

tion of the aspirations and feelings of those buried in the country churchyard—a “heart once pregnant with celestial fire,” “hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,” people motivated by “noble rage”—is characteristic of the euphemisms and refinements of neoclassical poetic diction.

Poets of the Romantic age (1785–1832), led by William

Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, reacted against the poetic diction of the previous period as being too artificial and self-conscious. In Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), he presented a critical manifesto that advocated that poets choose as their subjects “incidents and situations from common life,” and that they write about them in “simple and unelaborated expressions” that represent “a selection of language really used by men.” The collection of poems included in *Lyrical Ballads* was meant to illustrate those principles. Although most modern readers would also see in Coleridge and Wordsworth's poems instances of the neoclassical poetic diction of their predecessors that they condemned, their critical principles gave a new sanction to directness, simplicity, and colloquial diction that has exerted a major influence on subsequent poets.

## Allusion

An **allusion** (al-LOO-zyun, from the Latin word for “to play with”) is a passing reference in a work of literature to another literary or historical work, figure, or event, or to a literary passage. The reference is not explained, so that it can convey the flattering presumption that the reader shares the writer's erudition or inside

knowledge. For example, in Andrea Lee's novel *Sarah Phillips* (1984), the narrator describes her Harvard roommate, a chemistry major and “avid lacrosse player” who “adored fresh air and loathed reticence and ambiguity,” as having the following surprising predilection: “Margaret, the scientist, had . . . a positively Brontë-esque conception of the ideal man.” The allusion is to the dark, brooding, enigmatic heroes in the works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, especially Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Only a reader who recognizes the allusion would appreciate the irony of the frank, forthright Margaret's preference for men who are far from being either frank or forthright.

The title of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) presents a more complex example. It alludes to the soliloquy in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which the embittered PROTAGONIST dismisses all of life as merely “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound

and fury, / Signifying nothing.” The aptness of the reference becomes evident when the reader discovers that the first part of the novel is told from the perspective of a mentally challenged narrator, who is incapable of intelligible speech. Thus, an allusion can provide a rich network of associations and intensify the effects of a passage.

In other situations, in which the subject is of an inferior stature to the literary or historical source, an allusion may create a sense of IRONIC deflation. T. S. Eliot calls attention to that use of the technique in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The insecure narrator, feeling hopelessly inadequate in polite society, says of his efforts to court women:

. . . though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in  
upon a platter,  
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter. . . .

The allusion is to John the Baptist, the prophet in the New Testament who was beheaded after he refused to compromise his moral principles and assent to the advances of the seductress Salome. Prufrock envisions his own severed head, made ludicrous by its balding state, exposed to public scrutiny and his earnest endeavors amounting to “no great matter.” Later, Prufrock further denigrates his own worth by alluding to the hero of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be.” Rather, he claims, he is merely “an attendant lord, . . . deferential, glad to be of use,” or even, occasionally, “the Fool,” the court jester among the dramatist's personae. The comparisons to the heroic figures in the Bible and the Shakespearean tragedy underline Prufrock's sense of pathetic inadequacy.

Some literary works rely heavily on extensive allusions to another source—for example, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) provides a running allusion to, and absurdist variation on, aspects of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) contains a sustained allusion to the account of the birth of Jesus in the New Testament, as well as to the iconography (that is, the standard emblematic details) of Renaissance paintings of that story; and John Gardner's NOVELLA *Gravel* (1971) tells the story of Beowulf from the point of view of the first monster that the hero fights, who is in Gardner's version articulate and insightful.

Other allusions may be more obscure, either because they refer to highly specialized areas of knowledge, as is the case with many instances in Eliot's “The Waste Land” and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, or because they describe people and events known to only a small circle of the writer's intimates. For example, the British and American expatriates in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1925) are

arch-enemy, the haughty Malvolio. Feste disguises himself as the curate Sir Topas and goes to visit Malvolio, who, in a cruel practical joke, has been declared mad and imprisoned. Malvolio, fooled by the clown's disguise, makes an earnest case for his sanity, to which "Sir Topas" responds imperiously: "leave thy vain bibble-babble." To label Malvolio's stolidly rational protests with the absurd consonance of "bible-babble" is the ultimate insult.

