

SYMBOLISM



Symbolism occurs when a simple thing in a book or movie represents, or stands for, a big idea. When that happens, the simple thing is a **symbol** for the big idea.

Examples:
(there are
lots more)

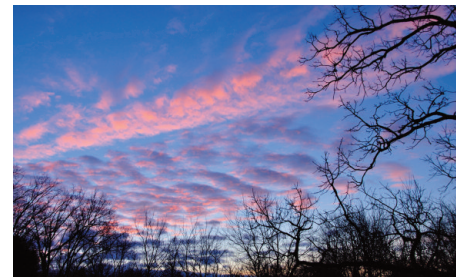
A simple thing...

...can mean a big idea:

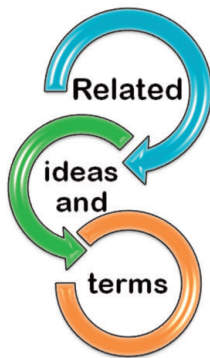
brick walls, locked gates	inability to reach goals
autumn leaves	getting older
storms, dark clouds	troubles, difficulties, hardship
darkness, nighttime	fear, the unknown, death
butterflies	change, rebirth

WHY
do
writers
use
symbolism ?

The student read this document and realized the truth within it as the sky brightened behind him with the dawn of a new day.



Did you recognize the two instances of symbolism in that sentence? Dawn is a symbol for a new beginning, and brightening light is a symbol for increasing knowledge. Because of the symbolism in that sentence, its meaning runs deeper and richer than the words on the surface. Symbolism makes stories more meaningful and more interesting in fewer words.



metaphor

Metaphor is related to symbolism because metaphor uses symbols. It isn't always clear where metaphor ends and symbolism begins.

Metaphor helps you better understand a single person or one thing. For example, when you say that a woman's depression was a dark cloud over her head, your use of metaphor helps the reader to better understand what the woman's depression was like.

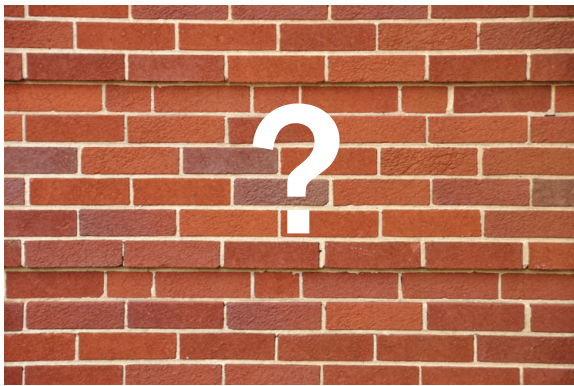
Symbolism helps show the big concepts under the surface of a story (like death, rebirth, change, struggle, triumph) by including things that represent, or stand for, or symbolize those big concepts.

For example, if you would write that a man was sitting in a green chair when he played with his new baby, and that later, he saw a cat with kittens under a branch with green leaves, you might say that the color green in that story is a symbol for birth and life.



Visual Learning: **SYMBOLISM**

This is a brick wall. What could it mean (symbolize) in a story?



Let's say that you're reading a story about a guy named Frank. In the story, Frank leans against a brick wall as he's waiting for his dad to show up.

Does the brick wall symbolize (stand for) a bigger idea or concept?

Not really. Unless...

What if you found out that Frank has been trying to find a job for six months, but nobody will give him a chance because he's an ex-convict?

Now that you know that, think about the brick wall. Is it possible that it was symbolic of (that it symbolized) his inability to get a job and move forward with his life?

barrier

obstacle

blocked goals

This is a dying autumn leaf. What could it symbolize?



You're watching a movie where Keeta and Erika, two teenagers, are walking through the city toward a park. After a while, the conversation turns to Keeta's sick grandmother, and Keeta tells Erika that her grandmother might pass away soon.

At that moment, the girls enter the park where there are autumn leaves falling from the trees.

Why did the movie director have autumn leaves falling at that moment? Could it be that the dying leaves were symbols of death in general?

death

cycle of life

Identifying symbolism - Step 1

Think about what the story or movie is really about, deep down.

Most stories or movies are about bigger concepts than just the plot (what happens).

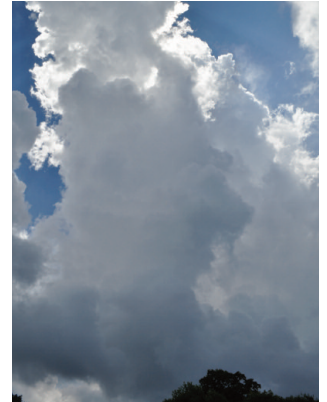
For example, here's part of a story:

A sad rain from a gray sky fell on Patrick as he trudged home from school. "I gotta go, Patrick," she had said, just a few minutes ago, her eyes averted, her body turning away from him as if avoiding something distasteful, but it was only him standing there when she turned, without a further word, without a smile. "I gotta go," was all she said.

He had tried to talk to her, again, and again she had looked left and right when he spoke, not looking at him as she once did, not smiling as she once had, and he searched for the reason, fearful of discovering the answer.

