

Elements of Fiction: The Symbol

A symbol is: a thing that suggests more than its literal meaning. Symbols point and hint at meaning, but do not stand for one definite meaning. They are NOT abstract terms like *truth* or *honor*. Instead they are noticeable objects.

Some classic examples of symbol are:

- The white whale in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: as the devil
- The giant eyes of the billboard in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: as the eyes of God

Sometimes 'symbol' is confused with 'allegory.'

An allegory is:

A *story* in which persons, places, and things form a system of clearly labeled equivalents and definite meanings

Some classic examples of allegories are...

- Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, in which the wife, Faith, represents religious virtue
- George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, in which animals represent human totalitarian oppressors and victims

Recap: Symbol = an item, fluid, many possible meanings

Allegory = the story, tightly constructed, objects or character with set meanings

Others aspects of symbols to consider:

- *Symbolic character*: such as Miss Emily in William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*. She appears twice in her window and is like a portrait of vanishing aristocracy of the South
- *Symbolic act*: such as the Captain Ahab breaking his pipe and discarding it another example from Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Here he is expressing that no pleasure or distraction will interrupt his quest.

So if I found a symbol, what next?

Here's a helpful checklist from *Our Fiction Anthology*

- ✓ Which objects, actions, or places seem unusually significant?
- ✓ List the specific objects, people, and ideas with which a particular symbol is associated.
- ✓ Locate the exact place in the story where the symbol links itself to the other thing.
- ✓ Ask whether each symbol comes with ready-made cultural associations. If so, what are these?
- ✓ Avoid far-fetched interpretations. Focus first on the literal things, places and actions in the story.
- ✓ Don't make a symbol mean too much or too little; don't limit it to one narrow association or claim it summons up many different things.
- ✓ Be specific. Identify the exact place in the story where a symbol takes on a deeper meaning.

Quick Write Activity:

Imagine that you are a citizen who has escaped from either Omelas (in Ursula K. LeGuin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas") or the town from Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Write about why you left your community, and what you hope to find in the outside world. If someone were to inquire about the place you came from, how would you respond?

