

Symbolism

Secondary Lesson Plan



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Source

Inside Out Student Guide

Learning area

English

Level

Middle secondary

Description

This activity uses input from the class and an example from literature as the basis for a study of symbolism. It is part of a unit that explores the use of symbolism in spoken, written, graphic and other visual forms in the above publication.

Purpose

To examine the use of symbols in everyday life and in literature.

To recognise that differing personal and cultural backgrounds may influence interpretation.

Duration

Two or three sessions

Possible outcomes

In relation to *English — a curriculum profile for Australian schools*, work on this activity could lead to the achievement of outcomes in the following strands:

- **Speaking and listening**
 - Texts
 - Contextual understanding
 - Linguistic structures and features
- **Reading and viewing**
 - Texts
 - Contextual understanding
 - Linguistic structures and features

Links to other learning areas, such as Creating, making and presenting in the Arts, are also possible.

Materials required

- photocopies of *The sick rose* by William Blake and the explanations of the symbolism contained in it
- video: 'Symbolism', *Inside Out*, program 3 (optional)
- a dictionary of slang (optional)

Procedure

1 Symbols around us

Groups of students make a list of some of the symbols encountered in everyday life, for example:

- a green light tells you it is your turn to go
- a bell may signal the beginning of the school day
- a gold cross on a necklace suggests the wearer is a Christian

Groups share their lists with the class to produce a combined list on the board.

2 Extending the examples

The class then classify the examples collected using the headings:

- visual
- written
- music and sound effects
- non-verbal
- verbal

Ensure that there are several examples for each of these headings. The video segment provides further examples.

3 Symbols and cultural contexts

Working individually, students use the following headings to make a list of examples in each category:

- symbols with changing meanings
- symbols with universal meanings

For instance, in one culture the idea of mourning is conveyed by the colour black and in another by its opposite — white. Examples may be drawn from previous class work and are discussed by students in small groups.

4 Symbolic language in common use

Groups of students brainstorm a list of words and phrases used every day but not a part of standard English speech. They may be examples from their own speech, their parents' or from young siblings. The terms 'unreal', 'groovy' and 'bad vibes' were used in the sixties and seventies. A dictionary of slang could help with this. The group selects twenty examples and arranges them alphabetically.

Individuals choose some words or phrases. A meaning is stated for each term in standard English. An explanation for how and why it has gained that meaning is developed. Again a dictionary of slang could help with this.

The group selects a small number of the most interesting, or most common words or phrases, and shares the explanations with the class.

5 Symbols in literature

Students read the poem below by William Blake.

The sick rose
O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

Each student develops a one-page interpretation of the poem's meaning. They write what they consider to be a possible 'reading', or way for the poem to be understood, by interpreting it line by line, or image by image. Students may use expressions such as, 'By using the image of the the poet creates ideas of but also of `'. The interpretation should finish with one or two sentences which sum up the student's view of what the poem is about.

Below are some of the many possible meanings associated with the symbols used in the poem.

Rose: a symbol of perfection and the flower of Venus (the Roman goddess of love). It also stands for joy and peace. The rose is always seen as feminine and sometimes represents the female genitals. A red rose can represent life, spring, passion and blood. A white rose can represent purity and virginity.

Worm: a symbol of death. It is connected with lowness, vileness and contempt. It is also a masculine force, sometimes being seen to represent the penis. In this poem, worm is also specifically the canker worm which eats the roots of the rose.

Storm: a symbol of chaos, confusion, fear, wildness, destruction and change. The storm can also be seen as blowing away the old and frail and giving the new room to expand. If the storm is seen to have creative effects, there must first be great wildness and destruction.

Night: a symbol of darkness, of things secret and hidden. It is also a symbol of evil. Satan is referred to as the Prince of Darkness.

Bed: a symbol of sleep and the vulnerability and innocence of sleep. It can also represent the sexual in bed. In this poem it is also, of course, a garden bed.

In groups, students compare their interpretations and discuss the differences.

Acknowledgments

'Inside Out' is an ABC Children's and Education Television production.

Related products

- [Teaching Viewing and Visual texts: Secondary](#)
Introduces teaching about visual language and visual texts and provides a range of classroom activities.
- [Teaching Language: Secondary](#)
Activities and units to help teach written and spoken language.