

What are literary symbols essay example

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



English Literature

Throughout literature, authors use symbolic imagery in order to assist the reader in conjuring up mental images from the words on the page.

Symbolism is a common literary device which is used to help make the story come to life and to make it more three-dimensional (Bloom 1339). This is seen in every work of literature ever written and for the purposes of this essay, the symbolic language used in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex* and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* will be discussed. In each of these texts, the author has used symbolism to help build up their ideas and the imagery within their words.

In William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the bard uses an over-riding allegorical literary symbol: the title of the play, a tempest which symbolises the difficulties faced in the past by Prospero and the difficulties which he intends to impose upon those around him. In Act One, Scene Two, Prospero states:

“ The King of Naples, being an enemy
Which was, that he, in lieu o' the premises
Of homage and I know not how much tribute,
Should presently extirpate me and mine
Out of the dukedom and confer fair Milan
With all the honours on my brother: whereon,
A treacherous army levied, one midnight
Fated to the purpose did Antonio open
The gates of Milan, and, i' the dead of darkness,

The ministers for the purpose hurried thence

Me and thy crying self.”

(I, ii, 144 – 155).

He clearly states how his brother and he were forcibly removed from their privileged position. In this sense, the play’s title and its content are focused on Prospero’s devotion to causing a storm of problems and destruction for his downfall’s perpetrators. Equally, along the same lines, in the final scene of the play, Prospero reveals Ferdinand and Miranda playing a game of chess. Of course, in chess, the aim of the game is to bring down the king and to remove him from power. The symbolism of this game is palpable since Prospero’s aim is to bring Alonso’s kingdom down and Ferdinand, being the king’s heir, is a prominent part of this goal. The effect of using such literary symbols is to reinforce the play’s central focus which is Prospero’s aim to avenge his wrong-doers whilst still lending an air of subtlety to proceedings.

In Tennessee Williams’ play *The Glass Menagerie* uses literary symbols in much the same way as Shakespeare in as much as the play’s title is also its most prominent symbol. In the play, the central protagonist, Laura, has a glass menagerie which contains a collection of glass models of animals. The animals represent different aspects of personality and the fact that they are made of glass indicates that Laura is fragile and transparent, like the models. In particular, is the glass unicorn which is Laura’s favourite figurine. At the end of the play, Jim, a friend of Laura’s family, is talking to Laura about the unicorn:

“ Jim: Unicorns, aren’t they extinct in the modern world?

Laura: I know!

Jim: Poor little fellow, he must feel sort of lonesome.”

(Williams 64)

The effect of this conversation is to draw attention to the fact that Laura is quite an unusual child and, like the unicorn, she too is lonely and quite unique in the world. The purpose of Williams’ use of a literary symbol here is to demonstrate Laura’s strangeness without directly drawing attention to it. The literary symbol allows him to be significantly more sympathetic towards his characters.

However, the use of literary symbols is not a modern day invention; in fact, it has been present throughout literature since the very beginning of the written word. An example of this is the Athenian tragedy, *Oedipus the King* (or *Oedipus Rex* in its Latin form) written around 429 BC by Sophocles. The story uses symbolism in various forms and not least, when it refers to Oedipus’ foot and, more notably, the scar it bears. The character receives his name after an accident in the mountains; the word ‘oidein’ means to swell, or in some instances it’s ‘oida’ which is to have seen or to know, and ‘pous’ which is foot (Sophocles & Mulroy 11). The accident that causes this injury goes on to mark Oedipus as being special and initiates his unique path in life and as a consequence, the scar that is left symbolises his as being a particularly distinct fate.

Literary symbolism is used prolifically throughout literature and is designed to help enhance the author’s ideas as well as to assist the reader in imagining the scene more fully. They are used, as seen here, to help

strengthen the reader's understanding of a scene, the overall plot or even just to help establish the character's background and personality. Literary symbols are the bread and butter of the author's arsenal and without them, literature would be significantly less imaginative, creative and interesting.

References

Bloom, Harold. *Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987. Print.

Mulroy, David & Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. London: Penguin Books, 1999. Print.

Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1996. Print.