

A symbol is a person, object, place, event, or action that suggests more than its literal meaning. In poetry, symbols can be categorized as conventional, something that is generally recognized to represent a certain idea (i.e., a “rose” conventionally symbolizes romance, love, or beauty); in addition, symbols can be categorized as contextual or literary, something that goes beyond a traditional, public meaning (i.e., “night” conventionally symbolizes darkness, death, or grief; contextually it symbolizes other possibilities such as loneliness, isolation, fear, or emptiness). Whereas conventional symbols are used in poetry to convey tone and meaning, contextual or literary symbols reflect the internal state of mind of the speaker as revealed through the images.

In order to have a better understanding of how poems are written, it is important to review the use of direct and indirect comparison. The literary term for a direct comparison is simile or a comparison with the words **like**, **as**, **as if**, or **as though**; the term for an indirect comparison is metaphor. Simile and metaphor are used to compare two things that are not similar and shows that they have something in common, as illustrated in the following examples:

- Life is like a box of chocolates. This is a simile and suggests there are choices to make in life and one doesn’t always know what to expect from a decision.
- Time is money. This is a metaphor and warns you that time is not infinite and whenever you expend time, you are making an investment that should be of value.
- O my love’s like a red, red rose,  
    That’s newly sprung in June;  
O my love’s like the melodie  
    That’s sweetly played in tune.

In these lines from a poem by Robert Burns “love” is compared to “a red, red rose,” which suggests passion and intimacy. The woman loved by the speaker of the poem is like a “melody” in that she is sweet and harmonious, yet there is a gentle reminder that a melody can also be brief and fleeting.

- All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts.

In this monologue from William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, the “world” is compared to “a stage”; however, it is not stating the world is “like” a stage with people playing roles, etc. but rather that the world “is” a stage, which opens the door to the imagination—to see what has not been seen before.

As English poetry has developed over hundreds of years, certain symbolic meanings have attached themselves to such things as colors, places, times, and animals. A list of these common symbols and their meanings follows. The list does not exhaust the possible meanings and associations of a symbol or metaphor in any particular poem. You cannot merely plug these meanings into a poem and expect to understand the poem completely. Your own knowledge, associations, and experience are what will lead you to a deep and personal connection to any poem.

**Sleep** is often related to death. **Night** often suggests darkness, death, or grief. **Dreams** are linked to the future or fate.

**Seasons** often represent ages: winter/old age or death; spring/youth; summer/prime of life; fall or autumn/middle age

**Water** is sometimes linked to the idea of birth or purification.

**Colors** are often linked to emotions: red/passion or anger; blue/happiness or calm; green/jealousy; **colors** are also used to represent states of being: black/death or evil; white/purity or innocence; red/blood or danger; green/growth; purple/royalty or privilege; yellow/violence or decay

**Snakes and guns** are often phallic; **caves and underwater** images often womb-like; **nature imagery**, in general, is often associated with the mother or the female.

**Flowers** are also linked to emotions and/or states of being: rose/romance and love; violets/shyness; lilies/beauty or temptation; chrysanthemums/perfection.

The **cycle of natural growth**—birth, degeneration, death—often suggests the cycle of love (e.g., a poem may trace a rose from bud to bloom to withered vine).

**Objects** are often used to suggest images: a ring/faithfulness and fidelity; a ladder/ascension or connection between heaven and earth; a chain/union or, conversely, imprisonment; a mirror/the sun; a broken mirror/separation.

**Animals** have various associations: **horse**/phallic sexuality; **doves, lambs, sleeping animals**/peace; **felines, birds of prey**/dissension, war, danger; **snakes, serpents**/evil, phallic sexuality, fall from virtue, magic.

**Forests** are often places of testing or challenge.

**Wind** is often associated with change, transition, or destructive power.

**Light**—as the sun, the moon, stars, candles—often symbolizes good, hope, freedom. The **moon** has several associations. It is sometimes a feminine symbol, sometimes associated with madness, sometimes with resurrection. **Rainbows** are associated with hope or reward. **Darkness** is associated with evil, magic, or the unknown.

Reminder: This list is meant to stimulate your imagination, not to stifle it. The meanings listed have been suggested by many poems, but they are not the only meanings these symbols can have.