

Little Book of Symbols & Context

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Disclaimer

When you have a B.A. in English Literature and teach literary analysis you read literature differently than the average for-fun reader. You read analytically. So, if the author wrote “blood-red velvet drapes concealed the dirt-encrusted window,” and I’m reading literature—as opposed to a light beach romance—I’m going to focus on the words *blood*, *velvet*, *concealed*, and *dirt-encrusted* because I figure the author is giving us thematic, foreshadowing, contextual, plot, and character clues beyond the superficial.

For more on this subject, I suggest reading
How to Read Like a Literature Professor by Thomas C. Foster

Does this mean you have to write that way? NO, of course not!

Because this is the *Little Book of Symbols & Context* I left out most of the examples. For those, you’ll have to read my blogs. Or email, tweet, or Facebook a question.

Whatever you do, do not get hung up the “this means that” school of thought. The magic of writing is the way the writer creates an image or idea with words and punctuation.

Table of Contents

Setting
Direction
Hot and Cold
Biblical Allusions
Shapes
Architecture
Blood
Body
Eyes
Color
Color Descriptors
Whatnots
Fire & Water
Illness
Light & Dark
Sex
Mealtime
More Water
Geography
Weather
Nature

Seasons

Setting

Usually when folks think of setting they think physical location. But setting is much more than that. Authors may construct setting like they do characters and plot.

Setting is a powerful element for establishing themes and may reflect the author's own background, biases, and perspectives.

Setting can influence, shape, and emphasize a character's actions and ideas. Setting can drive plot, create mood, or assume the role of antagonist.

Settings can be:

- political
- time frame (minutes, hours, days, years)
- historical
- financial
- socio-economic
- cultural
- religious

- dystopian/utopian
- magical
- mythical
- surreal
- constructed/ alternate /parallel/imaginary
- dream (think *Inception*)
- virtual (think *Tron*)
- psychological
- attitudinal
- industrial
- seasonal

Setting may refer to:

- physical place
- temperature
- weather
- geography
- landscape/topography

Which Direction Did He Go?

North. East. South. West. Directions are often used symbolically. The direction a character travels often foreshadows his moral growth or decline.

An important caveat. The literary symbolism associated with direction is used by northern hemisphere European/North American authors. You'll understand why in a moment.

- **NORTH** is traditionally associated with colder weather, and so is linked to austerity, starkness, industriousness, isolation, cold-heartedness, hostility, and bitterness. Like the thick layers necessary to protect one from the cold (be it psychological, spiritual, or emotional) a character wears these layers as emotional protection.
- **SOUTH** is warm temperatures and sunny climes. It's where the wealthy went for rest and relaxation. It's associated with plenty, hedonism, clothing removal, and the hot sweaty acts one

engage in when naked. A character's lusts, passions, and raw subconscious are exposed.

Not convinced? Think of the geography of *Game of Thrones*. It's a fictional world—George R.R. Martin could have set the saga in the southern hemisphere but didn't. Even the name Stark is descriptive of a cold northern landscape.

- **WEST:** The symbolism of this direction might be an American thing. Freedom from rules, freedom from laws, adventure, fresh starts, morality, and possibilities are associated with this direction. In Mark Twain's *Huck Finn*, Huck and Jim decide to go west where they will be free from the racism and prejudice encountered in the story. Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is another example. John Galt and his groupies hide out in a valley in the west.
- **EAST:** Exotic and mysterious, it's linked to renewal, rebirth, early civilizations, and the location of the Garden of Eden (kind of vague directions if you ask me) and yet it's also associated with wealth and corruption.

Hot and Cold

Temperature symbolism is hot-hot-hot. Turn it up for burning anger or passion that sizzles. Turn it down to reveal character and mood. But be careful, the heated adjectives can be ambiguous in the cold reality of writing.

Temperature can:

- reveal mood
- be a plot device
- reveal a character's personality
- reveal a character's mood
- be thematic

The Great Gatsby is loaded with heat. Tom is a hot-head. Gatsby is hot for Daisy. Tom is hot for Myrtle and hot (with anger) when he discovers Daisy's infidelity. Myrtle is hot to be wealthy. Gatsby made all his money on hot goods. Myrtle's husband is hot to murder his wife's killer. The rising temperature mirrors the rising anger/lust of the characters.

HEAT—and all its scorching synonyms—can refer to:

- lust
- personality
- anger

- popularity
- enthusiasm

A Few Synonyms For Hot

Warm, summery, tropical, broiling, boiling, searing, blistering, sweltering, torrid, sultry, humid, muggy, roasting, baking, scorching, scalding, searing, heated, red-hot, steamy

Cold may refer to

- personality
- lack of emotion
- remoteness
- probability: It will be a cold day in hell when I forgive you.
- austerity

A Few Synonyms For Cold

chilly, chill, cool, freezing, icy, nippy, wintry, frosty, frigid, bitter, biting raw, bone-chilling, arctic, frozen, numb, shivery

Biblical Allusions

In the western world, Christianity and the Bible are engrafted in our collective conscience. Most people, even non-believers, know a bible story or two, which is why writers add depth and complexity with its timeless themes, stories, and recognizable names.

