

## 15. SYMBOLISM AND ALL THAT

Maybe you never got anything out of your literature courses except a strong dislike for “analyzing a story to death.” Sometimes the symbolic interpretation of a story or poem can seem pretty far-fetched.

Nevertheless, as soon as you start writing, you start writing on some kind of symbolic level. Maybe you’re not conscious of it, but it’s there: in your characters, their actions, the setting, and the images. (Some writers are very powerful symbolists, but don’t realize it; that’s why authors are often poor critics of their own work.)

You may argue that your writing simply comes out of your own life and experience, and has nothing to do with “literary” writing. Well, no doubt you’ll include elements of your own life, but whether you like it or not you’ll find yourself treating that experience like gingerbread dough: You’ll shape it into a mold to create a gingerbread man, or you’ll have a shapeless mess on your hands.

What you write is really a kind of commentary on everything you’ve read so far in your life. If you really get a kick out of romance novels, and you write one based on your own torrid love life which is quite different from most romances, your novel is still a comment on what you’ve read.

This is not the place for a long discussion of the theory of fiction. You should learn at least the basics of that theory, however, and no better source exists than *Anatomy of Criticism*, by Northrop Frye. It’s usually available in libraries in big cities and universities. You may find parts of it heavy going, but it will repay your efforts by letting you look at your own work more perceptively, and by enabling you to develop structure and symbol more consciously.

To paraphrase Frye very crudely, every story is about a search for identity. That identity depends largely on the protagonist’s position (or lack of position) in society.

A tragic story shows a person who moves from a socially integrated position (the Prince of Denmark, the King of Thebes) to a socially isolated one (a dead prince, a blind beggar). A comic story shows a person moving from social isolation (symbolized by poverty, lack of recognition, and single status) to social integration (wealth, status, and marriage to one’s beloved).

Fiction in the western tradition draws on two major sources: ancient Greek literature, and the Judaeo-Christian Bible. Both sources are concerned with preservation or restoration of society, and with the individual hero as savior or social redeemer. Hamlet wants to redeem Denmark from his uncle’s usurpation; Oedipus wants to save Thebes from the curse that he himself unintentionally placed on it.

In precisely the same way, the private eye redeems his society by identifying who is guilty (and therefore who is innocent); the frontier gunman risks his life to preserve the honest pioneers; the mutant telepath faces danger to search for fellow-mutants.

Now, you can play this straight or you can twist it. The private eye may find that everyone is guilty. The gunman may be in the pay of crooked land speculators. The mutant may find he is sterile, that his talents will die with him. As noted in "Ten Points on Plotting," an ironic plot undercuts its surface meaning. Winston Smith, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is happily integrated at the end of the story, but we don't share his happiness.

How you use symbols can also undercut or change your apparent meaning. Let's take a look at some common symbols and patterns, and how they can comment on your story.

#### **THE NATURAL CYCLE:**

Day to night, spring to winter, youth to old age. These suggest all kinds of imagery:

light/goodness, darkness/evil  
spring/hope, winter/despair  
girl/innocence, crone/evil knowledge, impending death

Northrop Frye argues that we associate images of spring with comedy; images of summer with romance; images of autumn with tragedy; images of winter with satire and irony. Note, however, that here "comedy" means a story of social unification; "tragedy" means a story of social isolation; and "romance" means a story in which the characters are larger than life and encounter wonders usually not seen in reality.

Bear in mind that images associated with these cycles are usually all you need: at the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a cold April wind kills the crocuses that ought to promise hope and renewal. Similarly, autumn leaves can symbolize an aging person, a dying society, or the onset of evil.

#### **THE NATURAL VERSUS THE HUMAN WORLD:**

Desert/garden  
Sinister forest/park  
Pastoral world/city

In western literature, the journey from innocence to experience is often symbolized by the protagonist's journey from an idyllic world close to nature, to an urban world that has closed itself against nature. (In Biblical terms, this is the journey from Eden through the desert of the fallen world, to the Heavenly City.) Returns to the natural world are sometimes successful; sometimes the protagonist manages to bring the urban world

into a new harmony with nature. In other cases, an urban hero finds meaning and value through some kind of contact with nature.

