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