Symbolism and Allegory

Symbol – person, object, action, place, or event that, in addition to its literal meaning, suggests a more complex meaning or range of meanings.

- **Universal or archetypal symbol** – (Old Man, the Mother, or the Grim Reaper) are so much a part of human experience that they suggest the same thing to most people
- **Conventional symbol** – Likely to suggest the same thing to most people with common cultural and social assumptions (rose = love, skull and crossbones = poison).
- **Contextual (or literary) symbol** – Depends upon the context of the story for its significance. May seem innocuous at first, but begins to gain meaning through emphasis or repetition.

Recognizing Symbols – Consider how an object is used, how often it is used, and when it appears. Look specifically for the following:

- Repetition
- Sense of significance
- Allusion to object in title
- Given significance through character dialogue or action
- Function parallels plot
- Story’s opening or closing paragraph focuses on it

Allegory – communicates a doctrine, message, or moral principle by making it into a narrative in which the characters personify ideas, concepts, qualities or other abstractions. In other words, a story with two parallel and consistent levels of meaning – one literal and one figurative.

- **Allegorical figure** – a character, object, place, or event in the allegory
- **Allegorical framework** – the set of ideas that conveys the allegory’s message.
- **Beast fable** – short tale, usually including a moral, in which animals assume human characteristics. Aesop’s fables are examples.

Taking a Closer Look: Consider the following questions when examining symbolism in a literary work:

- Are any universal symbols used in the work? Any conventional symbols? What is their function?
- Is any character, place, action, event, or object given unusual prominence or emphasis in the story? If so, does this element seem to have symbolic as well as literal value?
- What possible meanings does each symbol suggest?
- How do symbols help to depict the story’s characters?
- How do symbols help to characterize the story’s setting?
- How do symbols help to advance the story’s plot?
- Are any of the symbols related? Taken together, do they seem to support a common theme?
- Does the story have a moral or didactic purpose? What is the message, idea, or moral principle the story seeks to convey?
- What equivalent may be assigned to each allegorical figure in the story?
- What is the allegorical framework of the story?
- Does the story combine allegorical figures and symbols? How do they work together in the story?

Information adapted from *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing* (Kirszenr and Mandell).