

Figurative Language

four senses of interpretation: the levels frequently used in interpreting literature

- literal: ex. Jerusalem=the capital city in ancient Judea/modern Israel
- allegorical: ex. Jerusalem=the Church
- moral (tropological): ex. Jerusalem=the believing soul
- anagogical (spiritual): ex. Jerusalem=the heavenly City of God

rhetorical figure: a departure from customary or standard use of language to achieve special effect without a radical change in the meaning of the word or phrase

trope: a figure of speech involving a “turn”; the use of a word in a sense other than its proper or literal use; a change in the meaning of the word or phrase

Master Tropes

irony: the recognition of a reality different from the masking appearance; a situation or statement characterized by significant difference between what is expected or understood and what actually happens or is meant; irony is a mark of sophistication in writing as the ironist often writes with “tongue in cheek”

accismus: a pretended refusal that is insincere or hypocritical (Caesar’s refusal of the crown, reported by Casca [*Julius Caesar*, I, ii], is an example of accismus).

cosmic irony (irony of fate): irony that goes beyond being unfair and is morally tragic; such irony is often so severe that it causes people to question God and see the universe as hostile (“The honest, hardworking, and generous man bought a lottery ticket and won ten million dollars, only to die in an auto crash two days later.”)

dramatic irony (tragic irony): the words or acts of a character carry meaning unperceived by the character but understood by the audience (“The audience gasped as the heroine opened the door; it knew the killer was poised with a butcher knife, ready to strike.” Othello calls the man who is about to deceive him “honest Iago.”)

verbal irony (antiphrasis): what is said is not what is meant (“Drop dead,” she cried, and he keeled over with a heart attack.); this can include **innuendo**, an insinuation or indirect suggestion, and **sarcasm**, in which apparent praise is actually bitterly or harshly critical (Smirking and winking at the other girls, Sandy exclaimed, “Oh Jan, that dress is really *beautiful*; it *really* makes a statement about your *taste* in clothes!” Antony calls Brutus and the conspirators “honourable men.”)

situational irony: situational irony defies logical cause/effect relationships and justifiable expectations (“Adolph Coors, III, heir to the Coors brewing empire, is allergic to beer.” “‘You’re such a bastard,’ she remarked, not knowing his illegitimacy.”)

metaphor: an implied analogy which imaginatively identifies one object with another and ascribes the first with qualities of the second; the implicit comparison or identification of one thing with another unlike itself without the use of a verbal signal such as *like* or *as* (“My kid brother is a pain in the neck at times but a true Galahad.”) Compare **extended metaphor** in which the figure of speech is the **controlling image** for an entire work of literature.

metonymy: a figure of speech characterized by substitution of a term naming an object closely associated with the word for the word itself (“The crown is secure, but the press is irresponsible.” “Today the Vatican announced the appointment of three new cardinals.” “The pen is mightier than the sword.”)

symbol: a person, place, thing, event, or pattern in a literary work that designates itself and at the same time figuratively represents something else; the use of one object to suggest another hidden object or idea; a symbol is a trope which combines a literal and sensuous aspect with an abstract or suggestive aspect (“As the pope stood by, aghast at the spectacle, Napoleon crowned himself, rejecting the church’s authority over his empire.” “O, say, does that Star-Spangl’d Banner yet wave . . . ?”)

Other Figures of Speech (Rhetorical Figures and Tropes)

allegory: a form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a prose or verse narrative are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself; characters are usually personifications of abstract qualities (In John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian must overcome obstacles on his journey like the Vanity Fair and the Slough of Despond.)

allusion: figure of speech which makes brief, indirect, even casual reference to a historical or literary figure, event, or object to create a resonance in the reader or to apply a symbolic meaning to the character or object of which the allusion consists (“Jonathan has the perseverance of Job in dealing with all of his troubles.” “Huck Finn’s odyssey does not spare him the Scylla and Charybdis of the Duke and the Prince, nor the Siren of Mary Ann.”)

ambages: a form of circumlocution in which the truth is spoken in a way that tends to deceive or mislead (“Brothers and sisters have I none, but this man’s father is my father’s son.”)

ambiguity: the expression of an idea in language that gives more than one meaning and leaves uncertainty as to the intended significance of the statement; the “resourcefulness of language” to supercharge words with great pressures of meaning—Richards; a linguistic complexity “which adds nuance to the direct statement of prose”—Empson (In *The Scarlet Letter*, the A on Hester’s dress can mean “adulterer” and “able” depending on who views it).

