

Symbol

(Simplified from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

In the widest possible sense, a *symbol* is "anything that stands for something else." But if we used that definition, literally every word would count as a symbol (since words stand for things). So literary critics use a narrower, more useful definition:

A symbol is a word or image that represents an object or event and that object or event itself suggests something further, some deeper meaning beyond its literal sense.

Public symbols vs. private symbols

Some symbols are shared by an entire culture, so most people recognize them immediately. These are called *public or conventional symbols*. Examples: "the Cross" (Christianity), a national flag (patriotism/nationhood), "the Good Shepherd" (protective care, often religious). Because these meanings are widely shared, a reader doesn't need any special context to understand them.

But poets often use *private or personal symbols* instead, symbols whose deeper meaning is not automatically shared by everyone, but built up gradually through how the poet uses them. Sometimes a poet draws on associations that are fairly widely known even if not officially "public". For instance, a peacock commonly suggests pride, an eagle suggests heroism, a rising sun suggests birth or new beginnings, and a setting sun suggests death or ending. Other times, a poet invents a meaning almost entirely on their own, and these are the hardest symbols to interpret, because you can only understand them by paying close attention to the specific poem (and sometimes the poet's other works).

To understand exactly what makes something a symbol (as opposed to a simile, metaphor, or allegory), it helps to trace one word — "rose" — through several different uses:

As a simile: Robert Burns wrote, "O my love's like a red, red rose." This is a simile because it uses the word "like" to directly compare two things (his love and a rose).

As a metaphor: A poem calling a woman "our rose, our star" is using metaphor — no "like," but still a direct one-to-one comparison.

As an allegorical emblem: In the medieval poem *The Romance of the Rose*, a half-opened rose is protected by characters with names like "Fair Welcome" and "Jealousy." Here, the story makes it completely clear what the rose represents: a woman's love (and body). Because the meaning is spelled out clearly through the

story's structure, this is called allegory, and the rose here is an "emblem," a symbol with one fixed, decodable meaning.

As a true symbol: Now compare this to William Blake's poem "*The Sick Rose*":

*O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.*

This rose is not a simile (there's no "like," and no clearly named second thing being compared). It's also not a clean allegory — Blake doesn't give us a story that spells out exactly what the rose represents, the way *The Romance of the Rose* does. Instead, certain words — "bed," "joy," "love" — don't quite fit an actual flower, and combined with the poem's dark, ominous tone, they make us sense a deeper meaning, without stating it directly. Many readers interpret this poem as being about corrupted love: a joyful, honest relationship being destroyed by secrecy, deceit, or hidden desire. But notice: the poem never says this outright. It only suggests it. That open, suggestive quality, meaning that points in a direction without landing on one fixed answer, is exactly what makes something a symbol, rather than an allegory.

Difference between symbol and allegory

Two famous writers gave very influential explanations of the difference between symbol and allegory, and it's worth understanding both, because they say the same thing in two different ways.

I. Coleridge's explanation: S.T. Coleridge said that allegory is just an abstract idea "translated" into a picture: you can always translate it back into the plain idea. (If a story shows a character named "Greed" doing greedy things, you don't need to interpret much, the allegory tells you directly what it means.) A symbol, on the other hand, is different: Coleridge said a symbol actually shares something with the larger truth it represents, rather than simply illustrating that truth from the outside. He called this quality "translucence" — meaning that a bigger truth seems to shine through the symbol, the way light shines through a translucent object, rather than the symbol simply standing in front of the truth like an opaque sign.

II. Goethe's explanation: Goethe explained the difference this way: if a poet starts with a general idea and then goes looking for a specific example to illustrate that idea, the result is allegory. But if a poet starts with something specific and particular,

and, without necessarily even planning to, a larger, more general truth naturally shines through that specific thing, that is true symbolism. Goethe said an allegory can always be fully translated back into words (the idea it illustrates). But a true symbol can never be fully explained in words. There's always something left over, something that can't be fully captured, no matter how much you explain it.

Putting it simply: Allegory has two clear, separable parts: a picture, and the idea the picture stands for. A symbol has only one part: the image itself, which points toward meaning without ever being fully "unlocked" or exhausted by explanation.

The Symbolist Movement

Beyond the general use of symbols, "Symbolism" (with a capital S) also refers to a specific group of French poets, starting with Charles Baudelaire in 1857 (with his book *Fleurs du mal*, meaning "*Flowers of Evil*"), and including later poets like Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry. These poets believed in something called "correspondences": the idea that there are hidden, systematic connections between the human mind and the outer physical world, and even between the material world and a spiritual realm beyond it. Baudelaire wrote that in both nature and the spiritual world, everything is connected, echoing, and meaningful. This French movement had an enormous influence on later English-language poets, including W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, and it shaped major works of Modernist literature, including T. S. Eliot's famous poem *The Waste Land*.