

Help Centres – English Support



Symbolism in Literature

Symbols are objects, people, names or events that suggest abstract ideas. For instance, a car could connote freedom, or a battle might symbolize a painful change. However, not all “things” in a work of literature have a symbolic meaning: sometimes a car is just a mode of transportation moving characters from one location to another.

“Things” that are symbols are often emphasized in a story. Such focus is accomplished by:

- repeated referencing or appearance
- being described in relatively great detail
- appearing or disappearing at axial moments in the story
- used in the title of the story

A symbol can be conventional or private. A **conventional symbol** is acknowledged by a group or culture and has connotative meanings beyond a particular work of literature, such as doves being equated with peace or a four-leaf clover symbolizing luck. A **private symbol** has meaning for a specific text.

Exploring possible symbolism within a text can help uncover a theme of the literary work. For example, if a car is read as symbolizing freedom, what is the story or poem expressing about freedom? The theme might be that, like driving a car, freedom is equally restricted to certain paths and permissions, that it is never absolute and is always subject to a higher authority.