crown: wealth
Ring: long-term commitment
Axe: battle, work
Belt: protection, chastity

Candle: light in the darkness
Circle: wholeness, perfection
Fire: Hell; pain, death
Pearl: incorruptibility
Sword: protection, strength

ACTIONS

Kiss: friendship, fellowship, intimacy

Journey: the call of fate, adventure

NUMBERS

Zero (0): the ultimate mystery; nothingness

Three (3): tripartite nature of the world; signifies fulfillment

Consider: Holy Trinity; 3: beginning, middle, end; past, present, and future;

Five (5): human perfection

Consider: Five senses, five fingers on each hand, five toes on each foot, five wounds of Jesus

Seven (7): totality; divine abundance

Consider: Seven days of creation, seven days of the week, seven sacraments, seven deadly sins

Twelve (12) universal fulfillment

Consider: Twelve tribes of Israel, Twelve Apostles, twelve days of Christmas, 12 months in a year

Forty (40): penance, purification

Consider: 40 days of lent, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, the Jews wandered the desert for forty years, Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai, the Great Flood was caused by 40 days of rain