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