## Assonance

Assonance (ASS-oh-nantz, from the Latin word for "to sound in response to") is the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds in nearby words or stressed syllables: "right / time," "sad / fact," "seven / elves." It differs from RHYME, in which both the vowels and the consonants of nearby words match. As the examples above show, the assonantal sound may occur either at the beginning of words or in the middle. Like ALITERATION and CONSONANCE, it can create subtle underlying harmony as well as provide coherence and emphasis. In the opening lines of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the narrator uses assonance in APOSTROPHIZING the work of art:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,  
Thou foster child of silence and slow time.

The repetition of the short *i* sound in "still unravished" emphasizes the meaning of those words and suggests the speaker's first impression of wonder at the ancient urn's pristine state, while the long *i* that predominates suggests the serenity and self-possession that it exudes. Despite the metaphors of human relationship—the urn is compared to a "bride" and a "foster child"—the implication is that art is impervious to human passions. The bride is permanently virginal, and the child has been nurtured by abstract and serene forces.

Assonance conveys a very different tone in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. The narrator, grieving over the death of a beloved friend, recalls waiting eagerly to take his hand, and then laments:

A hand that can be clasped no more—  
Behold me, for I cannot sleep.

The repeated short *a* sounds, reinforced by the ALLITERATED *c*'s, like quick blows, imply the cruelty and permanence of the loss, while the long *e*'s suggest the reaction: a near wail of despair.

## Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia (ah-noh-mah-oh-PEE-ah, Greek for "to coin names") has two meanings. Its most common definition is using a word or phrase that seems to imitate the sound it denotes: for example, *bang*, *creak*, *murmur*, *ding-dong*, or *plop*. As with CONSONANCE and ASSONANCE, that effect cannot come from the sound of the word alone: its meaning is involved as well. To illustrate, words whose sounds closely resemble those of some of the examples above—bank, creek, and plot—are not onomatopoeic. In "Piano," D. H. Lawrence uses onomatopoeia to echo the sounds that a small child hears as he sits under the piano while his mother plays, "in the boom of the tingling strings." The description implies that, with his ear so close to the sound box, the boy hears both the resonant "boom" of the music and the "tingling strings" of the keys that the musician presses to create it. Lewis Carroll makes clever use of onomatopoeia in "Jabberwocky," a nonsense poem about a boy who slays a dragon-like monster. Carroll's invention of "portmanteau" words, created by combining two conventional words, includes some that are onomatopoeic. For example, as the Jabberwock goes on the attack, it "bubble[s]," a word that seems to be made up of "bubble" and "burp." Few young readers would likely be frightened by a creature that makes such a silly noise, or by the "snicker-snack" that describes the Jabberwock's quick and bloodless beheading. The light tone is sustained by the reaction of the boy's father, who "chortle[s]" (probably a combination of "chuckle" and "snort") his joyful congratulations.

In its broader sense, onomatopoeia means using words in such a way that they seem to exemplify what they denote, not just in terms of sound but also of such qualities as pacing, force, touch, movement, or duration as well. For example, in the DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE "I felt a Funeral in my Brain" by Emily Dickinson, the narrator recounts the surreal experience of being conscious at her own funeral, using onomatopoeia to convey the sensations that she is experiencing:

I felt a Funeral in my Brain,  
And Mourners to and fro  
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed  
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,  
A Service, like a Drum—



And then a Plank in Reason, broke  
And I dropped down, and down—  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing—then—

As these examples show, the various sound patterns may coexist with one another, for example, onomatopoeia with ALLITERATION ("My mind was going numb") in the poem above. Also, it should be stressed again that none of these patterns depend solely on the sound of words: rather, their richness and force derive from the associations that they present between sound and meaning.

1. He clasps the crag with crooked  
Close to the sun in lonely land
2. A tap at the pane, the quick sl  
And blue spurt of a lighted m
3. In me thou see'st the twilight  
As after sunset fadeth in the w  
Which by and by black night  
Death's second self, that seals
4. The hum of multitudes was th  
Thousands of little boys & girl
5. And the silken, sad, uncertain  
Thrilled me—filled me with fa
6. By brooks too broad for leaping  
The lightfoot boys are laid;  
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping  
In fields where roses fade.