There are a thousands and thousands of examples of biblical allusions from literature and film. The better you know your Bible, the easier to find.

The Bible's timeless portrayals of **betrayal, sin, fall from grace, loss of innocence, and redemption** are brought to life within its pages.

Allusions to Biblical events may

- explain a theme, problem, experience, or event
- reinforce a theme, problem, or experience, or event
- add irony
- satirize
- condemn
- foreshadow
- characterize a person or place

Shapes

A few common biblical allusions (I believe these examples all come from *How To Read Like a Literature Professor*)

- names found in the Bible
- idyllic garden
- 7-day time frame
- one brother killing another
- tree of life/ tree of knowledge of good and evil
- serpents
- plagues
- floods
- parting of waters
- loaves of bread
- no room at the inn
- crucifixion
- 40 days
- escape from slavery
- wandering in a desert
- milk and honey
- tempted by Satan
- carpenter by trade
- 12 friends
- a cock crowing 3 times
- flaming bushes
- last suppers

Christianity doesn't have an exclusive on religious allusion. Novels and poems from other countries/cultures will allusions to Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, etc and their corresponding holy scriptures.

Before man carved pictographs and told the Gods' tales in cuneiform, shapes denoted meanings and were imbued with mystical power.

Circle/Sphere:

- universal symbol of completeness and perfection
- God
- sphere of Heaven
- circle of life
- movement of the stars and heavens
- Hindus and Buddhists associate it with birth, death, and rebirth
- Wheel of law in Buddhism
- A round table (early management style first practiced by the legendary King Arthur) denotes equality—all stakeholders having an equal share in solving a problem
- Dante saw Hell as a series of concentric circles
- **A ring** denotes a pledge or promise
- a **sphere** represents the spiritual aspect of Heaven/Universe
- **spirals** are symbolic of energy
- **spirals** drawn in a woman's womb indicate fertility
- **the helix** is also a fertility symbol

Triangle

- associated with the number 3
- beginning, middle, and end
- holy trinity
- body, soul, and spirit
- man, woman, and child

▪ **upward-pointing equilateral triangle :**

- male organ
- fire

▪ **down-ward pointing triangle:**

- a woman or her womanly parts
- water

▪ **base of a pyramid** represents the earth; the apex, heaven

Square

- stability
- lasting perfection
- four directions
- In Islam it represents the heart's susceptibility to the divine, angelic, human, and diabolic forces
- square halos in Christian art indicates the person was alive when painted

Cube

- material universe
- wisdom, veracity, and moral fortitude
- cloistered courtyard of religious structures
- endurance and security

Stars

- wisdom
- spiritual counsel or advice
- light of wisdom shining in the dark (sinful) world
- mythological figures or deities
- the dead
- Star of Bethlehem symbolizes Christ's birth
- **5-pointed pentagram** pointed upward represents a human (the top point is the head, 2 arms on the side points, 2 legs of the downward facing point)
- **upside down pentagram** is the sign of the Devil—the two upward pointing points signifying the devil's horns
- **6-pointed hexagram** (2 interlocking triangle) is symbolic of: 1) the conjoining of male and female; 2) the four elements; 3) Star of David; and 4) Judaism
- **the 7-pointed heptagram** is: 1) a magic symbol for pagans; 2) symbolic of the 7 days of creation; and 3) the 7 steps of enlightenment for Buddhists

▪
Mandala—not a shape per se but a pattern—it signifies

- search for inner peace or spiritual enlightenment
- pathway to the Divine or God
- a symbolic trap for malevolent spirits
- used as a tool or focal point in meditation
- universe

Architecture

The roof over your head, the window you gaze through, the threshold you walk across—all these structural features can be used symbolically in literature.

Window

- lets in the light of knowledge/understanding
- allows character to view the outside world—which may or may not be a good thing
- Are the windows dirty or clean?
- Are the drapes/ blinds closed or open?
- stained glass—especially those with religious iconography—shout RELIGION. The observer sees the world through the dogma of their religion

Door

- divide between good and evil
- transition from one stage of life to another
- divide between one world and another
- **Locked doors** suggest secrets and forbidden places/worlds/experiences

Archway

- divine or religious entrance into another state of being
- rebirth
- metaphysical time-space threshold

Wall

- strength
- division or barrier
- privacy

Floor

- earthy realm
- being grounded in reality
- material of the floor may be symbolic. Is its marble (wealth) or rustic wood (humility)?

Roof

- shelter
- keeps evil out
- shape of the roof may be suggestive.
- **Domed roofs** are emblematic of heaven

- **Low roofs** suggest restriction or being hemmed in by dogmas

- **Vaulting roofs** may be metaphor for high-mindedness or lofty ideals

Hallway

- transitional location
- location before deciding which symbolic door you will enter

Stair

- steps toward or away from morality, enlightenment
- winding staircases suggest mystery—one can't see straight ahead

Kitchen

- traditional domain of women
- maternal care taking, be it with food, spiritual, or motherly nourishment
- best place to get your hands on a knife

Living room/Drawing room

- room where proper social behavior was expected
- location of one's public persona

Bedroom

- love
- lust
- private room where one's true self appears

Blood

Library

- synonymous with learning, knowledge, and education
- place of ancient wisdom or secrets

Attic

- repository of tucked away memories and secrets
- place of half-remembered or forgotten truths
- storage for relics of the family's or ancestor's past

Basement

- deepest darkest secrets
- underworld or lower realms
- creepy or base desires

Blood is a powerful and often confusing symbol. From the Divine to the violent, our fascination with blood infuses our collective consciousness.