amplification: bare expressions, likely to be ignored or misunderstood because of their bluntness, are emphasized through restatement with additional detail (“Foul!” cried the referee, but the tennis star ignored him. Again the referee cried “Foul! You cheating bully, foul! Stop trying to intimidate Cravats with your serve! He’s got a bloody eye, you scoundrel!”)

analogy: a comparison of two things that are alike in some respects; metaphors (implied) and similes (expressed) are both types of analogy (“Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you’re gonna get.”—Forrest Gump’s “Momma” Gump)

anthropomorphism: the ascription to animals or inanimate objects of human forms, emotions, or characteristics—compare personification; in most mythologies, the gods are given human attributes (“The Road-Runner is no Mr. Potato-Head; he outwits Wile E. Coyote every time.”)

antithesis: a figure of speech characterized by strongly contrasting words, clauses, sentences, or ideas (“Man proposes, God disposes.” “The hungry judges soon the sentence sign, and wretches hang that jury-men may dine.”—Pope)

antonomasia: a proper name is substituted for a general class or idea of which it is representative, or an epithet for a proper name (“Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest.” “We celebrate the Prince of Peace.”) Contrast **periphrasis:** an indirect or abstract way of stating ideas (“No news is good news.”)

apostrophe: a figure of speech in which a person, thing, or abstract quality is addressed as if present (“Papa Above! Regard a Mouse.”—Dickinson)

archetype: “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole”—Frye (serpent=evil; dove=peace)

asyndeton: a condensed form of expression in which word, phrases, or clauses customarily joined by conjunctions are presented in a series (“*Veni, vidi, vici.*”—Caesar; “. . . of the people, by the people, for the people . . .”—Lincoln) Compare **palilogy**, the deliberate repetition of words or phrases for emphasis. Contrast **polysyndeton** (“[Satan] pursues his way, /And swims, or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flies away.”—Milton)

burlesque: a form of comedy characterized by ridiculous exaggeration (Mark Twain’s “At a Funeral” and “At a Fire” from his *Burlesques on Books of Etiquette*).

caricature: descriptive writing that seizes upon certain individual qualities of a person and through exaggeration or distortion produces a burlesque, ridiculous effect (“The cartoonist caricatured the politician by exaggerating his large incisors and prominent ears.”)

chiasmus: a rhetorical balance in which second part is syntactically balanced against the first but with parts reversed—the order of terms in the first of parallel clauses is reversed in the second (“Truth is beauty, beauty truth.”—Keats)

conceit (compare **metaphysical conceit**): an ingenious or fanciful notion or conception usually expressed through an elaborate analogy; a striking parallel between two seemingly dissimilar things (“A general of love, he stormed her barricade, assaulted her fortress, broached her gates, and conquered her castle.”)

dead metaphor: a figure of speech so long and often used that it is taken in its denotative sense only, without conscious comparison or analogy to the physical object it once conveyed (“The keystone of his system of belief is the omnipotent God.”)

double entendre: a statement that is deliberately ambiguous, one of whose meanings is risqué (“Nothing is too good for him.” “They had a gay time.”) Compare **equivoque**, a kind of pun.

ellipsis: a figure of speech characterized by the omission of one or more words which, while essential to the grammatical structure of the sentence, are easily supplied by the reader (“Where wigs [strive] with wigs, [where] with sword-knots sword-knots strive,/ [Where] Beaus banish beaus, and [where] coaches coaches drive.”—Pope)

enallage: the intentional substitution of one grammatical form for another, as past for present tense, singular for plural, noun for verb (“Toe the line”; “Boot the ball”: “But me no buts.”—Shakespeare). Compare **antimeria**, the use of one part of speech for another (“The thunder would not peace at my bidding.”—Shakespeare)

epithet (also **Homeric epithet**): an adjective or adjective phrase used to point out a characteristic of a person or thing; also a noun or noun phrase used for similar purpose (“laboring clouds” for *storm*; “the trumpet of the dawn” for *rooster*; “rosy-fingered Dawn” for *sunrise*)

eponym: the name of a person associated with some widely recognized attribute (*Helen* for beauty; *Croesus* for wealth; *Caesar* for dictator; *Machiavelli* for duplicity)

euphemism: the substitution of a milder or less direct expression for one that is harsh or blunt (“When papa passed, we knew that he went home.”)