## Essential Literary Terms With Exercises



9. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
 Old time is still a-flying;  
 And this same flower that smiles today  
 Tomorrow will be dying.  
 The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,  
 The higher he's a getting,  
 The sooner will his race be run,  
 And nearer he's to setting.  
 —ROBERT HERRICK, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" 5

10. My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
 My sense, as though of hemlock<sup>5</sup> I had drunk,  
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards<sup>6</sup> had sunk:  
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
 But being too happy in thine happiness—  
 That thou, light winged Dryad<sup>7</sup> of the trees,  
 In some melodious plot  
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease. 10  
 —JOHN KEATS, "Ode to a Nightingale"

## SOUND AND SOUND PATTERNS

In addition to RHYME, several other recurrent patterns of sound may be used to create unity and emphasis.

### Alliteration

Alliteration, the repetition of sounds in nearby words or stressed syllables, is frequent in both poetry and prose. Usually, the term applies to consonants that appear at the beginnings of words. For example, in Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool," the young delinquents who serve as the group of NARRATORS boast of their dangerous lifestyle: "We / Lurk late. We / Strike straight." The alliterated *l* and *s* sounds link the curt assertions and suggest the speakers' bravado

5. An opiate.

6. River in Hades that causes forgetfulness.

7. Nymph.



and their eagerness to promote their "cool" and threatening image. As with all patterns of sound, including RHYME, such effects depend on the combination of repetition of the sounds and of the meanings of the words in which the sounds occur. Alliteration was a major element of old English poetry, in which the lines, which were unrhymed, were linked by a pattern of alliteration of the stressed syllables. See ACCENTUAL METER.

Another effect of alliteration may be comic exaggeration. The title of Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, uses alliteration to imply the cause and effect connection between the faults of character that the book will satirize. Shakespeare called attention to the intentionally comic effect of excessive alliteration in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the final act, a group of dull-witted Athenian laborers stage a performance at court of a DOGGEREL tragedy. Their crude production, Shakespeare's ingenious parody of Elizabethan theater, contains such cacophonous passages as the following APOSTROPHE. The hero, believing that his love, whom he calls his "dainty duck," is dead, calls for the Fates to strike him, too:

O Fates, come, come,  
Cut thread and thrum,<sup>1</sup>  
Quail,<sup>2</sup> crush, conclude, and quell!<sup>3</sup>

The humor lies in the relentlessness of the alliteration and the redundancy of the synonyms that it links. As this passage shows, alliteration depends on the way that words sound, not on their spelling: here, "cut" and "quail" alliterate. To take a second example, "gnaw," "know," and "new" alliterate, but "gnaw" and "get" do not. The reiterated sound may also occur within words, as in "conclude" above; in that case, it is called **internal alliteration**.

Used for serious purposes, alliteration may subtly create unity and influence TONE. In Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless, Patient Spider," the narrator describes the creature beginning to construct its web: "It launched forth filament, filament, out of itself." The alliterated *f* suggests the step-by-step process of the venture, as well as the spider's determination. In William Butler Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," the narrator uses alliteration to describe a beloved place: "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore." The repeated *l*, in linguistic terminology a "liquid" sound, suggests the tranquil atmosphere of the idyllic setting.

1. Weaving; loose end of thread.
2. Overpower.
3. Kill.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the protagonist reflects in an early SOLILOQUY on his qualms about murdering kind old King Duncan, who stands in the way of Macbeth's ambition for the throne of Scotland:

If th' assassination  
Could trammel up<sup>4</sup> the consequence and catch  
With his surcease<sup>5</sup> success<sup>6</sup>—that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,  
But here, upon this bank and shoal<sup>7</sup> of time,  
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases  
We still have judgment here, that we but teach  
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
To plague th'inventor.

The alliterated *s* sounds, initial and internal, in lines 2–4 underline the secrecy and egotism of Macbeth's impossible hope: that the "assassination" could be done in a self-contained moment of time and produce no further "consequence." The hissing *s* sound betrays his recognition of his nefarious purpose, however, an effect underlined by the repeated *b*'s that suggest the "blows" he plans to deal his innocent victim. Macbeth's next step in the reasoning process is the hyperbolic claim that were this freedom from consequences possible, he would be willing to sacrifice divine salvation—"the life to come." The alliterated *j* of the colloquial verb "jump," however, connects it to the somber noun "judgment." That link and the alliteration of hissing *s* and pointed *t* sounds in lines 7–10 show that the aspiring regicide is all too aware of the ways that the malevolent "instructions" he is about to "teach" will "return" against him.

