

Literary Devices and Figures of Speech ☺

Alliteration

The repetition of an initial consonant sound. Alliteration is a special case of consonance.

- A few flocked to the fight.
- Betty bought butter but the butter was bitter, so Betty bought better butter to make the bitter butter better.
- A skunk sat on a stump. The stump thought the skunk stunk. The skunk thought the stump stunk. What stunk, the skunk or the stump?
- Around the rugged rock the ragged rascal ran.
- "Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade, He bravely breach'd his boiling bloody breast." (from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream")
- "Dancing Dolphins/Those tidal thorough/breds that tango through the turquoise tide./Their taut tails thrashing they twist in tribute to the titans./They twirl through the trek tumbling towards the tide./Throwing themselves towards those theatrical thespians." (by Paul McCann)

Allusions

References to people, places, events, or works of literature

- **Biblical allusions** - References to people, places, events, or passages from the Bible
- **Classical allusions** - References to people, places, events, or passages from writings of ancient Greece or Rome
- **Historical Allusions** - Subtle references to historical events
- **Literary Allusions** - Subtle allusions to other works of literature

Analogy

A detailed comparison of one thing to another dissimilar thing.

At its most basic, an analogy is a comparison of two things to show their similarities. An analogy explains one thing in terms of another to highlight the ways in which they are alike.

- Finding a good man is like finding a needle in a haystack. (Finding a small needle in a pile of hay takes a long time, so the task at hand is likely to be hard and tedious.)
- That's as useful as rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. (It looks like you're doing something helpful but really it will make no difference in the end.)
- Explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog. You understand it better but the frog dies in the process. (E.B White's famous analogy shows that sometimes it's better not to know too much.)
- That movie was a roller coaster ride of emotions. (While you're not flying through the air, the twists, turns and surprises of a movie plot can leave you feeling like you've been through quite an experience.)
- Life is like a box of chocolates – you never know what you're gonna get (An often-used analogy from Forrest Gump shows that life has many choices and surprises, just like a box of chocolates.)

NOTE: Word analogies, or verbal analogies, are used in standardized tests and sometimes in job interviews where you must show the relationship between two objects or concepts using logic and reasoning. These analogies are set up in a standard format. For example:

- tree : leaf :: flower : petal

This analogy is read aloud as:

- Tree is to leaf as flower is to petal.

Anaphora

The repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses or verses.

Writers and speakers use anaphora to add emphasis to the repeated element, but also to add rhythm, cadence, and style to the text or speech. The use of anaphora dates back to ancient Greece and to Biblical times.

- "He has..." at the beginning of successive clauses in *The Declaration of Independence* by Thomas Jefferson
- I am awake. I am strong. I am ready.
- Mom, we will not run. We will not scream. We will not be late.
- "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair." (Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)
- There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance." (Bible, Ecclesiastes 3)
- "It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden, too like the lightning." (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)
- "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!"
- "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." (Bible, 1 Corinthians 13)

Antithesis

The juxtaposition of contrasting ideas in balanced phrases. The use of syntactical parallelism in two adjacent phrases or clauses to emphasize their contrasting meanings

- "To err is human; to forgive divine." (Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*)
- When he became the first man to walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong said that it was a "small step for man, but a giant leap for mankind."
- "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness." Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*
- Let's agree to disagree.

Apostrophe

An address to some absent person or thing, some abstract quality, an inanimate object, or a nonexistent character.

- "Oh Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman
- "The Author to Her Book" by Anne Bradstreet
- Oh, rose, how sweet you smell and how bright you look!
- Car, please get me to work today.
- Oh, trees, how majestic you are as you throw down your golden leaves.
- Dear love, please don't shoot me with your Cupid's bow.
- Feet, don't fail me now.
- Oh, Christmas tree, oh, Christmas tree, how lovely are your branches.
- Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.
- Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee! I have thee not, yet I see thee still! (Macbeth)
- Then come sweet death, and rid me of this grief. (Edward II, Marlowe)

Assonance

Similarity in sound between internal vowels in neighboring words.

