

**UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLISM AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE:
A STRATEGY FOR TEACHING READING**

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Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive approach for teaching university students to understand and analyze symbolism and figurative language in literature with an emphasis on improving reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. It focuses on identifying repetition, context and the inclusion of figurative language, such as metaphors and similes to reveal deeper messages in texts. Symbolism implies that students interact with both the explicit and implicit aspects of a text, which can lead to diverse interpretations and a deeper comprehension. It aims to improve students' reading comprehension by urging them to identify symbols in relation to their broader contexts, analyze patterns of repetition and consider the importance of figurative speech. The method integrates theoretical insights with practical, hands-on activities enabling students to actively interact with literary works and cultivate the skills necessary for confidently analyzing symbolism. By engaging in practical exercises and studying examples, students are motivated to actively delve into the different levels of symbolism enhancing their understanding of literary analysis and refining their interpretive skills.

Keywords: *symbolism; figurative language; reading comprehension; literary analysis; university teaching strategies.*

Introduction

Symbolism and figurative language in literature can be challenging for readers, particularly those who are not well-versed in literary analysis. Symbols inherently defy simple analysis, functioning in intricate and frequently complex ways within a piece of writing. Figurative language also brings depth to interpretations, making it necessary for readers to take a more sophisticated approach. Still, it is these very layers - symbols and figurative expressions that enhance a narrative, causing it to have a profound impact on both emotional and intellectual levels. The ordinary reader, lacking experience in recognizing and understanding literary devices, could feel confused when coming across symbols or figurative language that appear difficult to decipher. In one scenario a "rose" can represent *love, beauty* and *fragility*, while in another setting

it may symbolize *death*, *memory* or *sacrifice*. Students who lack the appropriate tools and strategies for analysis may fail to notice these symbols, therefore missing out on a deeper understanding of the text's meaning and thematic issues.

One of the common difficulties in teaching literature at a university level is aiding students in identifying and analyzing the intricate elements present in the text. While a few students may understand specific symbols naturally, a large number encounter difficulties due to the abstract and occasionally subjective aspects of interpreting symbols. In addition, the symbolic imagery supported by metaphors, similes and personifications must be analyzed thoroughly to understand their impact on the story's message.

The article tackles these pedagogical challenges by providing a thorough strategy for instructing university students on how to better understand symbolism and figurative language. This approach targets three main areas: 1) recognizing repeated patterns in texts, 2) grasping the context of symbols and figurative language usage and 3) utilizing digital tools to improve symbolic analysis.

Starting off, the **repetition** is essential for indicating symbols in a text. When a word, image, or idea is repeated, it frequently holds symbolic significance, symbolizing something more than its actual definition. For example, *a storm* that keeps appearing in a novel could represent *chaos* or *conflict*, while *a bird* that appears repeatedly could symbolize *freedom*, *optimism* or *spiritual elevation*. Educating students on identifying these repetitions and delving into their meanings is the initial stage in comprehending the functioning of symbolism in literature.

Furthermore, **understanding the context** is crucial in deciphering the symbolism and figurative language. A symbol may represent one idea in a specific cultural or historical setting and hold a completely different meaning in another context. In many Western texts *the cross* is often associated with *religious* meanings, while in different situations it could represent *suffering*, *sacrifice* or *oppression*. Hence, it is important to urge students to explore the wider context of the text - historical, social and cultural aspects in order to interpret its symbols and figurative language correctly.

The third aspect of the strategy includes incorporating **digital tools** to help with recognizing and examining symbols. Modern technology provides effective resources that can improve conventional literary examination. For instance, utilizing the "*Ctrl + F*" feature in electronic texts can assist students in recognizing repeated symbols more effectively enabling a swift method of monitoring their presence in the story. Digital platforms enable students to participate in comparative analysis, investigating how a single symbol may operate in various texts or genres.