Blood is LIFE, a physical indicator of our existence. And yet, behind this crimson liquid life force, man has imbued blood with great spiritual, divine, and emotional dominion.

Blood is symbolic of both LIFE and DEATH.

Blood:

- determines destiny
- atones for sins
- appeases/placates angry gods
- saves—the Israelites marked their doors with blood from a slaughtered lamb so that the Spirit of the Lord knew to pass over their homes while on the way to killing every first born
- destroys
- heals
- is lustful passion
- is rage
- is violence

- is an ingredient in witch brews
- is Divine—Christ’s blood
- marks one’s entry into adulthood—blood brother rites and/or a woman’s first menses
- contaminates—some early cultures believed women’s monthly blood made them unclean
- drinking was one way to absorb the power of your enemies
- letting—in all its ancient and modern forms—releases emotional trauma or pain
- brings emotional trauma or pain
- a favorite of Vampires everywhere
- purifies and corrupts
- saves and curses
- doesn’t wash off—see Lady Macbeth for details
- incriminates and exonerates

Body

The body is a temple. And everybody knows a temple is place for worship, a place to access the Divine. Even Apostle Paul said, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). It should come as no surprise that our body parts hold ancient symbolic meanings.

Head

- important because reason, wisdom, intellect, and spirituality reside within
- equated with authority and power (heads of state, heads of corporations)
- bowed head is a sign of respect
- tilts, nods, or shakes are powerful communicators
- many-headed gods depicted different aspects or personalities —Shiva, Hecate, Brahma, and Janus have multiple heads

Hair

- divine power and virility
- sexuality

- inner and physical toughness—when Delilah snipped Samson’s tresses she reduced his physical strength
- cutting the hair was a sign of sacrifice or surrender. In modern times—if done by women—the act symbolizes rebellion or liberation from feminine gender roles/expectations
- Mary Magdalene’s long flowing hair was a sign of immoral sexual behavior

Ears

- associated with a seashell or a spiral
- associated with birth—Karma was born from his mother’s ear
- long ears are linked to wisdom in Buddhism
- the Satyr’s large pointed ears reflect his sexual and sensual nature

Nose

- knowing
- intrusiveness or meddlesome behavior/personality
- valued by early man as a way of finding food
- phallic symbol
- nose that grows in length indicate lies—courtesy of Pinocchio
- turned up nose displays contempt

Mouth

- deemed the creative force, yet it’s our mouths which can get us in trouble
- the Mouth of Hell devours the wicked
- articulates our heart’s desires
- just slap a big X-rated sign on the lips

Tongue

- symbolic of speech
- visible manifestation of the spoken word
- **teeth** are symbolic of animistic strength and aggression
- long teeth are a sign of ambition
- the tongue is either a destroyer or a creator
- sticking one’s tongue out harkens back to times when that gesture warded off evil spirits

Shoulders

- strength— think Atlas holding up the world
- power
- carrying responsibilities
-

Skeleton

- harbinger of death
- bones symbolize strength, stability, and determination
- Chakras, the body’s energy forces, are aligned with the spine

Organs

- intestines are symbolic of long life and eternity
- intestines were used for divination in early times
- the spleen is where melancholy and laughter come from (part of the Humors of the Body theory)
- the liver symbolized passion during ancient Rome times

Limbs

- balance and movement
- good luck
- arms are symbolic of strength, power, protection, and justice

Hands

- command
- protect
- bless/bestow
- pledge
- symbolize power and strength
- teach
- heal
- there's the omnipotent Hand of God
- Hamsa hand is a protective talisman used by Muslims and Jews to protect against the Evil Eye

- As expressive communicators, we're familiar with the meanings of: palms out, finger pointing to heaven, handshakes, hand wringing, and hand washing (Pontius Pilate and Lady Macbeth)
- hidden hands denote respect in Asian cultures, but mistrust in western

Gender-specific Body Parts

Early man was obsessed with those particular parts—
Wait! We still are!

- **male:** strength, power, and virility
- **female:** regeneration, fertility, procreation, and the miracle of birth

Feet

- mobility
- rooted or in-touch with self and nature
- bare feet touching earth is man's link to the Divine Earth
- a monk's bare feet signify their vow of poverty
- solid foundation
- washing another's feet is a symbol of hospitality and humility

Eyes

The mere glance glimmer gawk gaze ogle glare bore focus beam sparkle peek peer look goggle gape leer reveals a character's emotions. No wonder the eyes are the windows of the soul. But there's more to eyes than...well, meets the eye.

Eyes are powerful symbols whose meanings have ancient beginnings.

Eyes are symbolic of:

- enlightenment
- knowledge
- wisdom
- discernment
- spirituality

Eye Color

- **Brown** eyes are opaque and viewed as less emotional and more ordinary.
- **Black** eyes are deemed evil or cold-hearted or conversely, their emotions are of a fathomless depth.

