



Symbols and how authors use them in stories

KS4 ENGLISH LITERATURE

Ages 11-16 ⌚ 3 min read

What is a Symbol?

A **symbol** is something that stands for something else. It's not just what it looks like on the surface—it has a deeper meaning hidden underneath. Think about a **red rose**. On one level, it's just a pretty flower. But in stories and in real life, a red rose often symbolizes **love** and **romance**. The rose itself isn't love, but it represents it.

Symbols are everywhere. A **white dove** symbolizes **peace**. A **skull** can symbolize **danger** or **death**. A **mirror** might symbolize **truth** or **self-reflection**. Once you start noticing symbols, you'll see them in books, films, art, and even in nature.

Think of it like a secret language. When you see a green traffic light, it doesn't just mean "the light is green"—it means "go." The green colour is a symbol for permission to move. Authors use symbols the same way, but for bigger ideas like hope, evil, freedom, or growing up.

Why Do Authors Use Symbols?

Authors use symbols to add **layers of meaning** to their stories. Instead of just saying "the character felt hopeless," an author might describe a **dying plant** to symbolize that feeling. This makes the story richer and more interesting to read.

Symbols help readers **connect emotionally** with characters and themes. They also let writers say complicated things in simple, powerful ways. A **journey** in a book might symbolize a character's **personal growth**. **Darkness** often symbolizes **evil** or **uncertainty**, while **light** symbolizes **good** or **truth**.

Think of it like emojis in a text message. Instead of writing "I'm happy," you just use a smiley face. The emoji carries the whole meaning in one simple picture. Authors do the same with words and images in their stories.

How to Spot Symbols in Stories

When you're reading, look for things that appear **repeatedly**. If a colour, animal, object, or image keeps showing up, it's probably a symbol. Ask yourself: **Why did the author mention this? What does it remind me of? What feelings does it create?**

Remember, a symbol's meaning can change depending on the **culture** and **context**. A **snake** might symbolize evil in one story but wisdom in another. The key is to think carefully about what the author is trying to say and how the symbol fits into the bigger picture of the story.