

Writing an Essay about Symbols in a Work of Literature

Notes on symbols

A. Symbols

1. Word for symbol is derived from the Greek word meaning “to throw together” (syn = together, ballein = to throw)
2. A symbol creates an equation between a specific object, scene, character or action and an idea. It is a substitute for the thing being symbolized.
3. **Cultural or universal symbols** are those that are generally recognized by a cultural tradition.
A cultural symbol that refers to another work of literature is called an allusion.
4. **Contextual (private or authorial) symbols** are not universally recognized and are found in the context of the individual work itself. The context and circumstances of the work make it a symbol.
5. **Archetypes** are patterns that appear through history and across cultures. Archetypes are usually characters but can also be a plot, a setting, an image or a theme.
6. To determine what is symbolic, one should judge the importance that the author gives to a particular object, action or character.
7. **Rule of three:** One time is literal.
Two times could be a coincidence.
Third time a pattern has been established and thus indicates that it may be a symbol.
8. **Allusions** are references to another work of art

B. Allegory

1. An allegory is a narrative in which characters and places stand for abstract qualities such as virtues and vices.
2. Although some stories are allegories from beginning to end, others are allegorical, meaning they contain passages that could stand out as an allegory.
3. Readers/listeners learn and memorize stories and tales more easily than moral lessons; therefore, allegory is a favorite method of teaching morality.

4. At times, though, expression of ideas has been censored. Thus, some authors have expressed their views indirectly in the form of allegory.
5. An allegorical interpretation is valid if parallel connections can be **closely** established.

The Essay

Purpose—inform your audience (people who will read your paper) about a position you are taking concerning a symbol or symbols in a work of literature.

Goal—locate, organize, and synthesize information on a symbol or symbols in a work of literature to support your thesis

Thesis—the idea that you are defending in your paper, your thoughts on a specific work by an author. You must prove this with pieces of textual evidence taken from the work in question.

Line X proves my thesis because it states, "YYYYY."

Prewriting

Questions to consider when planning an essay about symbols:

1. What cultural or universal symbols can you discover in names, objects, places, situations, or actions in a work? List them explaining their significance.
2. What contextual symbolism can be found in the work? What makes you think it is symbolic? What do the symbols represent?
3. How definite or direct is the symbolism? Give specific examples to prove your point. How systematically is it used? How necessary to the work is it? Explain. To what degree does it strengthen the work? Explain.
4. How strongly does the work stand on its own without the reading for symbolism? Explain.
5. Make parallel lists of as many symbols as you can find to show how qualities of a particular symbol match the qualities of a character or an action.
6. What mythological or Christian identification is established in the work, if any? List them. What do you find in the story (names, situations, etc.) that enables you to determine its mythological or Biblical significance? How is the myth or Bible story to be understood? What symbolic value does the myth or Bible story have? What current and timeless application does it have?
7. Is the story an allegory? If so, explain the correspondence between the allegorical elements and the concepts that they represent. If not, are there parts of the novel that could have an allegorical interpretation? If so, what are they? What do these allegorical elements represent?
8. Why do you think the author has included the specific symbols that you've found in the work? What makes you believe this is his or her intent?

Drafting

Organization for an essay about symbols

I. Introduction

- A. (Catch the reader's attention in some fashion)
- B. Relate the central idea of the essay to the meaning of the major symbols in the work
- C. Include justification for the parallels created by the symbol/s.
- D. Thesis statement—comprehensive statement about the symbol/s and the world.

Body

A. Symbolism

1. The meaning of a major symbol

Identify the symbol and what it stands for. Then answer questions such as these: Is the symbol cultural or contextual? How do you decide? How do you derive your interpretation of the symbolic meaning? What is the extent of the meaning? Does the symbol undergo modification or new application if it reappears? How does the symbol affect your understanding of the story? Does the symbol bring out any ironies? How does the symbol add strength or depth to the story?

OR

2. The development and relationship of symbols

For two or more symbols, consider issues such as these: How do the symbols connect to each other? What additional meanings do the symbols provide? Are they complementary, contradictory, or ironic? Do the symbols control the form of a work? How? Can these comparable objects and conditions be viewed symbolically in relationship to the development of the story? Other issues are whether the symbols fit naturally or artificially into the context of the story, or whether and how the writer's symbols create unique qualities or excellences.

B. Allegory

1. The application and meaning of the allegory

What is the subject of the story (allegory, fable, parable, myth)? How may it be more generally applied to ideas or to qualities of human character, not only of its own time but also of our own? What other versions of the story do you know, if any? Does it illustrate, either closely or loosely, particular philosophies or religious views? If so, what are these? How do you know?

2. The consistency of the allegory

Is the allegory used consistently throughout the story, or is it used intermittently? Explain and illustrate this use. Would it be correct to call the story allegorical rather than an allegory? Can you determine who parts of the story are introduced for the allegorical importance?

Conclusion

You may wish to do one or two of the following:

1. Summarize the main points (weak).
2. Describe general impressions.
3. Explain the general impact of the symbolic or allegorical methods.
4. Indicate personal responses.
5. Suggest further lines of thought.