- **Blue** eyes are associated with emotional and/or ethereal qualities, perhaps they appear more transparent, and thus believe we can see into their soul. Blue eyes are associated with the water and sky, two divine and mysterious elements. It's also easier for others to see pupil dilation in a blue-eyed person, which we know indicates emotion.
- **Green** eyes are deemed mysterious, exotic, magical and are often equated with witches and sorcery.

Eyes, no matter what color, can be described as:

- Cold- unemotional
- hard -uncaring
- warm - kind
- soft - loving and affectionate
- watery/cloudy - stricken with overwhelming emotion
- deep - harboring secrets or unexpressed emotion
- sparkling - excited, anticipatory, happy, and/or smitten
- dilated - indicating sexual arousal or drug use
- glowing - creepy, netherworld, evil, OR divine and celestial
- bright - keen, intelligent, curious
- sharp -accusatory, wary
- wide - wonder, amazement, incredulity

- blank - devoid of emotion, sociopathic, zombie-like

Color

Color is attached to a spectrum of emotions. Writers know they can use color to symbolize, reveal, and add irony. Remember color symbolism is fraught with ambiguity and duality, making it a vibrant way to add complexity.

Warm colors like yellow, red, and orange are considered stimulating.

Cool colors like blue, indigo, violet are soothing and peaceful.

Western and Eastern color symbolism is different.

Red

- passion and lust
- anger and aggression
- war and revolution
- fire and flame

Yellow

- sun and gold (metal)
- enlightenment and wisdom

- flowers and warmth
- cowardliness
- envy and treachery

Orange

- luxury and splendor
- a renunciation of earthly pleasures—think Buddhist monks garb

Blue

- sky and infinity
- the divine—the Egyptian god Amun and Hindu gods, Rama, Shive, and Krishna are blue.
- tranquility and reflection
- intellect
- depression
- sexual proclivities—blue movies
- socio-economic status—from blue-collar to blue blood
- In Egypt, blue was the color of truth.
- The Virgin Mary's blue robe signifies her purity.
- Indigo is the color of the Brow, or Third Eye of spiritual knowing and intuition.

Green

- spring and new life
- fertility and nature
- youth and inexperience

- hope and joy
- envy and jealousy and decay
- Recently connected with safeguarding our planet's resources promoted by the Green Movement

Purple/Violet

- royalty and wealth
- luxury
- power—Roman senators were identified by the purple stripe on their togas
- religion—Catholic clergy don purple vestments during Advent and Lent

Pink

- femininity
- baby girls
- gay pride

Black

- evil or darkness
- despair and death and mourning
- mortality
- secrecy
- ill-fortune
- disease

Gray

- gloom
- anonymity or inconspicuousness or namelessness
- old age
- uncertainty and unreliability and risk

White:

- purity and innocence
- goodness
- holiness
- In China, Japan and India, white is associated with death and mourning.
- surrender and peace

Color Descriptors

Does your character wear a red dress? What shade of red dress? Red—beyond the western symbolism of lust, power, and anger—doesn't really tell a reader all that much—which is OK if that's your intent. But if you want to add a bit of symbolic punch to your writing be mindful of the name you assign to that color.

- A **rose-colored** dress conveys ladylikeness or love
- A **cherry-red** dress is suggestive of sexual prowess or desire, or...ahem...a woman wishing to be deflowered
- An **apple-red** dress suggests something forbidden or idyllic
- A **blood-red** dress...well, when you mix two symbolic words you get a metaphoric punch in the symbolic face!
- A woman with **ruby** lips is sultry and expensive
- A woman with **candy-apple** lips sounds like a damn good fun time

You've all seen the meme dismissing color symbolism (and literary analysis) and yet consider this, fabric described as *bone* evokes a much different emotion than one described as *snow*.

Consider the following when assigning a color

- **Genre:** Sweet Romance novels might use more romancy color names. (caramel—sweet and gooey, like love—instead of light brown). Historical fiction authors need to be mindful of using color names that didn't exist in that century. A lipstick-red dress isn't gonna work if they had no lipstick back then. You're better off using a descriptor like *ruby*.
- **Revealing character:** Is your character a murderer? He/she might see their color world in shades of viscera. A gardener or florist they may see their world in terms of blooms and flora. A chef or a woman on a diet might describe the world with food colors.
- **Jewel tones** convey preciousness, worth, or rarity.
- **Nature colors** convey the idyllic.
- There are **city colors and farmland colors**, youthful and aged colors, fun colors, mysterious colors, clean colors and dirty colors, evil colors and good color descriptors.

Whatnots

A man's home is his/her castle. It's also chock full of symbolic furnishings and doodads.

Books

- Wisdom and learning
- Is the book old or new?
- Are pages torn out (think *Dead Poet's Society*) or bent?
- Is the print large or small? Does the book need a translation?
- Does book contain esoteric or forbidden or dangerous information? (Remember the movie *The Mummy* when the Egyptologist yells, "You must not read from the book!")

Bowls

- the feminine—it's a womb thing
- prosperity
- is bowl full or empty?
- What's in the bowl?
- what material is the bowl made from?