## Consonance

Consonance (CAHN-soh-nantz, from the Latin word for "to sound together") is the repetition of consonant sounds in two or more successive words or stressed syllables that contain different vowel sounds: "had / hid," "wonder / wander," "haven / heaven." In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the clown Feste uses consonance to taunt his

4. Trap in a net.
5. Duncan's death.
6. Victory; also, something that occurs afterwards.
7. Riverbank and shallows.

## Anaphora

**Anaphora** (a-NAF-or-ah, from the Greek word for "repetition") is the intentional repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of successive lines, stanzas, sentences, or paragraphs. It is used frequently in both poetry and prose to create emphasis, though the effect differs with the context. Anaphora occurs often in both the Old and New Testaments; a prominent example is the series of Beatitudes ("blessings" promised the faithful) from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, all of which begin with the phrase "blessed are the . . .":

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy, / Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:7-8). African American spirituals, inspired by biblical sources, often use anaphora, as in "Go Down, Moses," with its poignant refrain, "Let my people go." Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is replete with anaphora. One example is the narrator's response to a child's question—"What is the grass?"—which he answers with a series of whimsical propositions, all of which contain the phrase "I guess": "I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven. / Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord." The effect is a soothing, rhythmic harmony. In contrast, in "The Charge of the Light Brigade," Tennyson uses anaphora to suggest the speed and tension of a fatal battle: "Cannon in front of them, / Cannon to left of them, / Cannon in front of them / Volleyed and thundered."

## Antithesis

**Antithesis** (an-TITH-eh-sis, from the Greek word for "opposition") is a figure of speech in which words or phrases that are parallel in order and syntax express opposite or contrasting meanings. The long opening sentence of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* provides a famous series of antitheses: "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. . . ."

Antithesis was a favorite device of eighteenth-century poets, of whom Alexander Pope is the acknowledged master. In the opening stanza of his mock epic, "The Rape of the Lock," for example, the narrator claims as his antithetical subject "What mighty contests rise from trivial things," and follows that tongue-in-cheek assertion with another antithesis: "Slight is the subject, but not so the praise."

William Blake makes a quite different use of the figure of speech in the opening stanza of his moralistic fable, "A Poison Tree":

I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

Here the antitheses suggest not Pope's mock grandiosity but the dire effects of repressing rage.

## Chiasmus

**Chiasmus** (ky-AZ-mus, from the Greek word for "criss-cross," a designation based on the Greek letter "chi," written X) is a

FIGURE OF SPEECH in which two successive phrases or clauses are parallel in syntax, but reverse the order of the analogous words. Robert Frost's "The Gift Outright," for example, begins with the chiasmic line: "The land was ours before we were the land's." The pattern of noun, verb, possessive pronoun of the first clause becomes that of pronoun, verb, possessive noun in the second; the figure suggests the connection between Americans' colonization of their new country and the need to prove their claim to it by "the gift outright" of fervent acts of patriotism. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the following chiasmus occurs: "The Sun came up upon the left, / Out of the sea came he!" The word order of the first clause—noun, verb, prepositional phrase—is inverted in the second clause. Here, the effect is to suggest a sense of the eerie setting and fatalistic course of the sailors' voyage. Lord Byron makes quite different use of the technique in his satire *Don Juan*, when he describes his young hero's seduction by an older married woman in a wickedly funny chiasmus: "Pleasure's a sin, and sometimes sin's a pleasure."

10. Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,  
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,  
The rude<sup>1</sup> forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

—THOMAS GRAY, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

### FIGURES OF SPEECH (SCHEMES)

Figures of speech, also called schemes, depend upon a change in the standard order or usual SYNTAX of words to create special effects. The term "figures of speech" is sometimes used to refer to the much broader category of TROPES, which depend on changes not in the order or SYNTAX but in the standard meanings of words. More specifically, however, it describes a smaller category of rhetorical figures, including APOSTROPHE, RHETORICAL QUESTION, ANAPHORA, ANTITHESIS, and CHIASMUS.

