

Literary Devices for Prose Passages

Allusion: a brief reference to a person, event, place, or phrase. The writer assumes will recognize the reference. For instance, most of us would know the difference between a mechanic's being as reliable as George Washington or as reliable as Benedict Arnold. Allusions that are commonplace for readers in one era may require footnotes for readers in a later time.

Characterization: the way an author presents characters. In direct presentation, a character is described by the author, the narrator or the other characters. In indirect presentation, a character's traits are revealed by action and speech.

Imagery is a collection of images. It is the usage of details and descriptions in order to create a sensory experience for the reader. Imagery/Image are the elements in a literary work used to evoke mental images, not only of the visual sense, but of sensation and emotion as well. While most commonly used in reference to figurative language, imagery is a variable term which can apply to any and all components of a poem that evoke sensory experience and emotional response, whether figurative or literal, and also applies to the concrete things so imaged.

Irony: the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, what is said and what is done, what is expected or intended and what happens, what is meant or said and what others understand. Sometimes irony is classified into types: in **situational irony**, expectations aroused by a situation are reversed; in **cosmic irony** or **the irony of fate**, misfortune is the result of fate, chance, or God; in **dramatic irony**, the audience knows more than the characters in the play, so that words and action have additional meaning for the audience; **Socratic irony** is named after Socrates' teaching method, whereby he assumes ignorance and openness to opposing points of view which turn out to be (he shows them to be) foolish.

Irony is often confused with sarcasm and satire:

- **Sarcasm** is one kind of irony; it is praise which is really an insult; sarcasm generally involves malice, the desire to put someone down, e.g., "This is my brilliant son, who failed out of college."
- **Satire** is the exposure of the vices or follies of an individual, a group, an institution, an idea, a society, etc., usually with a view to correcting it. Satirists frequently use irony.

Language can be classified in a number of ways.

- **Denotation:** the literal meaning of a word; there are no emotions, values, or images associated with denotative meaning. Scientific and mathematical language carries few, if any emotional or connotative meanings.
- **Connotation:** the emotions, values, or images associated with a word. The intensity of emotions or the power of the values and images associated with a word varies. Words connected with religion, politics, and sex tend to have the strongest feelings and images associated with them.

For most people, the word *mother* calls up very strong positive feelings and associations-- loving, self-sacrificing, always there for you, understanding; the denotative meaning, on the other hand, is simply "a female animal who has borne one or more children." Of course connotative meanings do not necessarily reflect reality; for instance, if someone said, "His

mother is not very motherly," you would immediately understand the difference between *motherly* (connotation) and *mother* (denotation).

- **Abstract language** refers to things that are intangible, that is, which are perceived not through the senses but by the mind, such as truth, God, education, vice, transportation, poetry, war, love. **Concrete language** identifies things perceived through the senses (touch, smell, sight, hearing, and taste), such as soft, stench, red, loud, or bitter.
- **Literal language** means exactly what it says; a rose is the physical flower. **Figurative language** changes the literal meaning, to make a meaning fresh or clearer, to express complexity, to capture a physical or sensory effect, or to extend meaning. Figurative language is also called figures of speech. The most common figures of speech are these:
 - A **simile**: a comparison of two dissimilar things using "like" or "as", e.g., "my love is like a red, red rose" (Robert Burns).
 - A **metaphor**: a comparison of two dissimilar things which does not use "like" or "as", e.g., "my love is a red, red rose" (Lilia Melani).
 - **Personification**: treating abstractions or inanimate objects as human, that is, giving them human attributes, powers, or feelings, e.g., "nature wept" or "the wind whispered many truths to me."
 - **hyperbole**: exaggeration, often extravagant; it may be used for serious or for comic effect.
 - **Apostrophe**: a direct address to a person, thing, or abstraction, such as "O Western Wind," or "Ah, Sorrow, you consume us." Apostrophes are generally capitalized.
 - **Onomatopoeia**: a word whose sounds seem to duplicate the sounds they describe--hiss, buzz, bang, murmur, meow, growl.
 - **Oxymoron**: a statement with two parts which seem contradictory; examples: sad joy, a wise fool, the sound of silence, or Hamlet's saying, "I must be cruel only to be kind"
- **Elevated language** or **elevated style**: formal, dignified language; it often uses more elaborate figures of speech. Elevated language is used to give dignity to a hero (note the speeches of heroes like Achilles or Agamemnon in the *Iliad*), to express the superiority of God and religious matters generally (as in prayers or in the King James version of the Bible), to indicate the importance of certain events (the ritual language of the traditional marriage ceremony), etc. It can also be used to reveal a self-important or a pretentious character, for humor and/or for satire.

Paradox: a statement whose two parts seem contradictory yet make sense with more thought. Christ used paradox in his teaching: "They have ears but hear not." Or in ordinary conversation, we might use a paradox, "Deep down he's really very shallow." Paradox attracts the reader's or the listener's attention and gives emphasis.

Point of view: the perspective from which the story is told.

- The most obvious point of view is probably **first person** or "I."
- The **omniscient narrator** knows everything, may reveal the motivations, thoughts and feelings of the characters, and gives the reader information.
- With a **limited omniscient narrator**, the material is presented from the point of view of a character, in third person.
- The **objective point of view** presents the action and the characters' speech, without comment or emotion. The reader has to interpret them and uncover their meaning.

A narrator may be trustworthy or untrustworthy, involved or uninvolved.

Repetition: The repeating of a word, phrase, or sentence to achieve a literary effect. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is an excellent use of repetition to achieve effect.

Style: manner of expression; how a speaker or writer says what he says. Notice the difference in style of the opening paragraphs of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

A Farewell to Arms

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Symbol: in general terms, anything that stands for something else. Obvious examples are flags, which symbolize a nation; the cross is a symbol for Christianity; Uncle Sam a symbol for the United States. In literature, a symbol is expected to have significance. Keats starts his ode with a real nightingale, but quickly it becomes a symbol, standing for a life of pure, unmixed joy; then before the end of the poem it becomes only a bird again.

Tone: the writer's attitude toward the material and/or readers. Tone may be playful, formal, intimate, angry, serious, ironic, outraged, baffled, tender, serene, depressed, etc.

Theme: (1) the abstract concept explored in a literary work; (2) frequently recurring ideas, such as enjoy-life while-you-can; (3) repetition of a meaningful element in a work, such as references to sight, vision, and blindness in *Oedipus Rex*. Sometimes the theme is also called the motif. Themes in *Hamlet* include the nature of filial duty and the dilemma of the idealist in a non-ideal situation. A theme in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is the difficulty of correlating the ideal and the real.