Symbolism

Definition of Symbolism

Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense.

Symbolism can take different forms. Generally, it is an object representing another to give it an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. Sometimes, however, an action, an event or a word spoken by someone may have a symbolic value. For instance, “smile” is a symbol of friendship. Similarly, the action of someone smiling at you may stand as a symbol of the feeling of affection which that person has for you.

Symbols do shift their meanings depending on the context they are used in. “A chain”, for example, may stand for “union” as well as “imprisonment”. Thus, symbolic meaning of an object or an action is understood by when, where and how it is used. It also depends on who reads them.

Common Examples of Symbolism in Everyday Life

In our daily life, we can easily identify objects, which can be taken as examples of symbol such as the following:

* The dove is a symbol of peace.
* A red rose or red color stands for love or romance.
* Black is a symbol that represents evil or death.
* A ladder may stand as a symbol for a connection between the heaven and the earth.
* A broken mirror may symbolize separation

Examples of Symbolism in Literature

To develop symbolism in his work, a writer utilizes other figures of speech, like metaphors, similes, [allegory](http://literarydevices.net/allegory/), as tools. Some symbol examples in literature are listed below with brief analysis:

Example #1

We find symbolic value in Shakespeare’s famous monologue in his play *As you Like It*:

“All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
they have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,”

The above lines are symbolic of the fact that men and women, in course of their life perform different roles. “A stage” here symbolizes the world and “players” is a symbol for human beings.

Example #2

William Blake goes symbolic in his poem *Ah Sunflower*. He says:

“Ah Sunflower, weary of time,  
Who countest the steps of the sun;  
Seeking after that sweet golden clime  
Where the traveler’s journey is done;”

Blake uses a sunflower as a symbol for human beings and “the sun” symbolizes life. Therefore, these lines symbolically refer to their life cycle and their yearning for a never-ending life.

Example #3

Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* presents almost every character, house, surroundings and events in a symbolic perspective. The word “Wuthering”, which means stormy, represents the wild nature of its inhabitants. The following lines allow us to look into the symbolic nature of two characters:

“My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it; I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath a source of little visible delight, but necessary.”

The phrase “foliage of leaves” for Linton is a symbol for his fertile and civilized nature. On the contrary, Heathcliff is likened to an “eternal rock” which symbolizes his crude and unbendable nature.

Example #4

Sara Teasdale in her poem *Wild Asters* develops a number of striking symbols:

“In the spring, I asked the daisies  
If his words were true,  
And the clever, clear-eyed daisies  
Always knew.

Now the fields are brown and barren,  
Bitter autumn blows,  
And of all the stupid asters  
Not one knows.”

In the above lines, “spring” and “daisies” are symbols of youth. “Brown and barren” are symbols of [transition](http://literarydevices.net/transition/) from youth to old age. Moreover, “Bitter autumn” symbolizes death.

Function of Symbolism

Symbolism gives a writer freedom to add double levels of meanings to his work: a literal one that is self-evident and the symbolic one whose meaning is far more profound than the literal one. The symbolism, therefore, gives universality to the characters and the themes of a piece of literature. Symbolism in literature evokes interest in readers as they find an opportunity to get an insight of the writer’s mind on how he views the world and how he thinks of common objects and actions, having broader implications.