#### Apostrophe

An **apostrophe** (a-POS-troh-fee) is an address to a dead or absent person or to an inanimate object or abstract concept. The aim is not, of course, to evoke a response—a logical impossibility—but to elevate the style or to give emotional intensity to the address. For example, Wordsworth's sonnet, "London, 1802," begins with an apostrophe to the narrator's long-dead predecessor, the seventeenth-century poet John Milton: "Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour: / England hath need of thee." In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the young heroine, awaiting the consummation of her marriage with Romeo, **apostrophizes** a personification of night to guide her through the thrilling and intimidating experience: "Come, civil night, / Thou sober-suited matron all in black, / And learn me how to lose a winning match, / Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods." In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare makes fun of the usual serious use of apostrophe in his absurd play-within-the-play, "Pyramus and Thisbe." The dim-witted Athenian workmen who perform it have a stolidly literal-minded conception of the stage set, and enlist members of their company to represent the Wall that

separates the longing lovers and the Moon that shines on their encounter. In one hilarious moment, the vainglorious Bottom, playing Pyramus, pleads: "Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall, / Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eye." In contrast to the usual unresponsiveness from an inanimate entity that is **apostrophized**, the Wall complies by "hold[ing] up his fingers."

A special form of apostrophe is the invocation, in which the poet addresses an appeal to a muse or a god to inspire the creative endeavor. Such epic poems as Homer's *Odyssey* begin with an invocation: "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story / of that man skilled in all ways of contending."<sup>1</sup>

### Rhetorical Question

A **rhetorical question** is a FIGURE OF SPEECH in which a question is posed not to solicit a reply but to emphasize a foregone or clearly implied conclusion. The goal is to create a stronger effect than might be achieved by a direct assertion. An everyday example is: "Can you imagine that?" The point is to stress that a surprising or shocking thing has in fact happened. A less courteous example from ordinary conversation—"Are you crazy?"—is meant to imply that the person addressed is behaving irrationally. Examples abound in literature. In Wilfred Owen's "Futility," the narrator, contemplating the body of a young soldier who has been killed in the First World War, asks the heart-wrenching rhetorical question: "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" William Blake's "Holy Thursday (II)" is a blistering denouncement of the suffering imposed on poor children in the charity schools of eighteenth-century England. The narrator expresses his outrage in a series of rhetorical questions:

Is this a holy thing to see  
In a rich and fruitful land,  
Babes reduced to misery,  
Fed with cold and usurous hand?  
  
Is that trembling cry a song?  
Can it be a song of joy?  
And so many children poor?

<sup>1</sup>Rustic.

1. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 1.

s no fool," which implies "He means 'frequent.'" Litotes, where the effect is to suggest the perilous way of life the noble Beowulf's fatal last o describe his incipient death: ne on which the famous son of d."² The litotes, "no pleasant eme hero feels an all too ng that he knows and loves.

can now be shared with Gertrude's new husband and so assure the stability of the succession. The full extent of Claudius's political savvy and corruption become clear only later, when we learn that he has not only succeeded but also murdered his brother in order to procure both his throne and his queen.

## Pun

A **pun** is a FIGURE OF THOUGHT that plays on words that have the same sound (homonyms), or closely similar sounds, but have sharply contrasted meanings. The usual effect is a witty or humorous double meaning. For example, Shakespeare was fond of punning on "Will," which was not only his nickname, but in his day meant "desire," especially "carnal desire"; see his Sonnets 135 and 136. A more serious example occurs in *Hamlet*, when the prince answers his despised uncle's public inquiry about his continued melancholy—"How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" with a pun: "Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun." The retort is a reminder to the listening court and to Claudius, who has succeeded Hamlet's father on the throne, that the prince both dislikes this light of royal favor being shone on him ("sun") and that he feels too strongly his father's loss (as his "son") to celebrate Claudius's ascension. The pun is both ingenious and ominous. It announces the prince's instinctive loathing for the man whom he will soon discover has murdered his father, and it suggests the roundabout, intellectual nature of Hamlet's weapon of choice, "words, words, words."

