

Symbolism



DEFINITION

What is symbolism? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Symbolism is a literary device in which a writer uses one thing—usually a physical object or phenomenon—to represent something more abstract. A strong symbol usually shares a set of key characteristics with whatever it is meant to symbolize, or is related to it in some other way. Characters and events can also be symbolic. A famous example of a symbol in literature occurs in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when Atticus tells his children Jem and Scout that it's a sin to kill a mockingbird because mockingbirds cause no harm to anyone; they just sing. Because of these traits, mockingbirds in the novel symbolize innocence and beauty, while killing a mockingbird symbolizes an act of senseless cruelty.

Some additional key details about symbolism:

- Symbolism can be very subtle, so it isn't always easy to identify or understand.
- It can sometimes be difficult to say whether an author *intended* for something to be symbolic or not.
- Symbolism allows writers to convey things to their readers poetically or indirectly rather than having to say them outright, which can make texts seem more nuanced and complex.

Symbolism Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce symbolism: **sim**-buh-liz-uhm

Types of Symbolism

A symbol can be a physical object, a character, or an event. Here's a brief overview of how each type of symbolism works:

- **Symbolism through physical objects:** Most often, physical objects are used to symbolize an idea or concept, as a way of pointing the reader towards some of the basic themes that a work is dealing with. For example, a poet might write a poem about a flower dancing in the wind in order to convey a sense of innocence, harmony with nature, or sheer happiness.
- **Symbolism through characters:** Sometimes, characters themselves can serve as symbols—of a particular virtue or vice, or of a political ideology. For example, in Edmund Spenser's famous allegorical poem, *The Faerie Queene*, the female knight Britomart is a symbol of the values of chastity and restraint, traits which many 16th-century readers held in high esteem.
- **Symbolism through events:** Events can also be symbolic. For example, while a character's long, wild hair might symbolize a

period of youth or innocence, a scene in which the character chops off his or her long hair might symbolize a *loss* of innocence—or the sacrifices people have to make in the process of becoming a mature adult with responsibilities. While the act of cutting off the hair is neither an object nor a character, but it would still be an example of symbolism.

Identifying Symbolism

Writers employ a wide variety of symbols to deepen the meaning of their work. Some symbols, though, are much easier to identify than others. It's worth recognizing the ways that some symbols can be obvious, while others might be less so. For example, sea glass might be used as a fairly obvious symbol in one text, and a more subtle symbol in another:

- **Sea glass as an obvious symbol:** If a character in a story gives her son a piece of sea glass just before she dies, and the son then puts the sea glass on a necklace and wears it everyday, that's a pretty clear example of something being symbolic: the sea glass represents the son's relationship with his mother, his grief at her passing, or perhaps even the more general concept of loss. In this example, the author might choose to describe how the son plays with his necklace obsessively in order to convey his ever present grief at the loss of his mother—instead of having to state it outright.
- **Sea glass as a less-obvious symbol:** If a character in a story delivers a monologue about sea glass in which they explain how something sharp and broken (a shard of glass) becomes smooth and beautiful only through years of being tossed about on the ocean's currents, it might over the course of the story come to be symbolic for the process of growing up or recovering from trauma—but not every reader will necessarily pick up on the symbolism. In this case, sea glass would be an example of a symbol that might be harder to identify as a symbol within the context of the story.

Is a Symbol Purposeful or Not?

In some cases, particularly when a symbol is subtle, it's not always even clear whether the author's use of symbolism is intentional, or whether the reader is supplying their own meaning of the text by "reading into" something as a symbol. That isn't a problem, though. In fact, it's one of the beautiful things about symbolism: whether symbolism can be said to be present in a text has as much to do with the reader's interpretation as the writer's intentions.

Symbol vs. Metaphor

At first glance, symbolism and [metaphor](#) can be difficult to distinguish from one another—both devices imbue a text with meaning beyond

its literal sense, and both use one thing to represent something else. However, there are a few key differences between metaphor and symbolism:

- Metaphors compare two different things by stating that one thing *is* the other (e.g., your eyes are heaven). This doesn't happen in symbolism, where the relationship between a symbol and what it represents is not stated explicitly and one thing is not said to *be* the other thing. Instead, a symbol *stands* for or represents something else.
- Whereas a metaphor is used to compare one thing to another based on shared characteristics, symbols *can* but don't *need* to have any characteristics in common with what they represent. For instance, Annie Proulx's story *Brokeback Mountain* ends with one character taking in the smell of a shirt that was once worn by his lost love. The shirt doesn't have any characteristics in common with the lover—it symbolizes him only insofar as it once belonged to him.