He turned the corner, the sky seeming to get darker. A cold drop of rain ran down his back, and he pulled the collar of his jacket tighter. First Ryan didn't show up yesterday for cards, with no text, no reason, no nothing, and now *she* was acting weird. Distant. Uncomfortable. It wasn't a coincidence. He suddenly knew why, and a terrible sadness gripped him.

It was because of what happened last Sunday. Last Sunday at 2:35 in the afternoon, when it was raining, and thunder shook the house, and the police came and arrested his father for child abuse.



Okay, now think about that passage. You could talk about the plot (what happened), and the fact that the protagonist (main character) is named Patrick, and he likes a girl who wasn't named, and he has a friend named Ryan, and his father was arrested for child abuse.

But let's go deeper.

What's the story really about? In other words, what are the themes of the story?

It's not really about a missed card game, deep down. It's really about **sadness** and **struggling with his family**. Patrick is struggling against the sadness he feels as a result of his father's embarrassing arrest.

Now, you might feel differently, and you might come up with some excellent alternative interpretations of the things that are going on under the surface of the story. But for the sake of explanation, let's stick with **sadness** and **a struggle with family** as two of the themes of the story.

Identifying symbolism - Step 2

Now that you've identified the themes in the story, ask yourself this:

Is there anything in the story that comes up (or happens) over and over again that could represent (be symbols for) those themes?

Keep in mind that when you see a thing come up over and over again in a story (like colors, weather events, physical objects), that thing is probably a **symbol** of a theme, or a big idea within the story.

Think about the story on page 3. When Patrick was walking home from school, what was happening?

It was raining, and the sky was gray, and a cold drop of rain ran down Patrick's back.

So, why did the author make it rain? Why didn't the author make it a clear sunny day?

The author made it rain because Patrick was sad, and the author wanted that sadness to be bigger than just within Patrick—he wanted the sadness to be in the sky, on the ground, on the leaves, everywhere.

That rain, and the cold raindrop against which Patrick struggled, are symbols of his sadness and his struggle with his family; rain and storms are common symbols for sadness and troubles in general.



When you read that story again, do you see how rain was a part of the whole story, even when Patrick's father was arrested? There's a clue that the rain was a symbol for something.

Thinking about symbolism - Step 3

One more thing—sometimes the symbolism in a story is clear, and sometimes it's not so clear.

For example, a wedding ring is a clear symbol of love and commitment, and so is a bouquet of roses on a wedding anniversary.

But what if you read a story about a little girl growing up in a poor part of New York, and in the story there was a tree next to her apartment, and the tree came up again and again in the story? The author didn't write about the tree by accident; she put the tree in the story on purpose. So, what could it symbolize?

It *could* symbolize many things, such as growth, life, or survival. Your opinion about what it symbolizes might be different from somebody else's opinion, and that's OK. Talk about your opinion with other people, and listen to what they say about it, and you'll gain a newer, deeper understanding of what you read.

Name: _____

Date: _____

10



SHOW THAT YOU KNOW

Answer all these questions correctly, and you're on your way to becoming an expert on symbolism!

7
tasks

Circle "true" or "false":

- 1 true false Symbolism occurs when a simple thing stands for a big idea. 1
- 2 true false In this packet, dawn was a symbol for a new beginning. 1
- 3 true false In this packet, an autumn leaf was a symbol for death. 1
- 4 true false Metaphor and symbolism are exactly the same thing. 1
- 5 true false The symbolism in a story might be clear or not so clear. 1

What is symbolism?

Start with "Symbolism is..."

6



Handwriting practice area with a vertical pink line and horizontal blue lines.

2



7 Read this story so you can answer the question below.

You're in a coffee shop and you overhear a very upset woman sitting with a female friend at the table next to you. The upset woman is talking so loudly that you can't help but hear her. She says, "And then he told me that it wasn't important whether or not he wore our wedding ring. Can you believe it? He won't wear it anymore! I told him how upset it made me feel, and he just told me that I'm too emotional and that it isn't a big deal! Can you believe it? I can't..."

The woman stopped talking, so you sneaked a quick look at her (you didn't want her to see you looking) and you saw that she was crying. Her friend was patting her on the hand, saying nothing.

8

3

Read all these statements. Only one is completely correct. Circle the letter of the one that is completely correct.

- a) The first woman is upset because the second woman was not paying any attention to her, and she wishes that she was. The second woman is her mother; you can tell this by the fact that she was patting the first woman's hand.
- b) The first woman is not upset, but the second woman was upset when she saw you looking at her. She was patting the first woman's hand to comfort her, because a person's hand is a symbol of being upset.
- c) The first woman is upset because her husband refuses to wear his wedding ring. A wedding ring is a symbol of love and commitment, and his refusal to wear the ring might be a symbol that he doesn't love her and respect the commitment.
- d) When the husband said he was refusing to wear his wedding ring, the first woman was crying with joy, because the symbolism of not wearing a wedding ring means that you feel strong love for your wife or husband.