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Symbols are sneaky. They hide in literature and life, camouflaged by surrounding words or events, inconspicuously enriching each. Only a moment is needed to reveal them, a glimpse from the corner of an eye and they are found. Then the next task is deciphering, which illuminates a new world of intricacies in a story or a new level of understanding and sentimentality in life. But people cannot access that greater knowledge if they do not know what a symbol is to begin with. For all intents and purposes, a symbol is an object that represents itself and also carries a deeper, more abstract meaning in a story.

For example, in “The Dead” by James Joyce, the author creates an inconspicuous, concrete symbol for the more abstract concept of death. The reader notices that a motif of snow is strung throughout the story. The snow is set up to have an ordinary though perhaps slightly melancholy role. Joyce comments, “[Gabriel] stood on the mat, scraping snow from his goloshes” (Joyce 435) and “as for Gretta there, said Gabriel, she’d walk home in the snow if she were let” (437). The reader does not realize the redundant snow’s more sinister meaning until the end, where in the final paragraph Joyce states that the snow was “falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones” (463). Then Joyce’s macabre final sentence, “His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead,” causes the reader to go back over the story, analyzing every mention of snow (463). Suddenly, Gabriel’s scraping of snow off his galoshes is a metaphor for his fear of death and his nearly crippling caution in life, and his longing to be walking in the snow instead of at the dinner party shows his discomfort with his tentativeness. Gretta’s willingness to walk home in the snow is an allusion to her past tragic romance and the lack of fear she has for death in her passion for life. Sickly Aunt Julia’s sad statement, “I love the look of the snow,” is an ominous warning of her upcoming embracement of death (456). And the weather report, “snow is general all over Ireland,” is now a grim reminder that each person in turn will be touched by death and forced to give in.

Similarly, in Raymond Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” the symbol of the knight’s armor represents the intangible concepts of both healthy and unhealthy feelings of men toward relationships. Throughout the story we have three manifestations of the knight’s armor. Each time the “armor” is mentioned, a man is wearing it, and there is a woman in relation to him. The armor takes literal form when Mel says, “If I could come back again in a different life, a different time and all, you know what? I’d like to come back as a knight. You were pretty safe wearing all that armor […] [the knights] couldn’t get hurt very easy” (Carver 156). Terri comments, “Mel would like to ride a horse and carry a lance,” and Laura says, “Carry a woman’s scarf with you everywhere,” and then Mel retorts, “Or just a woman” (156). The armor here has a dual meaning. The knight was a noble character, cloaked with chivalry and usually depicted fighting for a woman’s love. This image of a knight appears to be the ideal way a man should feel toward the woman he loves: ready to fight and die for her. Mel misunderstands, as is apparent in his rocky relationship with Terri; several snide remarks are exchanged and there is frequent though brief quarreling as the story progresses. Mel views the armor as protection from the pain of the relationship, rather than a fortification to help defend it. He brings up a second form of armor, the beekeeper’s gear, which further illuminates how little he understands love. Mel wishes to wear the

beekeeper's gear as he is releasing a swarm of bees into his ex-wife's house in order to kill her. He is fantasizing about murdering a woman he used to love, but protecting himself from the bees—the consequences, the guilt, the pain from the destruction of love—by wearing this armor, the beekeeper's suit. He refuses to be vulnerable. But Nick makes the crucial point, "sometimes they suffocated in all that armor, Mel […] they'd fall off their horses and not be able to get up because they were too tired to stand with all that armor on them. They got trampled by their own horses sometimes" (156). In other words, Mel's armor will suffocate him and destroy his relationships, including the one he has with Terri, presumably.

Nonetheless, a third and most gallantly worn variety of armor is also mentioned by Mel, the full-body casts worn by the old couple from his anecdote. Indeed, the woman is also wearing it in this case, but this proves the point that for a man to feel so strongly about a woman after such a long time together, the wife should share the same chivalrous and loving feelings for him that he possesses for her. Otherwise, his love is a cage rather than a blanket and it makes him a villain. The casts are literally protecting them from further physical injury, but they could also be interpreted as the protection from the pain of relationships that Mel so sorely desires. However, in his makeshift armor, the old man's heart is breaking about the fact that the cast is so confining that he cannot turn his head to see his wife (158). As soon as this sentence is read, the old man transforms from his broken, pitiful state into a valiant knight, a hero for love. Ironically, a man must allow himself to be vulnerable and shed his armor—in order to become a knight in shining armor.

Symbols like those in literature are rampant in life as well, including my own. Even though I am young and my generation is a whirlwind of ever-improving smart phones, Mac computers, and enormous plasma screen TVs, I am not a very technologically sound person. I have an ancient television and I rarely use the internet for activities other than research. However, there is one small piece of technology that would end my world if it were ever denied to me permanently: my phone. The contraption is not sleek or flat; it does not have a touch screen or apps. It is red, chipped, scratched with a tiny little screen, though it does have a "QWERTY" keyboard that slides out when needed. The phone itself is not the object of my affection. However, it has become precious to me in its function. I have maintained a long-distance relationship for seven years. My phone is my gateway to my lover and a small lapse in time where I can achieve bliss. When my phone is broken I am in pieces; when I'm furious at my boyfriend my phone is nothing more than a quivering rattlesnake and I change the wallpaper from my favorite photo of us to something less painful. And when our relationship is peaceful or something particularly romantic has happened, I cuddle my phone to my chest like a baby while I sleep. To me, my already outdated phone is a symbol for my relationship and love, and there is not a thing I can do about it.

Symbols blossom up from time to time in stories and life, in clusters or in one or two succulent morsels. They are tiny puzzles and once they are solved, the meaning of every detail around them is illuminated. Consequently, a story that is drab when read literally is beautified once the symbols are determined and decoded. Defining these tools is simple. Symbols are objects that hold a greater meaning that is often more abstract than the object itself, but they are also a lot more. They are gateways to understanding.

Works Cited

Charters, Ann, ed. *The Story and Its Writer*. Compact 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011.