

Contextual symbols essay sample

Literature



Contextual symbols in literature differ from universal symbols in that, within a literary context, objects, characters, names, and even setting maintain a dual expressiveness: both as literal things and also as allusions to “deeper” meanings. What separates contextual symbolism from generic symbolism is that in contextual symbolism, an author uses: “setting, character, action, object, name, or anything else in a work” (Domina 5) in an attempt to move “beyond conventional symbols” (Domina 5) to instill additional meaning to a given symbol within the specific context of a specific work. A classic example of contextual symbolism, cited often by literary scholars, is the symbolism of the white whale in Melville’s “Moby Dick.” In Melville’s novel, the white whale stands for “multiple symbolic meanings [...] but these meanings do not automatically carry over into other stories about whales. The meanings suggested by Melville’s whale are specific to that text; therefore, it becomes a contextual symbol.” (Domina 6). The understanding of contextual symbols is crucial for any reader attempting to read and understand modern literature.

Some examples of contextual symbolism, used in the modern American theater, help to shed light on the important role contextual symbolism plays for the modern writer. In Lorraine Hansberry’s famous play “A Raisin in the Sun,” contextual symbolism is used to help to convey the plight of African Americans in a racist society. In order to present the play’s audience with the best and most emotionally convincing portrayal of the characters’ plight in “A Raisin in the Sun,” Hansberry relies on the use of contextual symbolism during key scenes of the play to help convey the play’s underlying social and political messages.

A specific example of contextual symbolism happens during the very first scene of “A Raisin in the Sun” when “Walter asks about the forthcoming life insurance check and also refers to a newspaper story about a bomb” (Domina 5).; here, the audience may not be consciously aware that the object of a bomb is being employed as a contextual symbol, but the image and object of a bomb is a concrete symbol for the play’s thematic notion of a “dream deferred.” The implication is that a dream deferred becomes a bomb ticking under everyone’s chair. Because bombs are usually regarded as symbols of devices used against an enemy and not as a device which will inflict pain on society from within, the symbol of the bomb is contextual.

There is a specific meaning to the symbol “bomb” in “A Raisin in the Sun” and that specific meaning is that it represents the “dream deferred.” In fact, the “bomb” is the central contextual symbol of the play’s theme: “how to live in a city and country where bombs are set “off in the homes of African Americans who move into white neighborhoods—that forms the heart of this play.” (Domina 6). The feeling of doom that hovers over the characters of the play is given symbolic expression by the contextual symbol of the bomb.

Similarly, later in the play, “As if to emphasize the family’s impending doom, Beneatha looks out the window and spots Travis chasing a rat in the street.” (Domina 8).; in seeing the rat, a contextual symbol is conveyed where, specific to the theme of “A Raisin in the Sun” the rat is a symbol of futility and degradation. It is also a symbol of the “dream deferred” and in the play the symbol of the rat stands for something not always or usually associated with rats in a general sense. In this way the rat is a contextual symbol.

Characters can also be contextual symbols. In “A Raisin in the Sun,” the character of Joseph Asagai is a contextual symbol denoting the lost African American heritage which plagues the characters of the play. Joseph arrives, bringing Beneatha “a traditional African robe, but his compliments to her are undercut by his description of her hair as “mutilated” (Domina 8).; the use of contextual symbols is basically unlimited.

Another modern American play which utilizes contextual symbolism is Susan Glaspell’s one-act play “Trifles.” This play deals with the plight of women living in a male-dominated society and deals with issues of self-empowerment and self-respect. The title of the play itself is a contextual symbol in which small or insignificant things — “trifles” — and meant to symbolize that status which men grant to women in a male-dominated society. The play shows men as inobservant of the “trifles” which are, in fact, the fabric of society: “As numerous critics have demonstrated, the men stomp about loudly and authoritatively but cannot find the clues because they are unable to read quiet, domestic “trifles.” (Makowsky 61). Similarly, Minnie’s soul is given a contextual symbol by the bird and this identification is made quite explicit in the play:

Mrs. Hale makes the identification clear when she states that Minnie “was kind of like a bird herself — real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and — fluttery. How — she — did — change” (22). Mrs. Hale finally places the blame for that change on John Wright: “ She used to sing. He killed that, too

(Makowsky 62)

Other major American authors have relied on contextual symbolism as an important aspect of the expression and innovation. Tennessee Williams, in his first successful play “The Glass Menagerie” utilized the contextual symbolism of small glass figures of animals to convey the delicacy and ephemeral nature of interpersonal relationships and human love. For Williams, the origin of the “glass menagerie” as such a spectacular contextual symbol lay in his own personal experiences: “When he was thirteen, his father’s promotion took the family to St. Louis, where they lived in tenement apartments. He helped his sister Rose whitepaint the walls and furniture of her dingy room and brighten it with her collection of glass animals, which were for him an enduring symbol.” (Cooper 569). In a sense it is an elevation of exactly this type of personal symbolism to a more universal articulation which makes a contextual symbol an active part of artistic expression in any medium.

Works Cited

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