Box

- the unconscious mind—think Pandora
- limitations
- close-mindedness
- Is the box open or closed? Locked?
- What is box made of?
- Where is box kept?
- Who locks box?
- Who opens box?

Broom:

- spiritual cleaning/Ridding home of evil
- protection against curses
- witch transportation
- Who is doing the sweeping?
- What problem is swept away?

Fan

- femininity
- social class
- dispels evil spirits
- releases soul into immortal realm (Taoism).
- Who is holding fan?
- How is it used— to cool, hide, flirt, conceal?

Hearth

- home
- family
- emotional warmth
- females
- maternal nurturing
- Is fire smoldering, blazing, or cold?
- Who is tending the fire?
- Who is beneficiary of the warmth?
- What is burning? (a romantic or incriminating letter, a body, evidence?)
- How big is the fireplace?
- Is hearth ornate or simple? Luxurious, pretentious, or utilitarian?

Key

- access to wisdom
- freedom
- success
- secrets
- 2 crossed keys are a Christian emblem of the Gates of Heaven
- What is key made of?
- Who is using key?
- Why is door locked?
- Does key work in the door?
- Who and why does someone steal the key?

Knife

- death
- sacrifice
- Cutting away emotions/ideals/prejudices/etc
- Who wields the blade?
- What is being cut?
- Is blade dull or sharp?

Loom

- Mother Goddess
- Feminine power
- Who is weaving?
- What pattern is created?
- What colors woven?

Mirror

- vanity
- truth
- clarity
- distortion
- reflection of soul
- inner calm (Taoists)
- transitory nature of reality (Hinduism)
- Who or what is reflected?
- What is NOT reflected?
- How is mirror framed?

- Does the mirror break? And if so, what *really* broke?

Pen & Ink

- learning
- creativity
- destiny
- What is written?
- Who is the writer?
- Does writer make mistakes or blot paper?
- Is script illegible, elegant, precise?
- What surface is written on?

Purse

- wealth
- vanity
- prosperity
- Is purse full or empty?
- What material is purse?

Screen

- mystery
- concealment
- Who is behind the screen?
- Is concealed form titillating or frightening?

Table

- A coming together
- What shape is table?
- What material is it made from?
- Who sits at the head of the table?
- Who arrives and who leaves?
- Is something spilled on the table?

Thread

- What material is thread?
- What is thread stitching together?
- Does thread become loose or break?

Timepiece

- mortality
- Does clock run fast or slow?
- Does someone stop time?
- Is time more important for one character than another?

Fire & Water

These powerful elements are fraught with symbolic significance, their meanings stemming from a myriad of religious beliefs, legends, and myths. Both represent:

- **power**
- **destruction**
- **divinity**

Whether earthy or otherworldly, these forces of nature are feared and loved with equal fervor. No wonder authors love playing with their multiple meaning.

Fire is:

- war and chaos
- linked to the sun or lightning
- associated with to passion, creativity, anger, or wrath
- a method of purification
- regeneration—the Phoenix rises from the ashes
- knowledge—Prometheus brought fire to people and suffered grievously for it
- violence and destruction
- God's glory—Moses and the burning bush or the flaming hearts of Christianity
- the eternal flame above an altar
- the flames of hell

Water is:

- divine wrath—almost every religion has a version of the flood story
- transforming
- changeable—from stagnant to raging, from shallow to deep
- a destroyer
- a purifier—baptism
- primordial, as all life sprung forth from its ooze in many creation myths
- life-giving—Fountain of Youth
- fertility and irrigation
- a natural and symbolic barrier to another place (or realm)
- reflecting—although it led to Narcissus' drowning
- a method of transition to the next life
- a method of torture
- divination
- healing
- sacred—from Holy Water to the Ganges

Illness

Ever wonder why the author chose that illness for a character? Besides the obvious plot device or thematic intent, writers often use illness to reveal a character's

- flaws or weaknesses
- last thoughts
- emotional/psychological/spiritual growth

Diseases can be:

- horrifyingly ugly and/or painful
- tragic
- picturesque
- mysterious
- the result of divine wrath
- a plot device
- ironic

A **weak heart** or **heart attack**

- heartlessness
- too much heart/compassion
- broken heart (tragic love)

Cancer may be:

- manifestation of personality trait
- emotional damage inflicted by others

- **Brain cancer** might be a metaphor for a character who thinks too much or not enough.
- The source of cancer can be a metaphor for character's proclivities, flaws, or strengths.

▪ **Malaria** (bad air)

- reveals a character's penchant for spreading nasty rumors
- being the target of malicious gossip

Seizures

- a character's inability to control their emotions
- physical manifestation of the thrashing received from society/group/individual.

Consumption was the demise of many a character in novels written during the 19th century. It's symptoms provided the necessary melodrama for deathbed confessions, long goodbyes, and change of hearts.

HIV/AIDS is today's tragic illness and can symbolize a character who is not immune to the emotional hurt inflicted by society/culture/other characters.

Ebola & other hemorrhagic fevers may suggest a character's emotional "bleeding."

Bone disorders or **back problems** can reflect a character's having "no back bone" or being weak willed (bones symbolize strength).

Rabies may be symbolic of a character's repressed hostility and aggressiveness.

