

Symbol

Symbols enhance our literary experience. Symbols are objects that represent something beyond themselves. Objects become meaningful and significant in context with the story or culture. Latter-day Saints culture, for instance, is rich in symbols. When we take the sacrament, the objects bread and water represent the Atonement and the Savior's flesh and blood. The sacrament also represents our baptismal covenants. The physical act of going under water in baptism by immersion represents the death of a natural man or woman and resurrection of a son or daughter of God through Christ, or it also represents a spiritual rebirth.

Additionally, Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life is a meaningful example of symbols. It's understandable if symbols can be tough to recognize and comprehend. We learn that in the Book of Mormon when Nephi's brothers complained that they didn't understand their father's dream. In fact, Nephi didn't initially fully understand the dream's significance until he himself went to God in prayer and received the same vision with an angelic explanation (1 Nephi 10-14). Because of Nephi's newly acquired understanding which he shares with his brothers, we too gain meaningful insights into this divine vision.

When analyzing a text for symbols, it's important to look for concrete objects that receive exceptional attention from the author. For instance, in Lehi's dream, some of the objects that receive emphasis include a tree, its fruit, a rod of iron, a mist of darkness, and a great and spacious building. Most often, the author will reveal directly or indirectly the meaning or significance of that object—its significance. With Lehi's dream we can list the specific symbol while Nephi explains its meaning or importance:

Symbol	Meaning
Tree (1 Nephi 8:10)	The love of God in giving his Son (1 Nephi 11:21-22)
Fruit (1 Nephi 8:11)	Eternal life (1 Nephi 15:36)
Rod of iron (1 Nephi 8:19)	The word of God (1 Nephi 1: 15:23-24)
Mist (1 Nephi 8:23)	Temptations of the devil (1 Nephi 12:17)
Great and spacious building 1 Nephi 8:26-27	Pride of the world (1 Nephi 11:36)

Students may feel frustrated when looking for symbols within literature. For the most part, readers shouldn't be looking for symbols as if they are hidden within the story. Rather, symbols most often are evident to perceptive readers who recognize that authors readily give clues and significance to symbols within the story.

Symbols, then, allow authors the opportunity to compress meaning within an object to enrich our reading experience and to enhance our understanding.

Laurence Perrine provides readers with general guidelines in identifying symbols and attaching meanings to those symbols:

1. The story itself must furnish a clue that a detail is to be taken symbolically.
2. The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story.
3. A symbol may have more than one meaning.

A symbol then is something that is itself and also stands for something else. It is usually a concrete object that represents an abstract principle and another level of meaning. As we identify and examine symbols in scriptures and literature, we can arrive at more insightful understandings and applications of what we read.