SYMBOLISM and IRONY

Short Stories
A symbol packs volumes of meaning in a single image, impression, or idea.

Looking at the following images, what are some things each image may suggest, represent, or stand for?
We'll start with the easy and obvious...
Then to the more complex...
Introduction to Symbol and Irony

Most successful stories are characterized by compression. This means that nothing is wasted and each word and detail is chosen to maximum effect... kind of like a great sandwich.

Every small element has a specific purpose.
The author chooses details and incidents which contribute most to the meaning he or she is after; therefore, the details are multi-valued, serving a variety of purposes at once.
A detail that expresses character at the same time it advances the plot, is more useful than a detail that does only one or the other.

Two means which the writer has of gaining this compression are thereby increasing the force and impact of a story are **SYMBOL** and **IRONY**.
A literary symbol is something that means more than what it is. It has a literal meaning in the story, but suggests or represents other meanings as well.

For example, consider the following image....
The pigeon is a simple and common bird. However, in the image it takes center stage, seemingly protected.

The bird could well symbolize the natural world, its fragility, and the need for it to be protected. A character fighting for the bird is fighting for the natural world itself.
Symbolism – Names

The most basic type of symbolism is name symbolism, where the author chooses names for his characters that suggest something about them.

*Pilgrim’s Progress* is one of the most extremely obvious examples of this.
More important than name symbolism is the symbolic use of objects and actions.

In some stories, these symbols will fit so naturally into the literal aspect of the story that their symbolic significance may not be readily apparent.
In other stories, they will be so central and obvious that they will practically demand immediate symbolic interpretation.
In the first kind of story, the symbols add to and **reinforce** the meaning.

I.e.: The conch shell in *Lord of the Flies* = order, government, and logical authority.
Symbolism – carrying meaning

In the second kind of story, they carry the meaning.

A story which is carried by symbols is called an allegory.

Think of all of Jesus’ parables where he starts with, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”
The ability to recognize and identify symbols requires perception. The great danger when one becomes aware of symbolism is to find symbolism everywhere and read into the details of a story meanings which were not intended and are not really supported by it.
The reader should be alert for symbolic meanings, but should observe the following cautions....
The story itself must furnish the clue that the detail is to be taken symbolically. Symbols nearly always signify their existence by emphasis, repetition and position/placing.
The meaning of the literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story. The symbol has its meaning inside the story, not outside it.
To be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind from its literal meaning; a symbol is something more than the representative of a class or type.

**I.e:** A sparrow would not represent birds, because it is one. It might represent nature, however.
A symbol may have more than one meaning. It may suggest a cluster of meanings.

However, the area of possible meanings is controlled by the story. The possibility of complex meanings, plus concreteness and emotional power, gives the symbol its special compressive value.
Irony is a contrast in which one contrast somehow mocks another.

There are three types of irony, all of them involving some discrepancy or incongruity.
I hate 3 things:
1. Vandalism
2. Irony
3. Lists.
26. VII. 93
Verbal Irony
This is a figure of speech in which the opposite is said from what is intended. The discrepancy is between what is said and what is meant. It is a way of saying two things that are true, but each in a difference sense.

IRONY – Types:
Dramatic Irony

The contrast is between what the character says or thinks, and what the reader knows to be true. The value of this kind of irony lies in what it implies about the speaker of his expectations.
Situational Irony
This is usually the most important kind for the story writer. The contrast is between appearance and reality, between expectation and fulfillment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate.
In each type of irony, the author is able to gain power with economy. Like symbolism, irony makes it possible to suggest meanings without stating them.

Simply by juxtaposing two contrasting facts, the author creates an ironic contrast that creates new meaning and provides insight in humanity, or the human condition...
“A Hanging…”