Symbolism and Allegory

An [allegory](#) is a work that conveys a moral through the use of symbolic characters and events. Not every work that incorporates symbols is an allegory; rather, an allegory is a story in which the *majority* of characters and plot developments serve as symbols for something else, or in which the entire storyline is symbolic of a broader phenomenon in society.

For example, the characters in Edmund Spenser's allegorical poem *The Faerie Queene* are not very complex or *deep* characters: they're meant to embody virtues or ideas more than they are meant to resemble real people. By contrast, Hester Prynne (the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's highly symbolic novel, [The Scarlet Letter](#)) exhibits a great deal of complexity and individuality as a character beyond whatever she may symbolize, so it doesn't really make sense to say that *The Scarlet Letter* is an allegory about adultery; rather, it's a novel that is *literally* about adultery that has symbolic aspects. In short, all allegories are highly symbolic, but not all symbolic writing is allegorical.

home of a lost lover named Jack. There, Ennis finds an old shirt of his nestled inside of one of Jack's shirts.

At the north end of the closet a tiny jog in the wall made a slight hiding place and here, stiff with long suspension from a nail, hung a shirt. He lifted it off the nail. Jack's old shirt from Brokeback days. The dried blood on the sleeve was his own blood, a gushing nosebleed on the last afternoon on the mountain when Jack, in their contortionistic grappling and wrestling, had slammed Ennis's nose hard with his knee. He had stanching the blood, which was everywhere, all over both of them, with his shirtsleeve, but the stanching hadn't held, because Ennis had suddenly swung from the deck and laid the ministering angel out in the wild columbine, wings folded.

The shirt seemed heavy until he saw there was another shirt inside it, the sleeves carefully worked down inside Jack's sleeves. It was his own plaid shirt, lost, he'd thought, long ago in some damn laundry, his dirty shirt, the pocket ripped, buttons missing, stolen by Jack and hidden here inside Jack's own shirt, the pair like two skins, one inside the other, two in one. He pressed his face into the fabric and breathed in slowly through his mouth and nose, hoping for the faintest smoke and mountain sage and salty sweet stink of Jack, but there was no real scent, only the memory of it, the imagined power of Brokeback Mountain of which nothing was left but what he held in his hands.

Proulx's description of the shirts sounds like it could be a description of the feeling of intimacy shared between lovers: she writes that they are "like two skins, one inside the other, two in one." The shirts symbolize the love the two men shared, but Proulx avoids having to explain Ennis's feelings directly by using symbolism in her description of the shirts, instead.

Symbolism in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias"

In the [sonnet](#) "Ozymandias," Shelley uses the story of an encounter with a decaying monument to illustrate the destructive power of nature, the fleetingness of man's political accomplishments, and the longevity of art.

I met a traveller from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay



EXAMPLES

Symbolism is very common in all sorts of narrative literature, poetry, film, and even speeches.

Examples of Symbolism in Literature

Authors frequently incorporate symbolism into their work, because symbols engage readers on an emotional level and succinctly convey large and complex ideas.

Symbolism in Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain"

The following passage from Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" describes a character named Ennis's visit to the childhood

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The symbolism in Shelley's poem transforms the half-sunken monument into a powerful representation of the passage of time. The poem reminds readers that natural forces will put an end to the reign of all empires and the lives of every person, whether king or commoner. In the final lines, the poem [juxtaposes](#) two very different symbols: the fallen statue, greatly reduced from its former size, and the huge, barren, and unchanging desert. The statue of Ozymandias is therefore symbolic of man's mortality and smallness in the face of time and nature.

Symbolism in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

In Chapter Ten of [Invisible Man](#), the book's protagonist goes to work at the Liberty Paints Factory—the maker of a paint "so white you can paint a chunk of coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through"—where he is surprised to learn that the recipe for the brilliant white paint actually calls for the addition of a few drops of black paint. The symbolism of the black paint disappearing into the white is a direct reference to the "invisibility" of black people in America—one of the major themes of Ellison's book.

