

Symbolism in *Strange Objects*

Authors use symbols in their writing to create additional layers of meaning. Examine the following symbols within *Strange Objects* and consider the meanings that they add.

Symbol	What it might mean	How it applies to <i>Strange Objects</i>
The 'cannibal' pot	The pot represents the misguided fears that colonial Europeans exhibited towards dark-skinned peoples, and the myths that perpetuate disempowering stereotypes.	The pot represents the misguided fears both Wouter and Steven have of Aboriginal people, stereotyping them as dangerous savages.
The mummified hand	Hands represent action, and in this case act as a recurring visual motif throughout the novel.	The hand provides a connection between cultures: it brings the past into the present, it was a 'gift' from the Aboriginal people to Wouter Loos, Jan took Ela's hand in marriage, hands are painted in the caves and so on; the hand represents how numerous people have a hand in creating or shaping history.
The ring	The blood red stone suggest danger. Rings represent eternity.	The ring represents the cyclical nature of history, reinforcing the continued presence of colonial attitudes in Australia, particularly towards Aboriginal people; the ring also links Steven and Jan.
The abandoned mission	A mission represents a western (religious) institution seeking to impose its own ideology upon a culture seen as requiring salvation, thus marginalising that culture as inferior.	Represents the failure of colonialist attitudes and policies that sought to 'civilise' Aboriginal people and instead resulted in their cultural devastation; its abandoned nature suggests the tendency of colonialist powers to abandon colonised cultures afterwards.
Blinding light	Suggests not being able to see clearly.	Steven is blinded by his visions/delusions, as are colonial versions of history.
Aliens	Suggest extraterrestrial visitors, usually with unfriendly intentions of conquest.	Encourage the reader to question who the real 'aliens' are in Australia's history: the white Europeans. Steven is linked with the aliens although this also represents his desire to escape.
Fragmentation of the narrative	Suggests ideas of multiple voices; competing versions of history; incomplete/unreliable accounts of history.	Reinforces a major theme of the novel, which calls into question accepted versions of Australia's history and the (un)reliability of dominant Anglo-centric accounts.
The whale	Represents Aboriginal spiritual beliefs; recalls the Biblical tale of Jonah and the whale.	Jonah was seen as a harbinger of doom, bringing the storm down on the sailors, just as Jan brings sickness to the Aboriginal people.

The Life Frame	Suggests a structure that is designed to hold life and reveal its interior.	Suggests that Steven may have been looking for structure in his own life, and a desire to see inside himself.
Allusion to James Dean	Pop culture icon representing the rebellious independence of a generation of adolescents.	Suggests Steven's uncertainty with his own identity; he may be unhappy within himself and his 'cooler', confident James Dean self was both threatening and attractive.
Allusion to <i>Psycho</i> and the Bates motel	Pop culture icon representing the psychological horror genre.	Psychoanalytically, could be seen as implying Steven's psychopathy; in terms of genre it imbues the novel with a level of horror and unease.

Names		
Steven Messenger	Steven stems from a Greek name meaning crown or wreath. Messenger means one who delivers a message.	A wreath or crown connects to the ring in terms of its circularity, and also suggests Steven's desire for power or agency; Messenger as a surname encourages the reader to consider the ways in which Steven acts as a messenger. What is his message?
Hope Michaels	Hope means a desire for something to happen. Michael is a Hebrew name meaning 'who is God?', implying that no-one is God, thus reminding us to be humble.	In some ways, Hope is a voice of reason; her name could be seen as questioning the perceived superiority of colonial powers (especially when considered with the failed mission) and the hope for a better future.
Charlie Sunrise	Charles stems from a Germanic word meaning 'free man'. Sunrise could be seen as a new beginning.	Charlie as a name for an Aboriginal man could show the impact of colonialism on Aboriginal culture; however, despite his disempowered status, he is still free and ultimately powerful within his own culture.
Ela	Ela stems from a Greek name meaning 'foreign' or 'other'.	Highlights the foreign nature of those who eventually became colonisers; could also be seen as symbolising Ela's 'othered' status as a girl.