

Short story form



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In short story form, time is of the essence. Characters must be created quickly, and understood in a brief amount of space and time. Often, symbols are used to load content and meaning onto a character.

In the short story "The Chrysanthemums" by John Steinbeck, he uses the symbol of the chrysanthemum to add depth to Elisa's character, and he uses the symbol of the pots to give depth to the repair man's character. Both symbols also make a statement on the cultural values of the time. Similarly, Louise Erdrich, in "The Red Convertible" uses symbolism to give depth to the culture, thus adding depth to the characters. She uses the car and the color red to add meaning and foreshadowing to Henry's character, with the backdrop of the Chippewa culture. Symbolism achieves two goals in these works: one, it adds depth to the characters, and two, it adds depth to the cultural background.

In discussing how symbols add depth to the characters and cultures, the following factors will be looked at. First, the timing of and the use of symbols - including introduction and frequency. Second, the context within which the symbols are found. Third, the common images people have when they see or hear these symbols. Finally, a summary will be given of how the character or culture is enriched through the use of symbolism.

The introduction and frequency of the use of symbols, creates the association and strength of the symbol in the reader's mind. In Steinbeck's, "The Chrysanthemums", when Elisa is first introduced, she is introduced working in her flower garden, specifically on her Chrysanthemums.

Additionally, the first word on the traveling repair man's wagon is "pots" -

this is the first Elisa knows about the man. The words chrysanthemum and pot are repeated 14 times.

These are both very important words and symbols. The image of the chrysanthemum is introduced to the reader when meeting Elisa, creating the association of the flower to the woman. The image of a pot is introduced when meeting the traveling repair man - although not is such a direct way. The traveling repair man is then associated in the reader's mind with a pot. In "The Red Convertible", the convertible and the color red are introduced at practically the same time - in association with the reservation and the author's brother. "I was the first one to drive a convertible on my reservation.

And of course it was red, a red Olds. I owned that car along with my brother Henry Junior." The Introduction of the red car and the narrator's brother at the same time creates the association in the reader's mind between them. The word car is used over 30 times (although convertible is used only twice). The word red is used 11 times, but in highly loaded contexts, as the next section will explain.

The context in which the symbols are found in each short story adds to the value of the symbolism. First of all, in "The Chrysanthemums", the chrysanthemums are in Elisa's garden. She is quite proud of her flowers. The second time the chrysanthemums are introduced is when the repair man asks about them: ""What's them plants, ma'am?" The irritation and resistance melted from Elisa's face.

“ Oh, those are chrysanthemums, giant whites and yellows. I raise them every year, bigger than anybody around here.”” At this point, the man indicates he knows a woman that has an excellent garden in need of chrysanthemums. Elisa can barely contain her excitement at giving some of her transplants to this woman. The man, on the other hand, takes pride in his mending of pots and pans. When it appears the Elisa may not have any work for him, the man looks dejected and says, “ He said, “ It’s nice, just like you say.

Only when you don’t have no dinner, it ain’t.”” At this point Elisa finds a pot for him to mend. It is interesting the various pots that are used in this story – both cooking pots and flower pots. The character of the repair man is associated to his value in being able to repair any broken pot – and for the transportation of a very valuable flower pot.

The context of these situations involving the flower and the pots hints at an underlying sexuality in the situation. A lone man meets a lone woman tending her garden, the woman feels touched by the interest of the man and reaches out to him – gives him flowers, and the man in return mends her broken pots and carries her potted flowers with him. In “ The Red Convertible” the car is associated with travel and freedom. It has its roots in the Chippewa Reservation, but whenever it is there – it is not moving! When Henry is away in the army, the author puts it on blocks to wait for his return. The car is used to travel. It is used for travel the entire summer, and even makes its way to Alaska! The color red, on the other hand, has other contextual uses.

First, in association to the car it seems to foreshadow the destruction coming. This is tied to his brother with this description: " He had a nose big and sharp as a hatchet, like the nose on Red Tomahawk, the Indian who killed Sitting Bull, whose profile is on signs all along the North Dakota highways." Henry also bites his lip - although red is not mentioned specifically, the color of red is imagined. The final mention of red is of the Red River: " There was a full cooler in the trunk.

We started off, east, toward Pembina and the Red River because Henry said he wanted to see the high water." The contexts surrounding the symbols used for Henry show the path of his life. They give the reader a visual symbol of the desire for freedom and travel, the loss of innocence, the link of the people to the Indian heritage, and the final death in the Red River. Finally, the common understandings of these symbols add depth without effort.

The use of the flower is a widely recognized symbol of female beauty and sexuality. The use of a black pot is not so easily seen, but pots are used primarily by women in the intimacy of their kitchens. A man who repairs these implies a close relationship with the intimate lives of women. A car has represented freedom in America since its introduction. People have always viewed the car as a way to travel, to see the world. The fact that the car is put on blocks during Henry's stay in the military reinforces this image of freedom for the car, by the fact of its very immobility.

Red has a powerful influence on human cognition. When people are angry, they are said to " see red". Also, blood is often described as red, although

the color is closer to purple. Finally, red is often the color used for danger. Therefore, finding red associated so closely with the life of Henry leads the reader to look at its instances as foreshadowing.

Finally, the use of symbols in “ The Chrysanthemums” and “ The Red Convertible” add depth to the characters and their cultures. Through their iteration, context, and cultural associations, much can be said about the characters using very little space. In fact, sensitive issues and topics can also be addressed, such as sexuality and death. The reader is able to see more deeply into the nature of each character and the culture in which they live.