"The idea is to open each bucket and put in ten drops of this stuff," he said. "Then you stir it 'til it disappears. After it's mixed you take this brush and paint out a sample on one of these." He produced a number of small rectangular boards and a small brush from his jacket pocket. "You understand?" "Yes, sir." But when I looked into the white graduate I hesitated; the liquid inside was dead black. Was he trying to kid me?

Symbolism in Film

Filmmakers often endow particular objects with emotional significance. These visual symbols may shed light on a character's motivations or play an important role later on in the film.

Symbolism in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*

In the [closing scene](#) of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, the camera pans to a sled with the word "Rosebud" printed on it—the same word that is uttered by the newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane on his deathbed. The movie itself portrays Kane's ruthless efforts to consolidate power in his industry. Yet in his final moments, he recalls the sled associated with the happier days of his youth. The "Rosebud" sled can be described as a symbol of Kane's youthful innocence and idealism, of which he lost sight in his pursuit of power. The sled is one of the most famous symbols in all of film.

Symbolism In Speeches

Orators often turn to symbolism for the same reasons writers do—symbols can add emotional weight to a speech and can stand-in for broad themes and central parts of their argument.

Symbolism in John F. Kennedy's 1961 Inaugural Address

In the opening lines of his [1961 inaugural address](#), President Kennedy claims that his inauguration is the symbol of a new era in American history, defined by both reverence for the past and innovation in the years to come:

We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end as well as a beginning—signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forbears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

Here, President Kennedy argues on behalf of the symbolic significance of his election, suggesting that his Inauguration Day stands for the progress in America that is soon to come. Though it's not an especially subtle use of symbolism, Kennedy's assertion that his first day in office represents the first of many steps forward for America likely had a considerable emotional impact on his audience.

Symbolism in Barack Obama's Speech on the 50th Anniversary of the Selma Marches

In his speech on the 50th anniversary of the [1965 Selma to Montgomery voting rights marches](#), President Obama casts the Edmund Pettus Bridge (in Selma, Alabama) as a symbol of American progress and resilience.

The American instinct that led these young men and women to pick up the torch and cross this bridge is the same instinct that moved patriots to choose revolution over tyranny. It's the same instinct that drew immigrants from across oceans and the Rio Grande; the same instinct that led women to reach for the ballot and workers to organize against an unjust status quo; the same instinct that led us to plant a flag at Iwo Jima and on the surface of the Moon.

In this example, President Obama paid tribute to the activists who were beaten brutally by state troopers after crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge during a 1965 demonstration in Selma, Alabama. Likening their perseverance in the face of police brutality to other prominent examples of American resistance, such as the American Revolution, Obama claims that the demonstrators symbolize a quintessential American trait: a commitment to securing and protecting personal freedom. Thus, in Obama's speech, crossing the bridge can be said to function as a symbol of the long struggle for civil rights.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

It's hard to find a work of literature that lacks any kind of symbolism. Symbolism is an important literary device for creating complex narratives because it enables writers to convey important information without having to state things directly. In addition, the use of symbolism is widespread because it can:

- Help readers visualize complex concepts and central themes, and track their development.
- Afford writers the opportunity to communicate big ideas efficiently and artfully.
- Invite readers to interpret a text independently, rather than be directly told what the author means.
- Add emotional weight to a text.
- Conceal themes that are too controversial to state openly.
- Imply change or growth in characters or themes through shifts in the way that characters interact with particular symbols, or ways in which the symbols themselves change over time.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Symbols](#): A rather theoretical account of symbolism, which delves into competing definitions of the term that might be more complicated or detailed than is necessary for

many readers. Still, the page demonstrates just how pervasive symbolism is in language and thought.

- [Cracked's List of 7 Films With Symbolism You Didn't Notice](#): Though the author's speculations verge on conspiracy theories at times, at its best, the list demonstrates how artists might use symbols to bury risqué themes in works for popular consumption.
- [The HyperTexts Page on The Best Symbols in Poetry and Literature](#): The explanations here aren't especially in-depth—certainly not as sophisticated as the symbols they discuss. Still, this is useful as a survey of poems by major writers with examples of concrete, object-based symbolism.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mahler, Adam. "Symbolism." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Mahler, Adam. "Symbolism." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/symbolism>.