



Stylistics Devices and Literature

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Abstract: *Stylistic devices refer to any of a variety of techniques to give an additional and/or supplemental meaning, idea, or feeling. Also known as figures of speech or rhetorical devices, the goal of these techniques is to create imagery, emphasis, or clarity within a text in hopes of engaging the reader.*

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What if I said, 'It feels like I walked 1,000 miles today' or 'I'm going to die if I have to sit through one more meeting.' If you interpreted either of those sentences literally, you would probably be concerned about the person saying them. But, if we look at these sentences figuratively, we know that the first sentence signifies someone who is exhausted, and the second reflects a person's lack of patience, attention, and overall boredom. Both of these sentences use stylistic devices to help the reader understand the emotion of the speaker and imagery of the idea being conveyed.¹

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Let's take a look at some examples to learn more about how to find and understand these devices.

Definitions and Examples

There are many stylistic devices in literature, but today we are going to focus on six specific devices that are used most commonly.

Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two unlike things that share a common characteristic. When you use metaphor, you speak about something as if it were something else entirely.

For example, 'Juliet is the sun' is a famous line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where Romeo compares Juliet to the sun. Juliet is not literally the sun; however, Juliet and the sun share common traits that are implied through the metaphor. Juliet and the sun both shine bright in Romeo's eyes, and both are his life force.

Let's look at another example. 'Kathy got out of the car with an army of children.' Does Kathy literally have an army of children? No, but the metaphor in this sentence puts an image in the reader's mind that implies Kathy has a significant amount of children getting out of her car.

¹ 11. Dawson, Hope; Phelan, Michael, eds. (2016). *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Linguistics* (12th ed.). T



Simile

A simile is a figure of speech where two things are directly compared using the words 'like' or 'as.' For example, 'When the donuts arrived, my dad popped out of his seat like a piece of toast.'

Dad's action of getting out of his seat is being compared to a piece of toast popping out of a toaster. We know a toaster shoots the toast up quickly when it has finished cooking, and therefore, the reader gets the image that the speaker's dad was excited about the donuts and jumped quickly out of his seat to get one.

Personification

Personification is a figure of speech that gives inanimate objects human characteristics.

For example, take the sentence: 'Opportunity was knocking at her door.' Can opportunity literally knock on someone's door? No, but it implies that a great opportunity was coming her way and is seemingly unavoidable.

Or, how about the sentence, 'The house looked depressed.' Can a house literally be depressed like a human? No, but it does provide a picture in the reader's mind that the house was run down. One could envision broken windows, chipped paint, or missing shutters.²

Synecdoche

Synecdoche occurs when a part of something is used to refer to the whole. Many examples of synecdoche are idioms, common to the language.

Example: Workers can be referred to as 'pairs of hands' and a vehicle as one's 'wheels'.

Metonymy

Metonymy is similar to synecdoche, but instead of a part representing the whole, a related object or part of a related object is used to represent the whole. Often it is used to represent the whole of an abstract idea.

Example: The phrase "The king's guns were aimed at the enemy," using 'guns' to represent infantry.

Example: The word 'crown' may be used metonymically to refer to the king or queen, and at times to the law of the land.

Apostrophe

Main article: Apostrophe (figure of speech)

Similar to 'personification' but direct. The speaker addresses someone absent or dead, or addresses an inanimate or abstract object as if it were human.

Charactonym

This is when the name of a character has a symbolic meaning. For example, in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham has a sham or lives a life full of pretense. In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Rev. Dimmesdale metaphorically fades away (dims) as the novel progresses, while Chillingworth has a cold (chilled) heart.

² 5. Bizzi, E.; Hogan, N.; Mussa-Ivaldi, F.; Giszter, S. (1992). "Does the nervous system use equilibrium-point control to guide single and multiple joint movements?". *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*.



Symbol

A symbol may be an object, a person, a situation, an action, a word, or an idea that has literal meaning in the story as well as an alternative identity that represents something else.[4] It is used as an expressive way to depict an idea. The symbol generally conveys an emotional response far beyond what the word, idea, or image itself dictates.

Example: A heart standing for love. (One might say "It broke my heart" rather than "I was really upset")

Example: A sunrise portraying new hope. ("All their fears melted in the face of the newly risen sun.")³

Allegory

An allegory is a story that has a second meaning, usually by endowing characters, objects or events with symbolic significance. The entire story functions symbolically; often a pattern relates each literal item to a corresponding abstract idea or principle. Although the surface story may have its interest, the author's major interest is in the ulterior meaning.

Imagery

This is when the author invokes sensory details. Often, this is simply to draw a reader more deeply into a story by helping the reader visualize what is being described. However, imagery may also symbolize important ideas in a story.

For example, in Saki's "The Interlopers", two men engaged in a generational feud become trapped beneath a fallen tree in a storm: "Ulrich von Gradwitz found himself stretched on the ground, one arm numb beneath him and the other held almost as helplessly in a tight tangle of forked branches, while both legs were pinned beneath the fallen mass." Readers can not only visualize the scene but may infer from it that it is the feud that has trapped him. Note also the diction used within the imagery: words like "forked" and "fallen" imply a kind of hell that he is trapped in.

Motif

When a word, phrase, image, or idea is repeated throughout a work or several works of literature.

For example, in Ray Bradbury's short story, "There Will Come Soft Rains", he describes a futuristic "smart house" in a post-nuclear-war time. All life is dead except for one dog, which dies in the course of the story. However, Bradbury mentions mice, snakes, robins, swallows, giraffes, antelopes, and many other animals in the course of the story. This animal motif establishes a contrast between the past, when life was flourishing, and the story's present when all life is dead.

Motifs may also be used to establish mood (as the blood motif in Shakespeare's Macbeth), for foreshadowing (as when Mary Shelley, in Frankenstein, mentions the moon almost every time the creature is about to appear), to support the theme (as when, in Sophocles' drama Oedipus Rex, the motif of prophecy strengthens the theme of the irresistibility of the gods), or for other purposes.

Paradox

In literary terminology, a paradox is an apparent contradiction that is nevertheless somehow true. Paradox can take the form of an oxymoron, overstatement or understatement. Paradox can blend into irony.

³ 2. Altmann, Gerry (2002). Psycholinguistics : critical concepts in psychology. London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0415229906. OCLC 48014482



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