

LITERARY TERMS:

SYMBOLISM  
AND  
ALLEGORY

# SYMBOLISM

- **SYMBOL**: an object that stands for itself *and* a greater idea; it creates a direct, meaningful **link** between...

a specific object, scene, character, or action

(AND)



abstract ideas, values, persons or ways of life.

(A *SIGN* is different because it is an object that is taken literally, while a *SYMBOL* can be taken both literally and figuratively)

# INTERPRETING SYMBOLS

A symbol can have a variety meanings...

1. PERSONAL: a meaning uniquely associated with our experiences
2. CONTEXTUAL: a private meaning created by an author
3. CULTURAL: a meaning uniquely influenced by our current culture

(ex: dogs represent **faithfulness** in China, but IMPURITY in Indian/South Asian cultures)

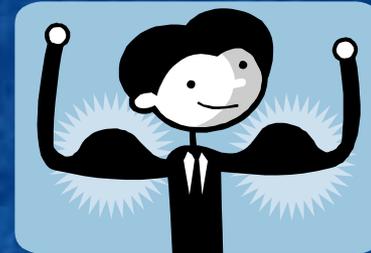
...and...



4. UNIVERSAL: a meaning that is given to a thing by most people and cultures



(ex: lions suggest deity, power and courage in many cultures)



NOTE: these may be hard to discern because in order to discover these, you have to put aside your own personal and cultural lenses

## On INTERPRETATION:

A piece of writing will always mean more than a writer intended because of personal associations. You may not understand all of the contextual symbols an author uses, but might get meaning out of something the author never planned.

We can derive meaning from the symbol itself, but can also make inferences based on how a universal symbol is exhibited or used.

(ex: Universally, water represents life and purity, so how we might interpret the use of a  
POLLUTED RIVER in a story?)



# PART 1: HOW MANY SYMBOLS CAN YOU ASSOCIATE WITH UNIVERSAL, **ABSTRACT** IDEAS OR VALUES??

HINT: Don't limit yourselves to objects, think also about shapes and colors or just *parts* of a picture



# FROM SYMBOLS TO SYMBOLISM

(*SYMBOLISM* is simply the use of symbols in art or literature.)



## PART 2: "I DREAMT A DREAM..."

Dreams are often full of strange events and objects that can be symbolic in nature. In fact, there is tons of literature out there that interprets dreams by putting universal meanings to these unexplainable things.

**Your assignment is to** take as many objects/symbols you discovered in "PART 1" and use them in a narrated dream-sequence. Keep in mind that dreams do not interpret themselves; they are mysterious and abstract. Your job is to assimilate a dream in all its weirdness; however, it needs to start with a chronological sequence of events that can include your symbols along the way. It should be at least a half-page long, and no longer than a page. When we're done, let's see if we can't interpret each other's strange night-time visions...

# ALLEGORY...

...a complete and self-contained narrative that can also be applied to a parallel set of external situations which may be political, moral, religious or philosophical.

In other words, it tells a real story and a symbolic story simultaneously.

Like symbols, allegories can be personal, contextual, cultural and universal.



# WHAT'S IT LOOK LIKE??

You may recognize the...

...**PARABLE**: a short allegorical story designed to illustrate or teach some truth, religious principle, or moral lesson.

OR other familiar stories like...

- The Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan
- Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll
- The Lord of the Rings trilogy, Tolkien
- The NARNIA series, C.S. Lewis
- The Divine Comedy, Dante

AND very soon in your future...

- The Lord of the Flies, William Golding



SYMBOLISM AND ALLEGORY are *MODES*  
*that expand meaning.*

Can you identify any use of these “modes”  
in the literature you’ve read so far this  
year?

