



# Symbolism

## What Is A Symbol?

A symbol is anything that hints at something else, usually something abstract, such as an idea or belief. A literary symbol is an object, a person, a situation, or an action that has a literal meaning in a story but suggests or represents other meanings.

## Two Types of Symbols:

### 1. General

A general symbol is universal in its meaning. Even if the symbol were removed from a work of literature, it would still suggest a larger meaning.

*Ex:* While the sea symbolizes the universal voyage from life to death in *The Odyssey*, it retains this association independent from literature. The "sea" is a general symbol.

*Ex:* In poetry, a "rose" often is not only a flower, but also a general symbol for romantic love.

### 2. Specific

A specific symbol is not universal in its meaning. It acquires a specific meaning based on how it relates to the content of a novel, poem, etc. The symbol's significance exists only within the context created by the author.

*Ex:* A hunting cap in *The Catcher in the Rye* has no universal meaning, but within the novel it is worn backwards and symbolizes a looking back at childhood.

*Ex:* A pair of eyes on a billboard in the *Great Gatsby* has no universal meaning, but within the story symbolizes the eyes of God watching humanity.

## Tips about Symbols:

- The story itself must furnish a clue that a detail is to be taken symbolically. Symbols nearly always signal their existence by emphasis, repetition, or position.
- The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story. The symbol has its meaning in the story, not outside it.
- To be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind from its literal meaning; a symbol is something more than its class or type.

- A symbol may have more than one meaning. This does not mean that the symbol can mean anything you want it to because possible meanings are always controlled by the context.

**Follow These Steps When Writing About Symbolism:**

1. **Determine what objects, characters, or actions are symbolic.** To identify a symbol, note if an object seems to
  - appear repeatedly
  - have an unusually vivid quality
  - be described with language conveying much emphasis
  - have more significance than its literal reality would suggest
2. **Determine symbolic meanings.** Carefully examine how the symbol functions in relation to the story. Ask yourself what idea is represented by the symbol.
3. **Classify the symbols.** Classification may reveal opposite relationships, such as symbols of good and evil, life and death, or eternal and ephemeral. Or symbols may fall into isolated categories, such as destruction, innocence, or sexuality.
4. **Classify the meanings of a symbol.** Determine how much depth a particular symbol has and classify its possible meanings. While your paper may focus on only one major symbol, you may be able to divide it into two specific meanings and two general meanings.

**Remember:** A symbol has a literal meaning in a story but suggests or represents other meanings. Not all symbolism is obvious; often it is subtle and indirect.