- The light of the fire is a sight. (repetition of the long I sound)
- Go slow over the road. (repetition of the long O sound)
- Try as I might, the kite did not fly. (repetition of the long I sound)
- From the movie My Fair Lady: "The rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain." (repetition of the long A sound)
- Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabelle Lee": "And so all the night-tide, I lie down by the side of my darling-my darling-my life and my bride" (repetition of the long I sound)
- She seems to beam rays of sunshine with her eyes of green. (repetition of long E)

Chiasmus

A verbal pattern in which the second half of an expression is balanced against the first but with the parts reversed.

- Do I love you because you're beautiful? Or are you beautiful because I love you? - Oscar Hammerstein
- The value of marriage is not that adults produce children, but that children produce adults. - Peter de Vries
- One should eat to live, not live to eat. - Cicero

What's the difference between antithesis and chiasmus?

Both are rhetorical balancing acts. In an antithesis, contrasting ideas are juxtaposed in balanced phrases or clauses ("Love is an ideal thing, marriage a real thing"). A chiasmus (also known as antimetabole) is a type of antithesis in which the second half of an expression is balanced against the first with the parts reversed ("The first shall be last, and the last shall be first").

Conceit

A conceit is a fanciful metaphor, especially a highly elaborate or extended metaphor in which an unlikely, far-fetched, or strained comparison is made between two things.

A striking, often elaborate, comparison carried out in considerable detail.

- Edward Taylor's "Huswifery" and "Meditation 6"
- "The Chambered Nautilus" by Oliver Wendell Holmes
- A famous example comes from John Donne's poem, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," in which two lovers are compared to opposite points of a compass needle using a long and elaborate metaphor.

Consonance

Stylistic literary device identified by the repetition of identical or similar consonants in neighboring words whose vowel sounds are different (e.g. coming home, hotfoot).

- "And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain" ("The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe)
- "I dropped the locket in the thick mud." (from "The Silken Tent" by Robert Frost)

Consonance may be regarded as the counterpart to the vowel-sound repetition known as assonance.

Epistrophe

What's the difference between anaphora and epistrophe?

*Both involve the repetition of words or phrases. With anaphora, the repetition is at the **beginning** of successive clauses (as in the famous refrain in the final part of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech). With epistrophe (also known as epiphora), the repetition is at the **end** of successive clauses ("When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child").*

- "...and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." (Lincoln – Gettysburg Address)

Euphemism

The substitution of an inoffensive term for one considered offensively explicit.

- He has gone to a better place. (*Euphemism for death*)
- She was placed in a correctional facility. (*Euphemism for prison*)
- I quickly offered him a motion discomfort bag. (*Euphemism for barf bag*)

Hyperbole

An extravagant exaggeration; the use of exaggerated terms for the purpose of emphasis or heightened effect.

- I have told you this a million times already!
- I am starving to death.
- She has been waiting for ages.
- I am so hungry I could eat a horse.
- You snore louder than a freight train.
- If he talks to me, I will die of embarrassment.
- *I have a million things to do today.*
- *That baby weighs a ton!*

Irony

The use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning. A contradiction in what is expected to happen and what actually happens.

Situational Irony

where actions or events have the opposite result from what is expected or what is intended

Verbal Irony

where someone says the opposite of what they really mean or intend; sarcasm is a particularly biting form of verbal irony

Dramatic Irony

occurs when the audience or reader of a text knows something that the characters do not

Situational Irony Examples:

- There are roaches infesting the office of a pest control service.
- A plumber spends all day working on leaky faucets and comes home to find a pipe has burst in his home.

Verbal Irony Examples:

- Looking at her son's messy room, Mom says, "Wow, you could win an award for cleanliness!"
- On the way to school, the school bus gets a flat tire and the bus driver says, "Excellent! This day couldn't start off any better!"

Dramatic Irony Examples:

- The audience knows that a killer is hiding in the closet, but the girl in the horror movie does not.
- The reader knows that a storm is coming, but the children playing on the playground do not.