hyperbole (compare **overstatement**): a figure of speech employing conscious exaggeration without any intent of literal persuasion (“I’d walk a million miles for one of your smiles” —Jolson “He shook when he laughed like a bowlful of jelly.”—Moore)

innuendo: an insinuation or indirect suggestion, often with harmful or sinister connotation (“Where have *you* been on a school night until two o’clock AM, in that outfit no less!”)

kenning: a metaphorical compound word which names something in terms of function (Anglo-Saxon: “whale road” for *sea*; “storm of swords” for *battle*; slave-driver; pencil-pusher; spot-light; lipstick)

litotes (compare **understatement**): an understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of the contrary (“Because he’s not a bad halfback, I’d say he can hold his own.”)

malapropism: an inappropriate use of one word for another (ref. Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan’s *The Rivals*), often for comic effect (“He is a progeny [prodigy] of learning.” “Illiterate [Eliminate] him from your memory.”) Compare **catachresis**, the use of the wrong word for the context (“He gazed at her with thirsty eyes.”)

metalepsis: a figure of speech consisting in the substitution by metonymy of one figurative sense for another; one thing is referenced by something else which is only remotely associated with it (“I’ve got to catch the worm tomorrow.” “He’s a lead foot.” “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.”—Genesis)

mixed figure (compare **mixed metaphor**): the mingling of one figure of speech with another (“I smell a rat; therefore, I shall nip it in the bud.”)

neologism: a word newly introduced into language, especially as a means of enhancing literary style; neologisms often utilize figurative language (tele+phone==telephone, NASA’s *Gemini* or *Apollo* series, National Biscuit Company=Nabisco, compute > computer, etc.) Compare **nonce word**, one created for one specific purpose by an author, as *jabberwocky* by Lewis Carroll or *Death Star* by George Lucas.

oxymoron: a paradoxical statement combining two terms that in ordinary usage are contraries (“Missing the plane was a fortuitous misfortune; had he caught it, he would have been killed.” “When she ordered the jumbo shrimp, you could hear a deafening silence at the table.”)

paradox: a statement that seems absurd and self-contradictory, but which turns out to have a tenable and coherent meaning (“He who is last among you shall be first.”—Bible; “Fair is foul and foul is fair.”—*MacBeth*)

personification (also **prosopopoeia**): a metaphor in which either an inanimate object or an abstract concept is described as being endowed with human attributes, powers, or feelings (“Justice is blind, but mercy wears a crown of gold.”)

portmanteau word: word concocted by accident or for deliberate effect by telescoping two words into one (huge+tremendous=humongous)

satire: a literary style used to make fun of or ridicule an idea or human vice or weakness; it blends a critical attitude with humor and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity (Mark Twain’s *Burlesques* ridicule priggish Victorian society).

simile: a comparison between two essentially different terms expressly indicated by a term such as “like” or “as” (“A pretty girl is like a melody.”) An **epic simile** is an elaborated, involved, ornate comparison in conscious imitation of the Homeric manner.

syllipsis: a grammatically correct construction in which one word is placed in the same grammatical relationship to two words but in quite different senses (“Or stain her honor, or her new brocade.”—Pope) Compare **zeugma**.

synesthesia: the concurrent response of two or more senses to the stimulation of one (“The jazz trumpeter played a blue note with a cool beat.”)

synecdoche, a metaphor mentioning a part of a noun to signify the whole noun; the comparison must be based on an important part of a whole and the part most directly under discussion (for

automobile, “motor” rather than “tire”; for *infantry*, “foot” rather than “hand”) Compare **metonymy** (“After she gave her hand in marriage, he bought her a new set of wheels.” “All hands on deck,” the boatswain bellowed.)

understatement (also **meiosis**): deliberate expression of an idea or event as less important than it actually is or was (Taylor whispered modestly, “Yes, it was nice to win the Nobel Peace for Medicine, but now tell me about your new job at Wal-Mart and all the things happening with the baby!”)

wit versus humor: wit is primarily intellectual, the perception of similarities in seemingly dissimilar things, whereas humor’s purpose is primarily to evoke laughter (Humor “deals with incongruities of character and circumstance, as wit does in those of arbitrary ideas.”—Hunt; “Wit is intensive or incisive, while humor is expansive. Wit is rapid, humor is slow. Wit is sharp, humor is gentle. . . . Wit is subjective while humor is objective. . . . Wit is art, humor is nature.”—Wells)