Examining Symbolism – Classic

Sympathy

by Paul Laurence Dunbar

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;

5 When the first bird sings and the first bud opes*,
6 And the faint perfume from its chalice* steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling

11 When he fain* would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

Line 5: opes = opens

Line 6: chalice = a cup or goblet

Line 11: fain = happily, gladly
Examining Symbolism – Classic
Student Worksheet

Symbols: A person, place, thing, or event that has meaning in itself and that also stands for something more than itself.

For example:
The eagle is a bird, but it is also the symbol for American freedom, liberty and justice.

**What could the “caged bird” possibly be considered a symbol of?**

**What are some elements outside of the bird’s cage in the poem?**
**What could they be considered symbols for?**

**What are some prominent elements inside of the bird’s cage?**
**What could they be considered symbols for?**

**Why does the speaker claim to understand “what the caged bird feels” (stanza 1)?**

**Why does the speaker claim to understand “why he beats his wing” (stanza 2)?**

**Why does the speaker claim to understand “Why the caged bird sings” (stanza 3)?**

**Why is the poem titled “Sympathy”?**
Examining Symbolism – Hip-Hop

*Three Strikes You In*

*by Ice Cube*

1 One more strike and I’m through
   Bottom of the ninth, swingin’ for my life
   I’m up at the plate, going for the gate
   They got my moms seated in section eight...

5 Yeah, (It ain’t right)
   Playin’ people like a game (It ain’t right)
   Human beings, puttin’ em in a jar (It ain’t right)
   For double life, triple life (It ain’t right)

   I gots to root for my homeboys

10 If they don’t win it’s a shame
   Cuz it’s one-two-three strikes you in
   Twenty-five years of pain you know my name
Examing Symbolism - Hip-Hop
Student Worksheet

Symbols: A person, place, thing, or event that has meaning in itself and that also stands for something more than itself.

For example:
The eagle is a bird, but it is also the symbol for American freedom, liberty and justice.

**Explain what baseball is being used as a symbol for in “Three Strikes You In.”**

In “Three Strikes You In,” what is the “In” to which Ice Cube refers?

In the excerpts, baseball is a symbol of something that can be said to be hiding a deeper feeling about society. Describe what that feeling is.
Poetry Writing Exercise: Symbolism

Learning Objective: Students will identify and utilize the poetic device of symbolism.

Standards Addressed: 9/10 W&O 1.3, 1.4; LRA 3.7, 3.11; R 1.1, 1.2 11/12 LAR 3.4; W&O 1.1, 1.2; W 2.2

Materials needed: This worksheet.

Methodology: See below.

A Symbol is a thing you can touch with your hands (i.e., it’s tangible) but has some further meaning beyond itself.

For example:
The Bald Eagle is more than just a bird, it is a symbol for the United States of America and its ideals.

I. Identify what the following objects might be considered symbols for:

- A Red Rose

- A Rolls Royce

- A lion

- A fork in the road

- The letter X

II. Create a list of 3 objects and explain what they are symbols of.

For example:

My baggy pants are a symbol of my lifestyle.

1. My ______________ is a symbol for ____________________________.

2. My ______________ is a symbol for ____________________________.

3. My ______________ is a symbol for ____________________________.

III. Write a four-line poem explaining the symbolism of an object from the list above.

For example:

My Baggy Pants

They’re comfortable, reflect the style of my streets.

Sweatpants, jeans and khakis got beat.

I like it when my pants sag.

It doesn’t really matter what name is on the tag.

It’s a lifestyle.

Symbolism Poem

Title: ____________________________