This strategy not just simplifies the analytic process, but also enhance its interactivity and engagement. It is important because it deviates from traditional methods that tend to enforce a single interpretation of literary symbols. Moreover, it embraces the various interpretations that are naturally present in symbols and figurative language. It motivates students to think about

how their interpretations are influenced by their personal experiences, backgrounds and cultural contexts making the process of literary analysis more dynamic and personalized.

Purpose of the Article: This article aims to introduce a teaching method that helps university students comprehend and analyze symbolism and figurative language in literature. The strategy focuses on exploring symbols' complexity and diverse interpretations to enhance students' reading comprehension, analytical abilities and critical thinking. By engaging in hands-on activities, students can develop the skills to uncover deeper messages within texts, leading to a greater understanding and enjoyment of literary evaluation.

Novelty of the Article: The uniqueness of this article is in combining digital tools and real-life illustrations while concentrating on reader-centric interpretation. Unlike traditional approaches that focus on a specific meaning of symbols, this tactic promotes a wider, more adaptable interpretation recognizing that symbols can hold varying interpretations depending on individual and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, utilizing digital tools such as "Ctrl + F" helps students analyze efficiently by enabling them to monitor symbolic repetition and patterns. This new approach, which is diverse and incorporates technology, provides a unique method for interacting with and educating about literary symbolism.

Problem: Numerous students struggle to identify and understand symbolism and figurative language in literature. Symbols are frequently unclear by nature and the interpretation of figurative language can change depending on the situation. This lack of clarity may result in annoyance and result in a shallow understanding of the text causing one to overlook deeper symbolic implications. The challenge is also increased by the fact that literary experts frequently have differing opinions on the meaning of specific symbols. This article tackles these obstacles by offering a well-organized, creative approach to teaching symbolic and figurative analysis that is both easy to understand and interesting.

Theoretical Background: The study of symbolism and figurative language in literature relies on various theoretical frameworks, all enhancing our comprehension of how symbols function in texts. These frameworks include semiotics, symbolic anthropology, archetypal criticism and literary theory that pertains to figurative language. Educators can improve teaching strategies for helping students understand symbolism and figurative language in literature by studying these theories.

According to Roland Barthes all signs, including symbols, consist of *a signifier* (the form of the sign) and *a signified* (the concept it represents) [Barthes]. This dual nature highlights that symbols are more than just objects or words, as they hold intricate meanings that need to be deciphered. In a novel an image of *a river* that appears repeatedly could function as *a symbol*. One person might interpret it as *time passing*, whereas someone else could see it as *change being inevitable*. Barthes expands on this idea with his concept of "mythology," which suggests that symbols can serve as conveyors of cultural or ideological significance similar to how myths

operate within society [Barthes]. In literature, symbols function in a similar manner, conveying underlying cultural narratives that go beyond the literal interpretation. Barthes' semiotics influences the educational approach of prompting students to deconstruct symbols and examine the multiple meanings derived from different interpretive viewpoints.

Victor Turner's research in symbolic anthropology provides an alternative perspective on symbolism [Turner]. Turner's study on ritual symbolism among the Ndembu brought attention to how symbols are not only theoretical, but are based on actual social and cultural truths [Turner]. His concept of "*communitas*" pertains to the collective emotional response generated by mutual symbols among a group, a concept that can also be relevant in the context of literature. Symbols in literature frequently connect with readers on an individual and societal level evoking a feeling of shared comprehension or emotional reaction. For instance, a symbol such as *a wedding band* can bring up strong, common cultural connections to affection, dedication or customs. Turner's model clarifies how symbols can bring readers together in understanding, while also eliciting varying emotional responses depending on individual backgrounds [Turner]. This method of teaching focuses on the social and cultural settings where symbols are placed, prompting pupils to reflect on not just their individual reactions but also the wider cultural significances that influence their understandings.

