Symbols & Symbolism

A symbol is something that represents something else. Symbols can be used to add another secret layer of meaning to books, poems, and films.

A symbol is usually something **literal** (e.g. physical, concrete, visible) that represents something non-literal, or **figurative** (e.g. an abstract idea that can’t be seen)

Example: chains are literal objects that we can see, touch, or hold. But seeing chains often makes people think of ideas that are connected to chains – slavery, freedom (or lack of freedom), prison, cages, etc. A serpent is a reptile, but it can be used as a symbolof lies, evil, or temptation

Depending on the context, culture, or the reader’s personal experience, symbols can carry lots of different meanings. Symbols are like a shorthand, a code or a reference that can express many things in a few words. Symbols also appeal to readers’ imaginations and stick with them.

Some common symbols:

**COLORS**

**Red:** blood, love, danger, anger

**White:** innocence, purity, peace

**Green:** new life, environment, growth

**Purple:** royalty

**SEASONS**

**Spring:** birth, new beginning

**Summer:** maturity, knowledge

**Autumn:** decline, nearing death, ageing

**Winter:** death, sleep, hibernation

**ANIMALS**

**Dove:** peace, purity, simplicity

**Lion:** strength, power, authority

**Lamb:** innocence, sacrifice, Jesus Christ

**OBJECTS**

**Door:** opportunity

**Skull:** death

**Apple:** temptation, loss of innocence

**Fire:** danger, pain, death

**Wings:** freedom

**Recognising symbols**

Symbols are often used in poetry to create layers of meaning: a surface interpretation, and a hidden interpretation underneath the surface – you have to think carefully to see it! A poem that seems to be about something literal (e.g. a bird in a cage, a fork in the road) might be used to represent something about life (e.g. feeling trapped, making a decision).

To figure out the symbolic meaning of an object in a poem, you could ask questions like:

* What is the first thing that comes to mind when I see this thing?
* Who uses this object and what is it used for?
* When and where does it come from?
* Are there any well known stories about this thing – for example in the Bible, fairy tales or famous songs?