Leprosy would surely indicate some kind of Biblical divine wrath.

Vision problems may reflect a character's inability to see the truth.

Light & Dark

We're familiar with the obvious uses: The Light of knowledge or the Darkness of the Soul, but writers can use darkness and light in a myriad of ways!

Light can refer to:

- enlightenment
- goodness
- understanding or knowledge, from the prosaic to the sublime
- divinity/cosmic power
- morality
- truth
- vitality/youth
- innocence
- spirituality
- an attitude, emotion, or personality unencumbered with worries
- imagination/creativity/inspiration
- joy

Sex

Darkness can refer to:

- evil
- corruption/degradation/baseness
- netherworld/underworld
- lies/falseness
- guilt /sin
- ignorance, in all its many forms
- mystery
- fear
- an attitude, emotion, or personality fraught with melancholy or ill will
- grief
- tainted or impure thoughts

Light and dark can:

- describe a character's mood or personality
- foreshadow a character's intent
- foreshadow an event
- indicate a setting's moral/ethical beliefs
- reveal irony
- provide (moral/ethical/religious) contrast between opposing characters/themes/events
- be a plot device
- be a symbol
- be a theme
- be a recurring motif

Intercourse. Coupling. Hanky-panky. Horizontal mambo. Lovemaking. Copulation. Fornication. Coitus. Carnal Knowledge. To know. Relations.

That small sampling of synonyms elicits a different reaction by virtue of its connotation.

Questions to ponder about a sex scene:

- Why is the sex scene there?
- Is it advancing the plot?
- How is it advancing the plot?
- Is it gratuitous?

Is the sex scene really :

- a metaphor or symbol of a character's emotional growth or downfall?
- symbolic of the characters' relationship?
- thematic? (cough, cough, *Shades of Gray*)

Sex can:

- reveal emotional/societal/cultural/gender relationships between characters
- foreshadow a change in a relationship
- reveal a character's emotional state
- be a metaphor for a character's allowing themselves emotional/physical pleasure
- be a sacrificial act
- be a way to break cultural/family/gender/societal/ expectations or rules
- Be an act of resignation or compliance
- reflect enlightenment
- be an act of supplication
- A way to gain favor
- be corruptive
- be transcendent (*Like Water for Chocolate*)

Mealtime

Breaking bread with someone once indicated friendship, truce, partnership, or an alliance. The human race hasn't changed all that much—we still enjoy eating with those we like—and eschew eating with those we don't.

Eating together and sharing food is an act of communion/agreement/fellowship/harmony.

Shared meals can:

- be a plot device
- reveal character
- reveal the relationships between characters
- be thematic
- reveal culture
- be an allusion to other famous religious meals or foods
- be an allusion to famous literary meals

Mealtime considerations

- **Who** is sharing the meal? Enemies? Lovers? Family? Strangers?
- **What** foods are they eating?
- Is the food and drink symbolic of religion or social class?

- Is the food itself fraught with symbolism?
- **Why** is this particular meal described? How is it significant to the plot/character?
- **How** does the meal end?
 - Did someone choke on their own words or that of another?
 - Did someone stalk off—an indication the communing/fellowship/agreement went wrong
- **How** is the character eating?
 - Are they nibbling (dainty), gobbling (glutton), selective (picky). Sloppy or neat or overly fastidious?
 - Did a character stop eating mid meal and why?
 - Is a woman enjoying her meal with great delight indicative of her sexual appetite?
- **How** does the character feel about the meal?
 - Do they hate the food (closed-minded?)
 - Try new food (open-minded?)
 - Does a character take food from another's plate?
 - Do they refuse to share?
 - Does a character become sick?
 - Is the sickness a plot device or is a character "sick of" or "sickened by" a character, conversation, or turn of events at the table?
 - Is a character eating with his favorite 12 friends? (Can you say, "who's gonna betray me?")
- Do characters share a utensil, straw, or drink either accidentally or on purpose?

- Does one character feed another? This may be erotic, suggestive, a prelude to sex, or reveal who is the boss in the relationship
- What's happening under the table? Hand-holding, clenched fists?
- Is character refusing to eat? In effect saying, I'm here with you, but I don't like/approve of you.

More Water

Authors use rain or a dunk in the water to indicate a character's spiritual change or spiritual rebirth.

A character may:

- **dance** in the rain, indicating joy at their new lease on life.
- **jump** in a lake/pond/river/ocean/pool of their own accord, signifying a *determined* effort to change.
- **be pushed or dragged** into a lake/pond/river/ocean/pool, which may indicate their *unwillingness* to change
- **emerge** as BAD/EVIL—think the Joker in Batman who falls into the vat of acid.
- **accidentally** slip or trip into the water signifying a less purposeful change

Other factors to consider

- Is the water polluted?
- Does the character float on his back and gaze at the sky (symbolic of divinity or limitless possibilities)
- Does character struggle or get tangled in seaweed?
- Is the character dragged down by their possessions?
- Is the water warm or cold or arctic?

- Does someone SAVE the character?
- Does character refuse to be saved?
- Does the character save himself?
- Is the body of water religiously significant?