#### **THE HERO'S QUEST:**

Mysterious or unusual birth  
Prophecy that he will overthrow the present order, restore a vanished order  
Secluded childhood among humble people in a pastoral setting  
Signs of the hero's unusual nature  
Journey/quest—a series of adventures and ordeals that test the hero, culminating in a climactic confrontation  
Death—real or symbolic  
Rebirth  
Recognition as savior/king; formation of new society around him

#### **SYMBOLIC IMAGES:**

A symbol may be good or evil, depending on its context, and the author is quite free to develop the context to convey a particular symbolism. For example, the tree is usually a symbol of life—but not if you use it as the venue for a lynching, or you turn its wood into a crucifix or a gibbet. Here are some images and their most common symbolic meanings:

Garden: nature ordered to serve human needs (*paradis* is a Persian word for garden)  
Wilderness: nature hostile to human needs  
River: life, often seen as ending in death as the river ends in the sea  
Sea: chaos, death, source of life  
Flower: youth, sexuality; red flowers symbolize death of young men  
Pastoral animals: Ordered human society  
Predatory animals: Evil; threats to human order  
Fire: light, life or hell and lust  
Sky: heaven, fate or necessity  
Bridge: Link between worlds, between life and death

#### **SYMBOLIC CHARACTERS:**

Different types of characters recur so often that they've acquired their own names. Here are some of the most common:

*Eiron*: One who deprecates himself and appears less than he really is; includes most types of hero (Ulysses, Frodo, Huck Finn). The term "irony" derives from *eiron*.

*Alazon*: An imposter, one who boasts and presents himself as more than he really is; subtypes include the braggart soldier (General Buck Turgidson in *Dr. Strangelove*) and obsessed philosopher/mad scientist (Saruman, *Dr. Strangelove*). In my novel *Tsunami*, I named my villain Allison; although he starts as a movie director,

he ends up as a braggart soldier.

*Tricky slave:* Hero's helper (Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*; Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*).

*Helpful giant:* Hero's helper; in tune with nature (Ents in *TLOTR*; Chewbacca in *Star Wars*).

*Wise old man:* Hero's helper; possessor of knowledge (Gandalf, Obi-Wan Kenobi).

*Buffoon:* Creates a festive mood, relieves tension (Sam Gamgee, Mercutio).

*Churl:* Straight man, killjoy or bumpkin (Uriah Heep).

*Fair maiden:* Symbol of purity and redemption (Rowena) or of repressed sexuality (any number of Ice Maidens).

*Dark woman:* Symbol of lust & temptation (or of natural sexuality).

*Hero's double:* Represents the dark side of the hero's character (Ged's shadow in *Wizard of Earthsea*).

Since these images are much older than what is now politically correct, they can cause problems; readers may see them as affirmations of old, oppressive social values. However, many modern writers now use them ironically to criticize, not endorse, the values the images originally expressed. Nevertheless, be aware that if your heroines are always blonde virgins and your villainesses are always seductive brunettes, you may be sending a message you don't consciously intend.

Be aware also that you're perfectly free to develop your own symbolic system. Just as the "Rosebud" sled in *Citizen Kane* symbolizes Kane's lost childhood innocence, you can make a symbol out of a hat rack, a catcher's mitt, or an old bus schedule.

You're also free to make your symbols understandable to your readers, or to keep them part of your private mythology. If you associate a catcher's mitt with your the death of your hero's father, the reader will understand – on some level – what you're trying to say. If the catcher's mitt seems important to your hero, but you don't tell us why, we can only guess at the symbolic meaning.

**Assignment:**

Write yourself a letter about the images, objects or events that seem to dominate your thinking about your novel. See whether they might indeed carry some symbolic level of meaning, and if that level is in harmony with your conscious intent.

For example, does every important scene begin at sunrise, or in stormy weather? Are those symbolic associations important to the story you want to tell?

Look closely at your characters. Is your hero (male or female) an eiron, someone whose true worth is concealed? Have you got a wise old mentor advising your hero? Does the villain share a lot of traits with the hero?

All of these elements are perfectly acceptable, but they will probably work better if you use them consciously. You may want to research the traditional meanings of common symbolic images like the ones listed above. Then, whether you use a given symbol positively or ironically, you'll know what you're doing.

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