

A symbol is most often thought of as something concrete - a sign, an image, an object - which stands for (represents) something abstract - an idea or a concept. As examples we might think of some shared or traditional symbols and what they stand for: a hand held up palm outward is a sign meaning "stop"; a snake often represents evil (or the devil); in Western countries an owl stands for wisdom; a crown represents a monarchy or authority; an olive branch stands for peace, as does the V sign and a dove; among Native American peoples, the coyote or the raven represent a trickster.

In literature, writers may make use of such traditional symbols, but they also may generate their own symbols in the context of their fictional, poetic, or dramatic works. Such representative or literary symbols do not have a single fixed meaning, as traditional symbols do. Instead they acquire multiple meanings and complex significance as they appear and reappear in key places in the work, gaining their symbolic significance within the context of a specific story. Such symbols may be an object, a person, an event, or anything that has a literal meaning in the work but also suggests other more general meanings. Thus, fog in a poem or story, through its quality of limiting what we can see, might suggest hiddenness, or blindness, or being closed in figuratively by life as well as literally by the fog; and a flower (such as in Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums") may come to stand for more than itself, perhaps symbolizing beauty, hope, growth, new life, or the like. And sometimes it is obvious that something in a story is symbolic because it is a focal point for the story and becomes a central symbol.

You should be alert for symbolic meanings in a literary work, but be careful not to run wild looking for symbols in every detail. The biggest problem in looking for symbolism is attributing symbolic value to too many objects or details, most of which are probably meant in a purely literal way. (A rose is a rose is a rose!) Instead, look for contextual clues - things occurring in the story or poem - that point to the existence of symbolic meaning in the detail. Anything may become symbolic - a name, an object, or even an action - but be careful in assigning such symbolism.

The ability to recognize and identify symbols requires perception and tact. The great danger facing the student when he first becomes aware of symbolical values is a tendency to run wild - to find symbols everywhere and to read into the details of a story all sorts of fanciful meanings not legitimately supported by it. The beginning reader needs to remember that most stories operate almost wholly at the literal level. A story should not be made the excuse for an exercise in ingenuity. It is better, indeed, to miss the symbolical meanings of a story than to pervert its meaning by discovering symbols which are nonexistent. Better to miss the boat than to jump wildly for and drown.

The ability to interpret symbols is nevertheless essential for a full understanding of literature. The beginning reader should be alert for symbolical meanings, but should observe the following cautions:

1. **The story must furnish a clue that a detail is to be symbolically.** For instance, is it somehow singled out for emphasis, is it repeated throughout the work, or does it occupy an important or central position in the work? The story must furnish such a clue to suggest the item is symbolic.
2. **The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story.** In other words, its meaning should be in the story, supported by other details such as the behaviour and emotional reactions of a character to it, by events, or by actions. A symbol has its meaning inside of a story, not outside of it.
3. **To be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind from its literal meaning;** a symbol is something more than the representative of a class or type. To act as a symbol, a detail must suggest meanings very different from what is actually is, but there must be something about it which lends itself to those interpretations. (As a snake, literally a reptile, in no way is evil; but it frightens many people, so it has come to be associated with this meaning.)
4. **A symbol may have more than one meaning.** It may suggest a cluster of meanings. At its most effective a symbol is like a many-faceted jewel: it flashes different colors when turned in the light. This is not to say that it can mean anything we want it to: the area of possible meanings is always controlled by the context. Nevertheless, this possibility of complex meaning, plus concreteness and emotional power, gives the symbol its peculiar compressive value. Most symbols are complex, having several possible meanings or a cluster of meanings, rather than a meaning confined to only one quality.