The criticism of archetypes by Northrop Frye complements the theories of Barthes and Turner by presenting symbols as universal archetypes that appear repeatedly in various cultures and texts [Frye]. Frye suggests that literary symbols frequently correspond with these archetypal motifs like the *hero, the quest, or the renewal*, which contain universal significance beyond individual narratives [Frye]. Frye's approach underscores that specific symbols, such as *a phoenix* or *a labyrinth*, have been employed in literature for ages to symbolize specific concepts, such as *rebirth* or *intricacy*, respectively. This classic perspective gives students a basis to identify shared symbolic themes in literature, leading to a more expansive understanding of their readings. It highlights the significance of interpreting symbols not just in one text but also in the broader literary context.

Understanding figurative language is intricately connected to the analysis of symbols. I.A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks have highlighted the impact of devices such as metaphor, simile and personification on readers' understanding of symbols through the addition of figurative layers of meaning [Richards, Brooks]. Comparing a character to a "*lion*" is an example of a metaphor that not only provides *a symbolic image* but also gives them qualities like *courage* or *authority*, enhancing their symbolic portrayal. Richards delves into the interplay of literal and figurative language emphasizing the need for readers to navigate this complexity in order to reveal underlying symbolic meanings [Richards]. Similarly, Brooks highlights the intertwined relationship between figurative language and symbolism in conveying significance [Brooks]. Understanding these observations is essential for instructing students on deciphering the relationship between figurative devices and symbols to improve their literary analysis.

Practical Applications in Teaching Symbolism: The practical applications aim to involve students actively in learning, enhance critical thinking and improve their understanding of literary symbols' depth and complexity.

One effective method for teaching symbolism is to identify *patterns* and *repetition* in literature. Symbols frequently occur multiple times throughout a text, whether they are consistent or varied in their appearances. Teachers can assist students in identifying how repeated images, objects or phrases contribute to the thematic structure by encouraging them to track these patterns. Students can be directed to a text and prompted to utilize digital tools such as Ctrl + F to identify any recurring words or symbols. In *The Great Gatsby*, students could follow the repeated appearance of the "*green light*" and examine how its symbolic significance changes in the novel—starting as a representation of Gatsby's aspirations and later representing the impossible and deceptive aspect of the American Dream. This task boosts students' aptitude in recognizing important symbols and tracking their evolution, enriching their comprehension of how writers employ repetition to add depth to the message.

Furthermore, symbols are frequently closely connected to their cultural and historical backgrounds. Students need to take into account both their own cultural biases and the context in which the text was written in order to read symbols correctly. Encouraging students to think about the wider social, historical and cultural context of a symbol helps them to create a more detailed interpretation. For instance, students can analyze the political context of the Russian Revolution when reading George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in order to comprehend the symbolism of characters such as *Napoleon* (Stalin) and *Snowball* (Trotsky). This activity based on research can be incorporated into classroom discussions, during which students demonstrate how their discoveries impact their understanding of important symbols in the text.

Next approach is to encourage students to critically analyze the functionality of symbols and their varied representations by breaking down symbols into their basic components: the signifier (the form) and the signified (the meaning). Students can be divided into teams and instructed to examine a passage filled with symbols from a book such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, such as the conch shell's physical traits (signifier) and the concepts it represents, such as order, civilization and authority (signified). Following a discussion, students may showcase their discoveries by highlighting how the meaning of the symbol evolves as the narrative unfolds and societal systems deteriorate. This activity promotes a deeper comprehension of the evolution of symbols in literature and how their meanings are formed.

Figurative language, such as metaphors, similes and personification frequently introduces or enhances symbols in a text. Teaching students on how to recognize these devices and delve into their connection with symbols can result in a more comprehensive comprehension of the text. Students should be given a passage from a literary work such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that contains symbolic imagery of *blood*. They try to identify examples of figurative language, such as metaphors and personifications regarding blood, and then evaluate how these literary devices

enhance the symbol's significance. Blood can represent *guilt, violence* or *the outcomes of ambition*. This activity improves students' capacity to link figurative language with symbolism improving their skills in analyzing literature.