Geography

There's a reason why the guru in every cartoon sits atop a mountain. Nothing like a bit of topography for suggesting morality, emotion, intellect, or spirituality.

Landscapes includes

- **Mountains** and higher elevations indicate moral righteousness or spiritual awareness—it's the whole closer to God thing.
- **Steep ground** suggests trials and tribulations to surmount.
- **Flat land** may reveal the "flatness" or dullness of a character's life.
- **Swamps** imply low morals, poverty, lack of faith, a dirty or degraded sense of self, a connection to the primordial ooze of the earth so to speak.
- **Forests** are dark and fraught with danger, implying emotional/spiritual/moral ignorance or heading into a place of emotional/spiritual/moral danger.
- **Gardens** with flowers symbolize beauty, a desire for beauty, sex, and if it's a rose garden, well, roses have thorns, so expect a character to have their heart broken.

- **Vegetable gardens** suggest practicality, abundance, frugality, and health, but not necessarily fertility.
- **Orchards**—depending on the fruit or nut—is associated with fertility, abundance, and prosperity.
- **Deserts** hint at a character's hopes and dreams drying up OR becoming an emotional or spiritual or moral wasteland.
- **Jungles** are dangerous and contain scantily-clad heathens. Expect some loosening of morals OR spiritual soul searching OR primitive behavior.
- **Caves**, as Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* suggests, is all about shadows vs reality and philosophical enlightenment (yeah, I know, a total over-simplification).
- **Cliffs:** Precipices shout DANGER! A character OR sentiment OR perception OR judgement OR insight OR truth is going over the edge.
- **A city setting** may indicate the story's fast-paced cosmopolitan complex plot OR the character's urban lifestyle OR serve as a sharp contrast to either.
- **Small town or rural settings** can tell a reader the plot will be charming, cozy OR small town creepy.

Weather

More than just the change of atmospheric conditions, weather is fraught with symbolism—especially bad weather.

Examples:

- The **crack of thunder** after a character's ominous OR foreboding OR creepy statement
- **Gathering rain clouds** signal the brewing emotional storm of characters
- **Rain, thunder & lightning** may suggest the arrival of an emotional/spiritual/physical confrontation.

Rain

Rain is never just rain. Snow is more than snow. And fog—oh, it's misty with meaning.

Rain may be:

- the emotional or spiritual emotional cleansing
- a character's drowning with despair—the rain a metaphor for tearful emotions
- a new life/new beginning/new outlook (think: spring rain)

Other factors to keep in mind:

- Is the rain gentle drizzle, pouring buckets, a hail storm, of flood-like proportions?

- Is it raining WATER? In *Kafka on the Shore* it rains fish and who doesn't like when "Hallelujah, it's raining men?"
- A freezing cold rain might mean the character's spiritual rebirth is one of heartlessness OR they become numb to their emotional pain
- A fresh spring rain symbolizes a fresh start or rebirth of life—life renewed
- Does mud splatter the character?

Snow

- Light, fluffy flakes may be symbolic of happiness and romance and good will toward men (are you having flashbacks of every sappy Christmas movie you ever saw?)
- A blizzard, however may have with either romantic or terrorizing significance.

Fog may indicate

- confusion
- a character is "in a fog" about their life, a relationship, or a problem.

Violence

We love it! And in many genres it's 100% necessary!
Most of us include some type of violence in our novels.

In literature, violence can be:

- thematic
- biblical
- Shakespearean
- allegorical
- transcendent
- metaphoric
- symbolic
- gratuitous: What can I say? Some of us need a little BAM! POW! SMASH!

A few violent factors to bear in mind

- The **proximity** of the two adversaries. The closer they are, the more intimate (personal) the violence.
- The **location** of the violence. A fight in a church has different implications than a fight in the forest.
- The **weapon**: Buffy the Vampire Slayer kills demons with a wooden stake after kicking their evil ass. Nice and old school!
- The **evilness of the bad person**. Does the Bad Person get his comeuppance or is his less-than-painful death a symbol/metaphor for some

statement about culture, gender, humanity, gender etc

- What **body part delivers** the hits? A knee to the groin is ever so much nastier than a fist to the nose.
- What **body part takes** the hits? You don't need to have a degree in literature to know the symbolic implications of a woman's cutting off a guy's man part.
- And we all know what a **stab in the back** implies.
- **Hits from behind** are associated with cowardice.
- **Frontal attacks** usually equated with courage.

Nature

What better way to reveal character, foreshadow, or convey conflict than through the natural world.

Blooming flowers

- suggest a blossoming or awakening of a character's personality, intellect, morals, understanding, love etc

Dead

- indicates something—like an idea, problem, conflict, relationship, ideology, morality, opinion, attitude—that is dead or dying
- may foreshadow a character's or conflict's demise
- characterizes an aspect that is dead/destroyed within a character's soul or heart

New Growth

- denotes new beginnings, fresh starts, renewal, hope *unless...*
- the growth is deleterious or harmful

Uprooted plants

- convey the root of a problems coming to the surface
- reveal the unearthing of a problem or situation

Yellowed or drying leaves

- may foreshadow a character's or situation's demise
- suggest the approaching end of one's life or goals or hope

Thorns

- a tricky or hurtful problem or situation
- characterize a person's temperament
- foreshadow problems

Shrubbery

- Consider type—thorny, thick, invasive, wild, sculpted, overgrown—which may indicate the type of problem/conflict OR
- reveal a character's personality OR
- foreshadow any of the above
- Hedges enclosing a space may reveal the boundaries of a character or situation
- Does the character leap over the bushes? Crash into them? Trip over them? Plant them? Tend them? Cut them down? Trample them?

