

Is That a Symbol?

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by Thomas C. Foster (2003)

Is that a symbol? Sure, why not. The next question, however, is where things get hairy: what does it mean, what does it stand for? When someone in my class asks about meaning, I usually come back with something clever, like "Well, what do you think?" Everyone thinks I'm either being a wise guy or ducking responsibility, but neither is the case. Seriously, what do *you* think it stands for, because that's probably what it does. At least for you.

Here's the problem with symbols: people expect them to mean something. Not just any something, but one something in particular. You know what? It doesn't work like that. Oh, sure, there are some symbols that work straightforwardly: a white flag means, I give up, don't shoot. Or it means, we come in peace. See? Even in a fairly clear-cut case we can't pin down a single meaning, although they're pretty close. So some symbols have a relatively limited range of meanings, but in general a symbol can't be reduced to standing for only one thing. Instead, the thing referred to will probably involve a range of possible meanings and interpretations.

The problem for readers is that they want the symbol to mean one thing for all of us and for all time. That would be easy, convenient, manageable for us. But that handiness would result in a net loss: the novel would cease to be what it is, a network of meanings and significations that permits a nearly limitless range of possible interpretations. The meaning of a symbol isn't lying on the surface of a novel. Rather, it waits somewhere deeper, and part of what it requires of us is to bring something of ourselves to the encounter. If we want to figure out what a symbol means, we have to use a variety of tools on it: questions, experience, pre-existing knowledge.

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain gives us the Mississippi. Twain sends Huck and the escaped slave Jim down the river on a raft. The river is a little bit of everything in the novel. At the beginning it floods, killing livestock and people, including Huck's father. Jim uses the river to escape to freedom, but his "escape" is paradoxical since it carries him deeper and deeper into slave territory. The river is both danger and safety since the relative isolation from land and detection is offset by the perils of river travel on a makeshift conveyance.

On a personal level, the river/raft provides the platform on which Huck, a white boy, can get to know Jim not as a slave but as a man. And, of course, the river is really a road, and the raft trip a quest that results in Huck growing to maturity and understanding. He knows himself well enough at the end that he will never return to childhood and St. Petersburg and bossy women, so he "lights out for the territory" instead.

So what are we to do? You can't simply say, "Well, it's a river, so it means *x*." Instead, you need to ask questions of the text; what's the writer doing with this image, this object. Reading literature is a highly intellectual activity, but it also involves instinct to a large degree. Much of what we think about literature, we feel first.

We tend to give writers all the credit, but reading is also an event of the imagination; our creativity, our inventiveness, encounters that of the writer, and in that meeting we puzzle out what she means, what we understand her to mean, and what uses we can put her writing to.

Imagination isn't fantasy. We can't simply invent meaning without the writer. Rather, a reader's imagination is the act of one creative intelligence engaging another. So engage that other creative intelligence. Listen to your instincts. Pay attention to what you feel about the text. It probably means something.