

One Page Concept Review: Symbol

What is it?

A symbol is a concept with significance beyond its obvious and immediate meaning (used to represent something else). It can be either be metaphor or metonym, though they are commonly the latter.

Why should I care?

Discussion of symbols (as either metaphor or metonym) will probably be reserved for Q3 essays, though occasionally College Board chooses a prose passage or poem that is especially rich in figurative concepts (Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain," for instance, was used one year as the poem for a Q1 prompt, and that year one could have written about the sea creatures, the iceberg, and the *Titanic* itself as symbols).

It really does pay to think about symbols in the major works you have read over the course of the year, since the symbols give you an obvious way of writing about some of the big ideas in the works themselves.

For example, you should be prepared to write about how symbols of fertility/infertility, field/house, heat/water, and desiccation/barrenness function in *Yerma* and what is used to develop these ideas. Of all the major works we've read this year, it's worth revisiting the passages we talked about in class for *Yerma*, since the most obvious way of writing about the play is to write about these symbols, and you want your paraphrase to be as specific as possible

Other important symbols in books you might have read in this class include: the cat's table in *The Cat's Table*, satellites and the other world in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, dolls and shoes in *My Brilliant Friend*, wells and the other world in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (the title symbol, by contrast, is much less important), solitude in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and the road in *The Famished Road*. These aren't concepts that are just nice to know; they are central to the ideas that the author is trying to communicate to you, the reader. Be prepared to write about any of these.

Sometimes an AP prompt specifically interrogates the idea of symbol, so this isn't just an exercise in abstract thinking.

How do I do it?

- **Establish the context.** Especially in a Q3 essay, understanding how a symbol functions is only going to be coherent in relationship to its appearance.
- **Analyze as either a metaphor or metonym.** If it's a one-off appearance of something or if the context never changes, it's probably a metaphor. If the context of each appearance changes or functions differently in different contexts, it's almost certainly a metonym.
- **If you don't quite know whether it is a metaphor or metonym, just refer to it as a symbol.** A little imprecision is generally preferable to an obvious mistake.
- **Focus on how the device works to structure the text.** Symbols tend to recur in some way, or else they become important at obvious turning points in a work. If the symbol does recur, it

can probably be analyzed as an image, probably picking up subtly different connotations in each iteration of appearance.

- **Connect to theme.** There's really no other point in discussing symbolism if you aren't doing this, since this is why symbols exist in the first place (to develop themes).
- **Titles of works are often symbolic.** Be attentive to this possibility.

How do students screw this up?

Failure to Explain

- **If you're going to read a work allegorically, you have to explain the logic of the symbols.** This is non-negotiable. To give an obvious example, claiming that the desert imagery in *Yerma* functions as a symbol of Yerma's infertility is obviously correct, but without you explaining why this is the case, it is unpersuasive. Do not treat a work of literature like a puzzle key where all you do is say, "This idea stands for this, and this idea stands for that." This sort of pseudo-analysis is just a list of claims, not an argument (that requires evidence and explanation).
- **In Q3 essays, context is everything.** Remember, what seems obvious to you may not be obvious to someone who hasn't recently read a work (if they've read it at all), and a discussion of symbolism is only going to work if the reader of your essay understands the context in which it occurs. It is your job to bring the reader up to speed on this.

Failure to Connect to Other Elements in a Work

- **Symbols work through implied comparisons and associations with other elements in the text.** Draw out these details and explain how they connect. If a character is symbolic, for example, how does he or she function as a foil to another character? If an idea is symbolic, how does it relate to a big conflict in the text?
- **You should connect symbols to themes.** This is why these particular literary elements exist in the first place, so there really is no point in uncovering and explicating them if you're not connecting them to theme.

Failure to Analyze as Literary Elements

- **Discussion of symbolic content works best as conclusions.** This can be either in the form of a summing up at the ends of paragraphs (establishing the "so what?" of your previous discussion) or as a conclusion to an essay (where you should be establishing the big picture). Either way, before you reach the point where you're discussing the important stuff, make sure you've analyzed the symbol as a literary element (diction, imagery, and/or figurative language) first so that the thrust of your analysis is moving from the more technical to the broader conceptual idea.
- **Symbols can be analyzed as imagery, metaphor, and/or metonym.** They will always work according to the logic of either metaphor or metonym, but they can usually be analyzed as images too (in which case you should be discussing their connotation).