

Themes In Symbolism Worksheet

Symbolism is a tricky element for writers to master. Its ability to represent ideas and qualities requires deeper thought than other literary elements do. But when symbolism is used effectively, it can make a story even more powerful and unforgettable. Plus, its purpose can serve as another way of nurturing literary themes.

So, how can you use your story's symbols to delivery literary themes without making them too obvious or haphazard? With the **Themes In Symbolism Worksheet!** Using the activities from my DIY MFA post "Developing Themes In Your Stories: Part 5 – Symbolism," this worksheet will help you identify the two different types of symbols and choose potential symbols that align with [our working definition of "theme."](#)

Before using this worksheet, [click here to read my DIY MFA article on themes in symbolism.](#)

Instructions:

1. Identifying Potential "Real-World" Symbols

We see symbols in the real world on a daily basis. Sometimes their meanings are explicit (e.g., drivers know how to interpret their local traffic lights and road signs). Other times they're more abstract, such as the following:

- **Cultural Images:** The Celtic cross, Chinese yin yang, and other regional / cultural symbols represent ideas or qualities that bear significance to its respective peoples.
- **Animals & Creatures:** People have associated animals, insects, birds, and other creatures with abstract ideas (pride, hope, freedom, love, etc.) for centuries.
- **Colors:** Black, white, red, green – all colors are associated with different concepts and emotions. Their symbolic interpretation may differ from one culture to another.
- **Names:** The names of people, settings, and other objects often mean something in their language of origin.

Using real-world symbols requires an understanding of what those symbols reflect. Take some time to research the symbols you're considering. Find out which ideas and concepts they represent, and see if they fit the story's themes. That way, readers will be better able to link the tangible (the symbol) with the abstract (idea / concept) after multiple readings.

Themes In Symbolism Worksheet

Activity #1: Review some of the names, tokens, and other objects in your WIP that are also found in the real world, and research their potential symbolism. Do the represented ideas and concepts match those explored in your story? If not, what other names, tokens, or objects might be a better fit?

Use the blank space below or on the back of the page for your answers.

Themes In Symbolism Worksheet

2. Identifying Story-Specific Symbols

Symbolism can also be drawn from within the story. Some symbols can be personal to a character, such as a tattoo chosen for a specific reason or a necklace, coin, or other token that elicits certain memories. Others come from aspects of the story world's history or culture that are significant to both the protagonist and the overall plot.

With a story-specific symbol, **it's crucial to share relevant history or backstory so readers can draw accurate conclusions about its meaning.** Be careful not to “info-dump” when introducing the symbol, though. Include the necessary details, then treat the symbol's later appearances in the story as echoes to that introduction and hints to its respective theme.

A famous recent example of story-specific symbolism is the mockingjay in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. Check out [my DIY MFA post](#) to learn how the mockingjay's symbolism is established and developed during the story.

Activity #2: Revisit your story world and character backstories. Do any names, tokens, and other objects bear a personal, cultural, or historical significance? How does this significance relate to the story's themes?

Use the blank space below or on the back of the page for your answers.

Themes In Symbolism Worksheet

3. Using the Five Keys to Connecting Symbolism with Theme

[The working definition of “theme”](#) we’ve developed at DIY MFA starts off with, “An idea, concept, or lesson....” If themes are ideas or concepts, then symbolism is a vessel for delivering those ideas and concepts. In other words, symbols should accurately reflect a story’s themes, and therefore must be chosen carefully.

To ensure a story’s symbols connect with appropriate themes, use these five keys based on the working definition of “theme”:

1. **Theme Expressed:** What theme does the symbol represent?
2. **Medium:** What form(s) does this symbol take (e.g., objects, dialogue, names)?
3. **Significance:** How is the symbol important to the story? Is its importance limited to the protagonist? Or, does it impact the story world at large?
4. **Frequency:** Does the symbol recur on an as-needed basis?
5. **Timing:** Does the symbol appear at appropriate moments that link it to its respective theme?

Activity #3: Answer the questions posed in the Five Keys to Connecting Symbols with Theme with the symbols you examined in Activities #1 and #2. Based on your answers, how effective are these symbols in the story? If needed, what changes could you make to improve the symbolism (e.g., increase or decrease the number of appearances in the text, raise its significance)?

Use the blank space below or on the back of the page for your answers.