

# Common Symbols

Created by Kathryn Reilly



# Symbol Background

- In fiction, authors may use symbols to communicate key ideas to the audience.
- Symbols are a tangible representation of an intangible idea.
  - For example, a dove may represent peace.

# Symbolic Colors

Note: Colors may have more than one meaning. In order to determine the proper meaning, using context is very important.

## Color

- Red
- Blue
- Green
- Yellow
- Black

## Meaning

- Love or anger
- Calmness or sadness
- Growth
- Warmth or cowardliness
- Evil or absence

# Symbolic Flowers

## Type of flower

- Roses
- Forget-Me-Nots
- Ivy
- Narcissus
- Pansy
- Four-leafed clover
- Lily
- Violet

## Meaning

- Love
- Remembrance
- Fidelity
- Egotism
- Remembrance and Friendship
- Good Luck
- Innocence
- Faithfulness

# Symbols in Literature

## OPHELIA

There's fennel for you, and columbines: there's rue for you; and here's some for me: we may call it herb-grace o' Sundays: O you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died: they say he made a good end,--

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.4.5.html>

- Here, Ophelia passes out flowers with symbolic meanings.
- Fennel represents flattery and wilts quickly when picked; so Ophelia indirectly insults the king.
- Columbines represent adultery and ingratitude.
- Rue also symbolizes adultery.
- Daisies represent innocence, which she gives to no one as everyone is guilty.
- Violets represent faithfulness, yet she gives them to no one as her father was murdered.

# Symbolic Animals

## Animal

- Birds
- Dogs
- Cats
- Elephants and Owls
- Snakes

## Meaning

- Freedom, the ability to travel
- Loyalty
- Independence
- Wisdom
- Deception, evil

# Symbolic Seasons

## Season

- **Winter**
  - Snow
  - ice
- **Spring**
  - Flowers
  - Plant buds
- **Summer**
  - Sunshine
  - Long days
- **Fall**
  - Leaves changing color
  - Plants dying

## Meaning

- Death, rest
  - Elderly phase of life
- Rebirth, hopefulness
  - Infant/teenage phase of life
- Adventure, carefree attitude
  - Early adulthood phase of life
- Change, resourcefulness
  - Later adulthood phase of life

# Symbolic Elements

## Element

- Fire
- Air
- Water
- Earth

## Meaning

- Passion, purification, masculinity, vengeance
- Necessity, mobility, inspiration
- Peacefulness, purity, life
- Stability, sustenance, femininity

# Religious Symbols

## Symbol

- Cross
- Star of David
- Crescent Moon and Star
- Pentagram
- Lotus

## Meaning

- Christian
- Jewish
- Islamic
- Pagan
- Buddhist

# Weather Symbols

## Symbol

- Storms
- Rain
- Heat
- Sunny days
- Wind
- Hurricanes, Tornados, Tsunamis

## Meaning

- Trouble
- Depression, cleansing
- Anger, trouble
- Hopefulness, pleasantness
- Change
- Chaos, destruction

# General Symbols

- **Seeds, plants**
  - If a character plants a seed or buys a plant, this may symbolize growth, change or new beginnings.
- **Clocks, timepieces**
  - If a character is surrounded by clocks or notices them often, this may symbolize an awareness of mortality.
- **Candles**
  - If a character lights a candle, this could represent hope. It could also represent acknowledgement or “lighting the way”.

# General Symbols

- **Books, Libraries**

- Characters surrounded by books or who spend a great deal of time in libraries are usually associated with intelligence and knowledge.

- **Road, path**

- Roads and paths symbolize journeys. The more difficult a path, the more the character must overcome to achieve his or her goal.

# General Symbols

- **Darkness**
  - If a character is often enveloped in darkness, this could symbolize being lost, or feeling hopeless. Darkness often represents the unknown, fears or evil.
- **Light**
  - If a character is often enveloped in light, this could symbolize knowledge or hopefulness. Light often represents security and goodness.
- **Sunrise**
  - Typically represents a new beginning or hope.
- **Sunset**
  - Typically represents closure or the end.

# Literary Symbol Examples

- Chopin's *The Awakening*
  - In this novel, the protagonist, Edna, feels trapped within her marriage. The author surrounds Edna with birds, both caged to represent her current state and flying free to represent her wish for freedom.
- Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*
  - In this novel, the protagonist, Gatsby, is captivated by a green light. This light symbolizes his goal, his hope: Daisy.

# Identifying Symbols

- A reader should pay attention to tangible items the author repeats in the text.
- For example, a character may always notice clocks or perhaps different types of birds appear throughout the novel.
- The author will most likely include symbols during important passages in the text.