Examples of Irony in Literature:

- In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, the main character Scout goes to school and is already able to read. While one would expect a teacher to be pleased about that, Scout's teacher does not like that she is already able to read. (*situational irony*)
- In *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen, Mr. Darcy says of Elizabeth Bennett that she is not "handsome enough to tempt me," but he falls in love with her in spite of himself. (*verbal irony*)
- In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience/reader knows that Juliet has faked her death, but Romeo does not, and he thinks she is really dead. (*dramatic irony*)

Litotes

*A figure of speech consisting of an understatement that uses a negation to express a positive. In other words, a statement is made about what **is** - by saying what is **not**.*

- She is not a beauty queen. (means she is ugly)
- I am not as young as I used to be. (meaning I am getting old)
- They do not seem the happiest couple around.
- The ice cream was not too bad.
- Your comments on politics are not useless.
- William Shakespeare was not a bad playwright at all.
- He is not the cleverest person I have ever met.
- Ronald Reagan was not an ordinary man
- A million dollars is no small amount.
- You are not doing badly at all.
- Your apartment is not unclean.
- You won't be sorry!
- The casserole wasn't too bad.
- The trip was not a total loss.
- I cannot disagree with your point.
- Karen is not unlike her father.
- The game is not likely to be rained out.

Examples of Litotes from Literature and Film

- "Indeed, it is not uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness of their masters, each contending for the superior goodness of his own over that of the others." *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave* (by Frederick Douglass)
- "Are you also aware, Mrs. Bueller, that Ferris does not have what we consider to be an exemplary attendance record?" (Ferris Bueller's Day Off)
- "I will multiply them, and they shall not be few; I will make them honored, and they shall not be small." (Correctly interpreted, he is saying "there will be many and they will be great or large." Jeremiah 30, The Bible)

Metaphor

An implied comparison between two unlike, dissimilar things that actually have something important in common. The comparison can be implied or stated, brief or extended (without using like or as)

Tenor – the subject

Vehicle – the image to which the subject is being compared

- The world is his stage.
- Debt is a bottomless sea.
- Love is a lemon; it is either bitter or sweet.

Metonymy

A figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it's closely associated. An expression in which a related thing stands for the thing itself

- "The sword shall never depart from thine house."
(The sword represents death.)
- The press surrounded the house by morning.
(The press represents all news media.)
- The crown has declared today a national holiday.
(The crown represents the British monarchy.)

Onomatopoeia

The use of words that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to.

- The burning wood hissed and crackled.
- clap, boom, or zap.

Oxymoron

A figure of speech in which incongruous or contradictory terms appear side by side.

- Bill is a cheerful pessimist.
- The classroom was in a state of controlled chaos.
- patient zeal
- quiet fury
- deafening silence
- "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." (The Bible)
- "Parting is such sweet sorrow." (Romeo and Juliet)

Paradox

A statement that appears to contradict itself, yet actually makes sense when understood in the right context.

- Some of the biggest failures I ever had were successes." (attributed to American actress and singer Pearl Bailey)
- "The swiftest traveler is he that goes afoot." (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854)
- "If you wish to preserve your secret, wrap it up in frankness." (Alexander Smith, "On the Writing of Essays." 1854)
- "I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love." (attributed to Mother Teresa)
- "Paradoxically though it may seem . . . , it is none the less true that life imitates art far more than art imitates life." (Oscar Wilde)

Parallelism

Similarity or repartition in the structure of two or more phrases, clauses, or sentences

- On vacation, our family went fishing, went swimming, and went horse-back riding.
- I am woman; I am mother; I am fierce.
- In class, at work, and on the field, Martin strives for excellence.
- Easy come, easy go.
- The phone was ringing, the dishes were washing, and the dinner was burning.
- "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . ." (A Tale of Two Cities, Dickens)
- "I'll give my jewels for a set of beads, My gorgeous palace for a hermitage, My gay apparel for an almsman's gown, My figured goblets for a dish of wood . . ." (Richard II, Shakespeare)
- "O well for the fisherman's boy, That he shouts with his sister at play! O well for the sailor lad, That he sings in his boat on the bay!" ("Break, Break," Tennyson)

Personification

A figure of speech in which an inanimate object or abstraction is endowed with human qualities or abilities.

- The wind whispered to them as they ran through the woods.
- The trees of the fields will clap their hands.
- The grease jumped out of the pan.
- The curtains danced in the breeze.
- The tree branch scratched and clawed at my windowsill, trying to break into the house.