Gardens

- May be a biblical allusion to the Garden of Eden

- **Consider what's in the garden.** Rock garden? Cactus? Full of statues? Fruit trees? Vegetables? Flowers? Herbs?
- Symmetry suggests beauty and a well-rounded intellect.
- Is the garden well-tended, wild, gone to seed, in ruin, meticulous?
- Is it a secret garden?

Trees

- Gnarled limbs may reveal a complex problem.
- Hint at the strength or weakness of a character.
- Does the trunk bend with the wind? Is it stunted? Does it overshadow other trees?
- Suggest the strength of a character's heritage/culture
- Is the tree symbolic?
- Indicate soaring ambitions?
- Does the character climb or swing from its branches?

Meadows

- Pastoral or idyllic atmosphere (unless it's full of zombies or raptors)
- Wild beauty

Moors

- Think Bronte!
- Desolate and dreary but can be tragically romantic
- Something to be crossed
- A great place to ponder one's life
- Add fog for some Gothic-style brooding

Vines

- are invasive, taking over and often obscuring or smothering other plants.
- Does a character or culture or conflict encroach upon your character?

Flowers

- Are they sleep-inducing poppies like *The Wizard Of Oz*?
- Do they have thorns?
- What's the symbolism behind the species?
- Are they wilted?
- Are they common or exotic?
- Does it grow with others? Or is it a single triumphant daisy growing from a crack in the pavement?
- Are the blooms wilted? Or have the buds been nipped off?

Weeds

- Unwanted and ugly unless...
- They are beautiful weeds, in which case they suggest the beauty of something unwanted and ugly.
- Are they a metaphor for a character's persistent problems?
- Are they a symbol for the character's troubles in life?
- Does a character try to get rid of them or let them take over?

Wide Paths

- physical, spiritual, intellectual, psychological, moral choice is easy
- common or frequent choice

Narrow Paths

- physical, spiritual, intellectual, psychological, moral choice is difficult
- uncommon or infrequent choice

Lakes

- They can be large or small, cold, frozen, fraught with danger, or harbor giant brontosaurus-type creatures

Rivers

- How fast is the water moving?
- It's the complex symbol found in *Huck Finn* where the Mississippi divides the racist east from the wide open west, where direction denotes bias, and where it's the only place where Jim and Huck are free from prejudice.
- Is it "The Bitter River" by Langston Hughes?
- Is it the river from *Fahrenheit 451* where Montag jumps into to save his life and symbolizing his intellectual rebirth?

Gates

- Like all doors, arches, and entryways, gates signify movement from one realm—physical, spiritual, intellectual, psychological, moral—to another.
- Is the gate connected to a white picket fence?
- Is the gate wide (easy) or narrow (difficult) ?
- Is the gate fancy or plain? Ancient or new?

Bridges

- connectors of two different physical, spiritual, intellectual, psychological, moral, cultural worlds
- broken bridges suggest the schism or rift between the two intellectual, psychological, cultural, moral worlds
- often haunted

- Is it a primitive rope bridge? The Golden Gate? Quaint covered wooden? Modern steel?
- What's under the bridge? Troll? Water? Dry creek bed? Deep ravine?
- How far down is the drop from the bridge?

Seasons

Seasons are important, especially in ancient times when agrarian societies depended on seasons and weather to plow, grow, and harvest food. Agriculture united peoples, tribes, and groups. It was a means of achieving wealth. Food is life! So, naturally, seasons, because they are tied to farming and thus food and thus *life*, were fraught with all kinds of symbolic meanings.

Spring:

- youth & childhood
- hope, anticipation
- sowing seeds and nourishing rain
- new life emerges from plants
- buds, flowers, birds, butterflies, sunshine
- a fresh start, new beginning, rebirth
- resurrection

Summer:

- young adulthood
- energy & vitality in abundance
- romance and passion
- increased temperature bring "heated" arguments and boiling tempers
- love and anger are both "hot" emotions

END NOTES

Fall

- middle age
- harvest is associated with abundance and prosperity
- thanks given to their god/gods for a plentiful harvest
- gratitude for good harvests result in sharing & celebratory feasts
- a time to count one's blessings

Winter:

- old age & death
- often equated with anger, resentment, discontent, or hatred
- worry and anxiety, because food had to last through the winter
- There's a great final scene in the movie version of *Phantom of the Opera*. The old man places a toy on his beloved dead wife's tombstone. There, in the dismal gray setting and in white snow, lies the Phantom's red rose! A vivid contrast and reminder of passions long ago. The scene would not have been the same had it been any other season.

So, what are you going to do with all this stuff now?

Well, if you're one of my students, you should use this resource to help analyze the texts we study.

If you're a writer you may decide to integrate a bit of what you've learned about symbols and context into your story...or not.