Conventional Symbols in Literature

A symbol is a setting, object, character, or event in a story that carries more than the literal meaning and therefore represents something significant to understanding the meaning of a work of literature. In other words symbols always have a literal (concrete) meaning and a figurative (abstract) meaning. Conventional symbols have a previously agreed upon meaning. Example:

**SERPENT**

**Literal meaning:** A serpent is a slithering reptile that hisses
**Symbolic meaning:** the devil, especially the devil’s aspect of deceit and deception
**Conventional source:** Genesis, the Garden of Eden

Some conventional symbols are as follows:

**COLORS**
- **Red:** blood, passion, emotion, danger, or daring
- **Black:** passivity, death, evil
- **White:** innocence, purity, light
- **Green:** new life, fertility, hope
- **Yellow:** caution, decay, decrepitude, old age
- **Blue:** peace, serenity, eternity
- **Pink:** innocence, femininity
- **Purple:** royalty
- **Brown:** earth, soil, humility and poverty
- **Orange:** heat, sun
- **Gold:** riches, sacredness

**NATURE**
- **Spring:** birth, new beginning
- **Summer:** maturity, knowledge
- **Autumn:** decline, nearing death, growing old
- **Winter:** death, sleep, hibernation, or stagnation
- **Christmas season:** birth, change for the better
- **Easter season:** rebirth, enlightenment
- **Dawn:** illumination, hope
- **Light:** truth, safety, warmth, knowledge
- **Darkness:** evil, ignorance, danger
- **Apple:** temptation, loss of innocence
- **Weeds:** evil, wildness/outcasts of society
- **Flowers:** beauty, youth, strength, gentleness
- **Rose:** budding youth, romance
- **Water:** purification, cleansing
- **Evergreen tree:** immortality

**WEATHER**
- **Fog/Mist:** isolation; confusion, obscurity
- **Rain:** sadness or despair
- **Wind and storms:** violent human emotions
- **Lightning:** power and strength
- **Morning:** purity and promise
- **Rainbows:** heralds of good fortune, heaven
- **Thunder:** God’s wrath, punishment

**ANIMALS**
- **Dove:** peace, purity, simplicity
- **Fox:** slyness, cleverness
- **Raven:** death, destruction, impending doom
- **Lion:** strength, power, authority
- **Peacock:** pride, vanity
- **Mouse:** shyness, meekness
- **Hawk:** sharp, keen eyesight
- **Owl:** wisdom
- **Cats:** cunning, forethought, and ingenuity
- **Lamb:** sacrifice element, the children of God
- **Eagle:** freedom
- **Donkey:** humility, patience, stupidity
- **Buzzard/Vulture:** warning of impending death

**CLOTHING**
- **Cape:** withdrawal into oneself or into God.
- **Cloak:** human trickery
- **Mask:** demonic tendencies
SETTINGS
Forest: usually a place of evil or mystery
Desert: isolation, alienation, loneliness
Garden: paradise of a haven
Window: freedom or lack thereof
Door: opportunity
Park: a place for retreat and renewal

OBJECTS
Skull: death
Crown: wealth
Ring: long-term commitment
Axe: battle, work
Belt: protection, chastity
Candle: light in the darkness
Circle: wholeness, perfection
Fire: Hell; pain, death
Pearl: incorruptibility
Sword: protection, strength

ACTIONS
Kiss: friendship, fellowship, intimacy
Journey: the call of fate, adventure

NUMBERS
Zero (0): the ultimate mystery; nothingness
Three (3): tripartite nature of the world; signifies fulfillment
  Consider: Holy Trinity; 3: beginning, middle, end; past, present, and future;
Five (5): human perfection
  Consider: Five senses, five fingers on each hand, five toes on each foot, five wounds of Jesus
Seven (7): totality; divine abundance
  Consider: Seven days of creation, seven days of the week, seven sacraments, seven deadly sins
Twelve (12): universal fulfillment
  Consider: Twelve tribes of Israel, Twelve Apostles, twelve days of Christmas, 12 months in a year
Forty (40): penance, purification
  Consider: 40 days of lent, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, the Jews wandered the desert for forty years, Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai, the Great Flood was caused by 40 days of rain