

Language can sometimes have layers of meaning. Words can have denotations – their literal meanings and connotations – the ideas or feelings that the word evokes.

For example, take the colour red and the colour green. What connotations do they carry in certain contexts?

If you're driving, red means stop and green means go. In this context, the colours are used symbolically.

In another context, red can symbolise danger, or love. Green might relate to the environment, or money.

Symbolism goes beyond just colours though. A person, place or an object could carry symbolic meaning. The symbol stands for an abstract idea – for example love, time or wealth.

Writers often use symbols to create atmosphere, or to show us something about a character, or to make a comment about life itself.

A writer might use metaphors or similes with symbolic meaning. For example, a fork in the road may symbolise the choices we make in life.

In Emily Brontë's poem *Love and Friendship*, she uses similes that compare a holly tree to true friendship. In this poem, the evergreen quality of the holly tree represents the lasting nature of friendship.

When you read different texts, you can look out for how writers use symbolism.

A useful question to ask yourself is this: in the context of this story, play or poem, could this tree or road stand for something else? What might that be?

But don't get too carried away, some things just are what they are! That's literally just a tree on this occasion.