Challenges and Solutions in Teaching Symbolism: Teaching symbolism is challenging due to the subjective nature of interpretation. Symbols can have different interpretations based on the reader's cultural background, experiences and worldview. This subjectivity can lead to different interpretations creating challenges for students in reaching an agreement on the symbolism's meaning in a text. For example, what one student sees as a symbol of hope could be viewed by another as a sign of despair. Differences in interpretation may cause uncertainty and confusion regarding the "correct" symbol meaning, particularly for beginner students of literary analysis. To tackle the issue of subjectivity, teachers can promote a cooperative classroom setting that appreciates varied perspectives. An effective approach is to prompt students to participate in group discussions and debates on symbolic meanings, enabling them to express their views and consider the emergence of various interpretations. Through examining various perspectives, students can enhance their comprehension of symbols and learn to back up their interpretations with textual evidence. Moreover, teachers can highlight the fact that symbolism is more about delving into the depth of meanings symbols can provide rather than searching for a definitive answer.

Another important obstacle in teaching symbolism is making sure students understand the significance of cultural and historical context. Symbols are frequently based on the environment in which they originate, and their interpretations are strongly linked to particular social, political or cultural situations. Lacking this contextual understanding could make it difficult for students to interpret symbols correctly, particularly when dealing with literature from diverse time periods or cultures. An awareness of the historical and cultural significance attached to symbols such as the conch shell in *Lord of the Flies* or the green light in *The Great Gatsby* is necessary to understand their symbolic meaning. To address this issue, teachers can integrate contextual research into their instructional methods. Educators can assist students in establishing a more solid basis for interpretation by motivating them to delve into the historical, cultural or social context of symbols. Adding interdisciplinary research in history, sociology and cultural studies can enhance students' comprehension of symbols in this method. For example, students studying *The Great Gatsby* could investigate the American Dream and the social interactions of the 1920s to gain a deeper insight into the symbolism of the green light. Teachers may also give tasks where students analyze how symbols are interpreted differently in various cultural or historical contexts, aiding in their comprehensive understanding of literature.

A further challenge presents in balancing traditional symbolism with modern digital tools and media. Traditional literary theories provide a firm basis for interpreting symbols, but modern students are also fully involved in digital landscapes that can provide innovative approaches to literature analysis. Old-fashioned methods of close reading are important for cultivating students'

analytical abilities, but they might not be as interesting to students who are used to interactive, multimedia material. The difficulty lies in incorporating these contemporary methods while maintaining the integrity of conventional literary examination. Teachers can address this problem by combining conventional and modern methods of teaching symbolism. Even though traditional symbol theories offer a solid base for interpreting symbols, modern resources can help improve students' analytical abilities in different ways. Educators can incorporate traditional frameworks like Freudian symbolism and archetypal analysis with digital tools such as annotation platforms, visual mapping software and multimedia projects where students analyze symbolism in films and online media. This mix enables students to understand the complexity of literary theory while interacting with symbolism in ways that connect to their daily lives. Teachers can include tasks for students to examine symbols in different types of media, like books, movies and ads, for a more diverse and engaging study of symbolism. Blending traditional and contemporary approaches can enhance students' comprehension of symbolism and make literary interpretation more interesting and applicable to today's learners.

Conclusion

Teaching symbolism in literature is challenging, yet a rewarding task when exploring the deeper meanings of texts. Educators are confronted with key challenges such as the subjectivity of interpretation, the necessity of contextual awareness and striking a balance between traditional and contemporary approaches. Nevertheless, these difficulties also offer chances for creativity and involvement in the educational setting. Educators can prepare students to understand the depth of symbolic meaning in literature by creating a supportive atmosphere for diverse interpretations, incorporating contextual research, and utilizing both classical and modern analytical tools. On balance, teaching symbolism involves more than just recognizing symbols; it entails assisting students in cultivating critical thinking abilities that enable them to interact with literature in a more profound manner. It motivates them to value the intricacy of human experience seen in the various interpretations symbols can represent. Through engaging in collaborative discussions, developing contextual awareness and employing various approaches, students enhance their ability to interpret symbols, becoming more insightful readers and skilled at linking literature to their environment.

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