

1.3 Personification

Personification is a figure of speech in which a thing – an idea or an animal – is given human attributes. The non-human objects are portrayed in such a way that we feel they have the ability to act like human beings. For example, when we say, ‘The sky weeps,’ we are giving the sky the ability to cry, which is a human quality. Thus, we can say that the sky has been personified in the given sentence. In his poem ‘To Autumn’, John Keats personifies autumn: Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind. We can guess that autumn is a woman. Not only because seasons were traditionally personified as female in European art, but also because this season has so soft hair.

1. When well-appeared April on the heel

Of limping winter treads.

(William Shakespeare)

There are two personification examples here. April cannot put on a dress, and winter does not limp, nor does it have a heel on which a month can walk. Shakespeare personifies the month of April and the winter season by giving them two distinct human qualities.

2. Loveliest of trees, the cherry now

Is hung with bloom along the bough,

And stands about the woodland ride

Wearing white for Eastertide.

(A. H. Houseman)

The poet sees a cherry tree covered with beautiful white flowers in the forest, and says that the cherry tree wears white clothes to celebrate Easter. He gives human attributes to a tree in order to describe it in human terms.

Generally speaking, personification is not merely a decorative device, but serves the purpose of giving deeper meanings to literary texts. It adds vividness to expressions, as we always look at the world from a human perspective. Writers and poets rely on personification to bring inanimate things to life, so that their nature and actions are understood in a better way. Because it is easier

for us to relate to something that is human, or which possesses human traits, its use encourages us to develop a perspective that is new as well as creative.

1.4 Symbol

The symbol is an image that stands for something also and perhaps many things. A symbol can take various forms. A symbol, however, helps make meanings appear concrete. Poets find in nature their powerful source of symbols. Therefore, ‘winter’ stands for death, ‘spring’ for rebirth, a ‘rose’ for love and beauty, a ‘dove’ for peace, and ‘white’ for purity.

Generally, it is an object representing another, to give an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. Sometimes, however, an action, an event or a word spoken by someone may have a symbolic value. For instance, ‘smile’ is a symbol of friendship. Similarly, the action of someone smiling at you may stand as a symbol of the feeling of affection which that person has for you.

Symbols do shift their meanings depending on the context they are used in. ‘A chain,’ for example, may stand for ‘union’ as well as “imprisonment”. Thus, symbolic meaning of an object or an action is understood by when, where, and how it is used. It also depends on who reads the work.

Read the following examples:

1. All the world’s a stage,

And all the men and women merely players;

they have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts, (William Shakespeare)

These lines are symbolic of the fact that men and women, in the course of their lives, perform different roles. A stage here symbolizes the world, and players is a symbol for human beings.

2. Ah Sunflower, weary of time,

Who countest the steps of the sun;

Seeking after that sweet golden clime

Where the travellers journey is done; (William Blake)

Blake uses a sunflower as a symbol for human beings, and 'the sun' symbolizes life. Therefore, these lines symbolically refer to their life cycle and their yearning for a never-ending life.

3. In the spring, I asked the daisies

If his words were true,

And the clever, clear-eyed daisies

Always knew.

Now the fields are brown and barren,

Bitter autumn blows,

And of all the stupid asters

Not one knows.

(Sara Teasdale)

Sara Teasdale develops a number of striking symbols. In the above lines, 'spring' and 'daisies' are symbols of youth. 'Brown and barren' are symbols of transition from youth to old age. Moreover, 'Bitter autumn' symbolizes death.