

6.9 The function of a symbol

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Total: 12 marks

Objective

Build the skills to explain a **symbol** 象征.

You must be able to:

- state when a material object becomes a symbol
- state what a symbol's meaning depends on
- distinguish common from contextual symbols
- state what makes a character symbolic

1 Worked examples

Study these first. Each one shows the method for a task used later.

■ Becoming a symbol

When a material object comes to represent, or stand for, an idea or concept, it becomes a symbol. The object is still itself; it has acquired a second job.

■ What meaning depends on

A symbol can represent different things depending on the experiences of a reader or the context of its use in a text. Two variables —the reader and the context.

■ Two kinds

Certain symbols are so common and recurrent that many readers have associations with them prior to reading. Other symbols are more contextualized and only come to represent certain things through their use in a particular text.

■ Symbolic characters

When a character comes to represent, or stand for, an idea or concept, that character becomes symbolic. Some are so common they are archetypal — and the CED again notes that **the exam will not require students to identify or label archetypes.**

2 Practice

2.1 State when a material object becomes a symbol. [2]

2.2 State the two variables a symbol's meaning depends on. [2]

2.3 There are two kinds of symbol.

(a) Distinguish them. [2]

(b) State the CED's exam note about archetypes. [1]

3 Exam-style questions

3.1 A contextual symbol comes to represent something through [1]

- **A** its use in a particular text
- **B** the dictionary
- **C** the author's biography
- **D** the publication date

3.2 A character who comes to stand for an idea becomes [1]

- **A** symbolic
- **B** an antagonist
- **C** a foil
- **D** a narrator

3.3 A key appears six times in a novel, always when a character is refused something.

(a) State what it has become. [1]

(b) Explain which kind of symbol it is.

[2]

4 Go further

- work through the **6.9 The function of a symbol** lesson on the **Learn** page;
- read the **Longer Fiction or Drama II** section of the AP English Literature handout on the **Know** page.

Solutions

2.1 when it comes to represent or stand for an idea or concept, while remaining the object it is.

2.2 the experiences of a reader; the context of its use in the text.

2.3 (a) common symbols carry associations readers bring to the text; contextual symbols acquire meaning only through their use in that text. (b) the exam will not require students to identify or label archetypes.

3.1 A. its use in that text.

3.2 A. symbolic.

3.3 (a) a symbol. (b) contextual, since its association with refusal is built by this novel's repeated use rather than brought in by the reader.