Common Symbolism in Literature

A symbol is a thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object that represents something abstract. Symbolism is a type of figurative language. Like a metaphor, a symbol is identified with something that is very different but shares some of the same qualities. When trying to determine whether or not something is a symbol, ask yourself: “Does this character, object, or event stand for something?”

DIRECTIONS: Read the passages below. Can you identify the symbols? What do they mean?

1. “All the world’s a stage,
   And all the men and women merely players;
   they have their exits and their entrances;
   And one man in his time plays many parts,”
   (William Shakespeare, As You Like It)

   SYMBOL: _______________________ MEANING: _______________________

2. To be, or not to be? That is the question—
   Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
   The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
   Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
   And, by opposing, end them?
   (William Shakespeare, Hamlet)

   SYMBOL: _______________________ MEANING: _______________________