

## Risk-Taker: Symbolism

Symbolism can be simply defined as anything that represents some greater meaning beyond its literal interpretation. In theatre, symbolism can be portrayed through costume, characters, movement, props, and actions performed by characters which serve a greater thematic purpose within the context of the story. [1] The Symbolist movement began in French poetry as a rebellion against the naturalistic and realistic styles that had taken over European literature. [3] Thus, Symbolist theatre, as a reaction against naturalist and realist theatre, often contains anti-realistic or non-naturalistic sets, props, dialogue and acting styles. These elements are usually used to symbolise values in society, like power represented by a throne or freedom represented by a window. [1] The emphasis on dreams and fantasies is characteristic of Symbolist theatre. Lugne-Poe, an actor and director who opened his own symbolist theatre, described the style as “unrealistic theatre of poetry and dreams through atmospheric staging and stylised acting.” [2] The philosophy behind the style, whether in art, poetry, prose, or theatre, is that reality is best expressed through poetry and symbols, as it finds parallels and connection to nature rather than imitating it in its original state. The movement, though in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, had a long-lasting effect on literature and art of modern times. A almost fundamental concept in poetry is the use of something concrete to represent an abstract idea. [3]

Maurice Maeterlinck was a Belgian symbolist poet and dramatist. One unique element of his work is the settings used. Instead of cottages and parlours used in realist drama, Maeterlinck used medieval castles, forests, and battlefields with no regard for space and time, and created the dream-like atmosphere distinctive of Symbolist theatre. Another distinct aspect is the underlying subject beneath all of his work. Rather than trying to find the *motive* of human action, as was the ever-present idea in theatre throughout all ages, Maeterlinck's work sought to explore the *source* of all motive. Supported by the 'modern' psychological idea of the conscious and subconscious, Maeterlinck gave life and voice to the subconscious. [4] An example of one of Maeterlinck's symbolist plays is *The Intruder*, about a family sitting around a table, talking while waiting for a doctor to come and help the mother and youngest child, who are ill. The grandfather is blind, and has seemingly lost his mind. Blindness could be a symbol for ignorance, as the man is immensely paranoid and , or perhaps used to create irony, as he is the only one of them that can 'see' the 'intruder', an invisible force - of sorts - that enters the room and makes the grandfather uneasy. It could be a symbol for death, as when it finally shows itself, it is dressed in black garments and announces the death of the mother. Among these there are other symbols, but these are the clearest and simplest. [5]

The Symbolist movement and Maurice Maeterlinck without a doubt connect to Risk-Taking. In the era of the movement, European literature was dominated by naturalism and realism. It took a lot of Risk-Taking to entirely reject the what was formerly known as expression and create an unrealistic, dream-like way to convey the same realities as those conveyed by the description of nature in its literal sense. The Risk-Takers of the Symbolist movement ultimately devised a new literary device and theatrical style based on everything that literature currently *wasn't*.