

Secondary English Department

Literature handout

Definitions of two literary devices: symbolism and foreshadowing

[**Symbolism**](http://www.yourdictionary.com/symbolism)is the practice or art of using an object or a word to represent an abstract idea. An action, person, place, word, or object can all have a symbolic meaning. For example, a sword may be a sword and also symbolize justice. A symbol may be said to embody an idea.

There are two general types of symbols: **universal symbols** that embody universally recognizable meanings wherever used, such as light to symbolize knowledge, a skull to symbolize death, etc., **and constructed symbols** that are given symbolic meaning by the way an author uses them in a literary work, as the white whale becomes a symbol of evil in Moby Dick.

Symbolism in Literature

When an author wants to suggest a certain mood or emotion or convey abstract ideas in a creative way he often uses symbolism to hint at different meanings, rather than just explicitly express those ideas. In such case, it´s the reader´s job to notice, discover and draw a possible interpretation for the symbols.

Symbolism is often used by writers to enhance their writing. Symbolism can give a literary work more richness and colour and can make the meaning of the literary work deeper.

Symbolism can take many forms including:

* An object, person, or situation which has another meaning other than its literal meaning.
* The actions of a character, word, action, or event that have a deeper meaning in the context of the whole story.
* Metaphors. Common examples of symbolism that take the form of metaphors include:
* Time is money: This is symbolic because it warns you that when you spend your time, you are giving up the opportunity to be doing something else with that time (just as when you spend your money, you give up your chance to do something else with the money). Further, like money, time is not infinite.
* Life is a roller-coaster: This is symbolic because it indicates that there will be ups and downs in life that you have to weather.
* He is a rock: This is symbolic because it signifies that he is strong and dependable.
* Love is a jewel: This is symbolic because it suggests that love is rare and precious.

Symbolism in Everyday Life

Our language contains an immense number of symbols whose intended meaning or significance is well-known and accepted by the majority.

**Colours**

* Black is used to represent death or evil.
* White stands for life and purity.
* Red can symbolize blood, passion, danger, or immoral character.
* Purple is a royal color.
* Yellow stands for violence or decay.
* Blue represents peacefulness and calm.

**Objects** are often used to symbolize something else:

* A **chain** can symbolize the coming together of two things.
* A **ladder** can represent the relationship between heaven and earth or ascension.
* A **mirror** can denote the sun but when it is broken, it can represent an unhappy union or a separation.
* **Wate**r can be religious, like baptism, it can mean purification, or it can even mean death (in instances like drowning). If the writer of the story takes time to mention an element of water look and see how it is used. Does it sound negative or positive? Does it sound peaceful or violent?
  + **Fire** can represent anger, passion, love, pain or death. It is a symbol used in some cases for rebirth or new life. If the story you are reading mentions fire, see how it is being used. Did a building burn down and a character learned a vital lesson? Was someone injured in a fight while using fire? See how this element is used and compare it to life lessons, intense emotions, or even a comparison between life and death or rebirth.
  + **Night** can be used in connection to darkness and acts as a cover over the world. Or it can be used to represent an ‘end of the road.’ It can even represent peace or tranquility. But it can also be as simple as death and darkness concerning the usage of shadows. The great thing about night is that there is a lot to work with.

Look for a scene in your story and analyse how the writer uses it. There are two sides: night is the end of the day, where things are hidden in shadows; but if there is a source of light, even a small one, the writer is trying to tell you about some internal or external conflict.

Things in the light are generally safe, but things in the dark can be susceptible to danger.

In the story if you have read, what role does night play? Does it have any connotations to hell or even show an image of horror? Is night trying to show you two sides: possibly good or evil, truth or lies or even danger and safety?

* + **Light** is used for truth, enlightenment, safety, or it can be used as a holy image. Light can stand for the side of ‘good’ in a novel or ‘power.’ It is used to overpower evil or even bring forth knowledge to a character or the narrator. When using light as a theme look for areas in the story that might discuss darkness or night, then use that to contrast the effects of light within the story and plot. Light illuminates shadows, which means that with light a character might be able to see the foil in another character or even see if the other character is a liar or evil.

In your story look and see if a character is cast in both light and dark.

* + **Darkness**: See if a character is in the shadows, literally, does the author describe a character as lurking in the shadows or have pieces of their body or face obscured? These are symbols for darkness and hiding, meaning the character may be lying about something. Look into the story you are reading and look for words that mean ‘night,’ ‘dark,’ ‘death,’ or ‘shadows.’ The author uses terms like that to provide the reader with an image in their mind, whether they are conscious of it or not. Darkness can play a role in a plot by hiding objects, people, or animals. Darkness can be symbols for death, or the Angel of Death.

Writers never mention something unless it is important!

**Definition of Foreshadowing**

Foreshadowing is a literary device in which a writer gives an advance hint of what is to come later in the story. Foreshadowing often appears at the beginning of a story, or a chapter, and helps the reader develop expectations about the coming events in a story. There are various ways to create foreshadowing.

A writer may use character dialogues to hint at what may occur in the future. In addition, any event or action in the story may throw a hint to the readers about future events or actions. Even a title of a work or a chapter title can act as a clue that suggests what is going to happen. Foreshadowing in fiction creates an atmosphere of suspense in a story, so that the readers are interested to know more.

Short examples of foreshadowing

-The evening was still. Suddenly, a cool breeze started blowing and made a windy night. (Foreshadows thunderstorm)

-Mary pulled back the curtains and saw some magpies sitting on the wall.

(Foreshadows gossip)

-Michael sees his own face under Donavan’s mask.

(Foreshadows Donavan is his father).