- During the night, the blanket crept up until it was snuggled under my chin and my feet were bare.
- The mother duck scolded her young, encouraging them to walk in a line.
- The diving board taunted me, daring me to approach.
- *America has thrown her hat into the ring, and will be joining forces with the British.*
- *The great rock loitered, poised on one toe, moved through the air, fell, and smashed a deep hole in the canopy of the forest.*
- "The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night." (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)
- "We have to stand for a few minutes in the doorway of the train while the cameras gobble up our images, then we're allowed inside, and the doors close mercifully behind us." *The Hunger Games*
- "Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'" . . . But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour." (Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven")

Polysyndeton

Repetition of coordinating conjunctions (especially "and")

The use of coordinating conjunctions close together, and more than needed, for stylistic effect. Writers and authors use polysyndeton, but we also use this in every day conversation.

- Today, my teacher gave me math homework and science homework and reading homework and a project to complete!
- I like Jeff, but he likes Karen, but she likes Mark, but he likes Marie, but she likes Morgan, but he likes me.
- We are ready for camping. We have the tent and the sleeping bags and the marshmallows and the chocolate and the graham crackers.
- For Christmas, I want a doll and a ball and an iPad and a new pair of boots.
- "And Joshua, and all of Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had." (The Bible)
- I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied. But Tom Sawyer he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable. So I went back. (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain)
- Mrs. Hurst and her sister allowed it to be so-but still they admired her and liked her, and pronounced her to be a sweet girl, and one whom they would not object to know more of. (*Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen)

Pun

A play on words, sometimes on different senses of the same word and sometimes on the similar sense or sound of different words.

- She is game for any game.
- Prison walls are never built to scale.
- I wondered why the baseball was getting bigger; then it hit me.
- You were right, so I left.
- Geometry is so pointless.
- It's hard to beat scrambled eggs for breakfast!
- "Tomorrow, you shall find me a grave man." (*Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare. Mercutio as he is dying.)

Rhetorical Question

A question asked, not to receive an answer, but to achieve an effect.

- How should I know?
- How many times do I need to tell you not to run in the halls?

- What's the point of going on?
- Who knows?
- Teacher to student who has been talkative: "Do you want to teach the class today?"
- Husband to wife who is taking a long time to get ready to go out: "Are you sure there isn't something else you need to do?"
- "How do you solve a problem like Maria? How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?" The Sound of Music
- Did you expect me to do anything less than my very best?
- If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (From Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice)

Simile

A stated comparison (usually formed with "like" or "as") between two fundamentally dissimilar things that have certain qualities in common.

- Her dress was white as a fresh snow.
- Like a mouse, she squealed with surprise.
- "Idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean" –Samuel Coleridge
- I turned as white as a ghost when you jumped out at me.
- That little girl is as sweet as sugar.
- This math problem is as easy as pie.
- The child chattered like a magpie.
- The baby was as busy as a bee.
- "Her beauty hangs upon the cheek of night, Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear." (From Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet)
- "I wandered lonely as a cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills." (William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud")
- "There is no frigate like a book / to take us lands away. / Nor any coursers like a page / of prancing poetry." (From Emily Dickenson)

Synecdoche

A figure of speech in which some striking part of an object is used to represent the whole or the whole for a part

- Steve just bought a fancy new set of wheels.
(The wheels refer to the entire car.)
- "All hands on deck!" The captain screamed.
(Hands refer to the workers.)
- At the homeless shelter there are many mouths to feed.
(Mouths refer to hungry people.)
- Referring to the alphabet as the "ABCs."
- Referring to cows as "heads" of cattle.
- Referring to a gossip as a "wagging tongue."
- "Beautiful are the feet that bring the good news." The Bible
- "I should have been a pair of ragged claws Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." T.S. Eliot
- "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears." Julius Caesar, Shakespeare

Tricolon

Repetition of three parallel phrases or clauses of equal length within a sentence.

- I came; I saw; I conquered. (Julius Caesar)
- "But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate – we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow – this ground." (Lincoln – Gettysburg Address)