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WRITING SCHOOL

# Don't Try to Make It Symbolic

I was invited to a Canadian fiction class at McGill University once. *This Cake Is for the Party* was on the required reading list for the course (!), and the students had all read the book and prepared some questions for my visit.

It was a surreal experience.

When I wrote the stories, I hoped for readers. But I never considered that English students would study my stories and look for symbols and meanings in a literary context (as in, possible answers to exam questions, yikes). And yet there I was, talking to a group of intelligent readers who wanted me to clarify details about images I'd written when I was in an altered state of mind.\*

One student asked if I wrote Anne drinking bubbly water in "Throwing Cotton" to represent the bubbly, optimistic, and hopeful feelings she was having about pregnancy.

I had to tell her no, I didn't. But it was a very cool interpretation. I think I actually said, "cool interpretation." I felt decidedly un-academic. I hoped I wasn't disappointing the class with my flaky responses. But really, I was surprised and pleased by her intuitive analysis.

It was *her* sharp mind that turned that bubbly water into a symbol, not me. I just wrote the bubbly water because that felt like the true thing that Anne would want to drink when everyone else had wine. The scene called for it.

Besides, had I tried to write an image that symbolized hope and optimism, I would never have come up with fizzy mineral water!

## *Be wary of consciously creating symbols in your stories.*

There's nothing that's more cringe-worthy than trying-to-be symbolic writing. Trust your subconscious! It's an expert at symbolism. It's been making symbols for you all your life.

Putting motifs in your story on purpose will not make your work more meaningful or more literary.

Look, themes and symbols happen. You don't have to try very hard to find them. Our brains are hardwired to find meaning in everything. So let go of trying to construct it in your story.

### *Three reasons to not write symbolically:*

1. It's way more fun to let your subconscious make symbols for you, and to see what sub-meanings appear after you've written the thing.
2. Your story will read more honestly and naturally when you write to uncover the things you don't know that you already know.
3. Nothing you can think up will ever be more nuanced or more compelling than what your subconscious can conjure for you effortlessly.

## *Do not try to outsmart your story.*

Write intuitively — when you come close to something that feels true, you can feel it like a tug on a divining rod. Know that when you're present in your scene and practicing the art of deep noticing, your images will be imbued with meaning.

Note: in your writing process, you'll probably find yourself writing a lot of untrue stuff, too. Sometimes you have to, even if it's just to get three wooden paragraphs in — but then if you're lucky, you'll find something at the end of the third paragraph that feels real and true. Deep noticing is a practice, and you get better the more you do it.

Spend your energy on the art of deep noticing — not trying to think up deep literary symbolism.

In the McGill class, a student finally told me that he was under the impression that most of the

themes and motifs that are taught in English classes are completely made up by the reader and the profs, and that they are not intentional.

“Yep,” I said.

“So do you think there is value in sitting and analyzing artists’ motifs, even if they’re *completely wrong*?” he asked.

But they’re not wrong. Symbols may exist outside of a writer’s conscious efforts, that’s all.

It’s a glorious thing to find meaning in images and motifs! It’s a deep and rewarding process. A story is a tool you can use to think about your life. It’s relevant, but because of you, not because of the *author*. What you choose to look at tells you something about yourself.

Therefore, dear writer, your intention should not be to give your readers meaning. Your job is to write something that becomes true when they read it. That’s when the magic happens.

Isn’t that even more mysterious and interesting?

Leave the analyzing to the English lit classes. Go into your story with uncertainty and curiosity, and be willing to write without knowing what it all means. Hold your pen like a divining rod. Focus on the truth-jolt you have when you come upon an image that feels like it existed before you got there.

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