Puns were especially popular in Renaissance and metaphysical literature; they have also been used extensively by such modern writers as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Tom Stoppard. In fact, Beckett suggests their supreme importance in his work by having his title character in the novel *Murphy* (1952) announce: "In the beginning was the pun," an ALLUSION to the first words of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the word." Although the usual tone of puns is humorous, they can also be used with serious intent. For example, Juliet, in agony over the possibility that Romeo has died, turns to the Nurse for the dreaded confirmation: "I am not I, if there be such an 'Ay' / Or those eyes shut that makes thee answer 'Ay.'" The triple level pun ("I" / "Ay" / "eye") expresses Juliet's despairing claim that her very identity would be destroyed if an affirmative answer confirms that her new husband's eyes will never open again. To take another example, in Joyce's last novel, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), the ambiguities of the writer's perception of human experi-

## asis

FIGURE OF THOUGHT in which a ocution, rather than directly. in euphemisms, such as "passed or "drunk." There the aim is to effect of the explicit term. ngs (descriptive phrases that acteristic of Old English poetry, "sword-hate" for warfare. In this e narration greater variety by words and makes the concept ual metaphor. ined and artificial if carried to dsworth made against its frequent it can also signal a deliberate i, a frequent device of politicians, ing," for "genocide." George sciously dishonest" abuse of dic- : English Language." is King Claudius's expedient troversial marriage to his former edding occurred with unseemly bethans such a match was consid- is event, Claudius resorts in his is. He refers to Gertrude not as his ss to this warlike state"—a widow ure"), he claims, is the state of Den- of this periphrasis is that the state



ence are given form through elaborate, often multilingual puns. Even the title is a play on words, in the dual meanings of "wake," the peculiarly Irish celebration/vigil for the newly deceased, and also "to awaken."

A special form of the pun is the *equivoque* (EK-wi-vohke), in which a word or phrase that has disparate meanings is used in a way that makes each meaning equally relevant. The term is French, derived from the Latin words for "equal" and "voice"—the adjective in English is "equivocal." For example, in Sylvia Plath's bitter poem "Daddy," addressed to her late father, the narrator says that an old photo shows "a cleft in your chin instead of your foot, / But no less a devil for that." The *equivoque* expresses both the literal look of the man's dimpled ("cleft") chin, and the narrator's condemnatory metaphor of him as a demon, with a "cleft" hoof. A more elaborate example is the warning of the self-important old courtier, Polonius, to his daughter Ophelia that Hamlet is an unscrupulous seducer, whose "tenders" [offers] of affection must not be believed: "Think yourself a baby / That you have ta'en these tenders [legal currency] for true pay / Which are not sterling. Tender [conduct] yourself more dearly, / Or . . . you'll tender me [present me with; or expose me as] a fool" [in the first meaning, a baby, for which "fool" was a common Elizabethan endearment; in the second, that such an illegitimate grandchild would subject Polonius to public ridicule]. The elaborate *equivoque* suggests both the pleasure that the old courtier takes in displaying his wit and the relentlessness of his onslaught on his vulnerable daughter's sensibilities.

### EXERCISE: Tropes Dependent on Contrasting Levels of Meaning

For each of the following passages:

- Name the *TROPE*—HYPERBOLE, UNDERSTATEMENT, PARADOX, OXYMORON, LITOTES, PERIPHRAIS, or PUN. Note: Some passages may exemplify more than one form.
- Explain why that term applies.
- Describe the effects—the impressions and feelings—created by the contrasts in levels of meaning.

1. The following dialogue takes place between Henry V and Catherine, the French princess he is courting, whose grasp of English is uncertain:

KING HENRY Do you like me, Kate?

CATHERINE Pardonnez-moi, I cannot tell what is "like me."

KING HENRY An angel is like you, Kate, and you are like an angel.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Henry V*

2. It is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

—Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

3. The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

—W. H. AUDEN, "Funeral Blues"

4. On hearing the report of his daughter's elopement with Othello, Brabantio, who is prejudiced against Moors, says:  
This accident is not unlike my dream.  
Belief of it oppresses me already.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Othello*

5. Hamlet, having mistakenly killed an interfering old courtier in the act of spying for the king, addresses the body:  
Take thy fortune.

Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*

6. Success is counted sweetest  
By those who ne'er succeed.

—EMILY DICKINSON, "Success is counted sweetest"

7. Romeo reacts to the news that, for the crime of slaying Tybalt, he has been banished from Verona, where his new wife, Juliet, resides:  
There is no world without Verona walls,  
But purgatory, torture, hell itself.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*

8. you fit into me  
like a hook into an eye  
a fish hook  
an open eye

—MARGARET ATWOOD, "You Fit Into Me"

9. Romeo, dejected by his unrequited infatuation for Rosaline, gives this description of love:

Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,

Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*

In Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," the PROTAGONIST, Gregor Samsa, a mild-mannered traveling salesman, awakes one morning to discover that he has been turned into a giant insect. Rather than react with the horror and revulsion that such a transformation would be expected to evoke, or even question why it has happened, Gregor complains about the overcast weather. The only anxiety that he expresses is over how to get out of bed. He is on his back and so, like any beetle, cannot turn over, and he is afraid of being late for work. The surface calm doubles the shock for the reader and also, perhaps, suggests the philosophical-psychological reasons that so lowly and self-effacing a man might have been subjected to such a horrific transformation. The OMNISCIENT NARRATOR never reveals the reason for Gregor's metamorphosis, however, adding to the shock effect created by the understated TONE.

### Paradox

Paradox is a TROPE in which a statement that appears on the surface to be contradictory or impossible turns out to express an often striking truth. For example, the paradoxical slogan of the Bauhaus School of art and architecture, "Less is more," suggests that spareness and selectivity are more important in achieving aesthetic beauty than expansiveness and inclusiveness. To take another example, John Donne's sonnet "Batter my heart, three-personed God" expresses the speaker's yearning to be forced violently into the pious faith that he feels incapable of attaining on his own. The poem ends with a startling vision of God as a masterful seducer, to whom the speaker pleads: "Take me to you, imprison me, for I / Except You enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me." In other words, the paradox implies, only in total servitude to the power of the deity can the worshipper achieve genuine autonomy.

Paradox is used to express servitude of a different sort in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, when the usually cynical Enobarbus describes the overpowering charisma of Cleopatra:

Other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies.

The soldier is explaining his commanding general Antony's enthrallment by the Egyptian temptress: her seductive powers, rather than

jading those who succumb to them, be every experience. The implications of misogynistic Enobarbus is smitten by and that Antony will never break the "keep him from fulfilling his duties to F

### Oxymoron

An oxymoron (ox-ih-MOR-on) is a cor links two seemingly contrary elements. sideration, turns out to make good sense. TROPE are "bittersweet," "a living death," with paradox, the effect is to suggest a expression, for example, that refusal to of asserting one's will. The Greek roots an oxymoron: "sharp" and "dull or foolishly foolish." Similarly, the oxymoronic means "wise" and "foolish," a reference sighted conviction that he or she knows.

Often in literature an oxymoron is a feelings. For example, when Juliet discovers just slain her cousin Tybalt, she exclaims: "flowering face! . . . / Beautiful tyrant! fie, fie, / O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? / Deny thy father and refuse thy name; / Or, if thou wilt not, let but me see thee: / I'll deny thee never." The seeming rift between Romeo's moral corruption that she thinks is revealed.

Oxymorons can also create humor and befuddlement. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, Duke Theseus mocks the ridiculous that some plodding Athenian workmen court: "Merry and tragical? Tedious and wondrous strange snow. / How shall we cord?" The clever nobleman is signaling contradictions by describing them with

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## Oxymoron

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 TROPE are "bittersweet," "a living death," and "passive aggressive." As  
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 expression, for example, that refusal to take action can be a means  
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 an oxymoron: "sharp" and "dull or foolish"—in other words, "point-  
 edly foolish." Similarly, the oxymoronic etymology of "sophomore"  
 means "wise" and "foolish," a reference to the young scholar's short-  
 sighted conviction that he or she knows all.

Often in literature an oxymoron is a sign of a speaker's conflicted  
 feelings. For example, when Juliet discovers that her new husband has  
 just slain her cousin Tybalt, she exclaims: "O serpent heart, hid with a  
 flowering face! . . . / Beautiful tyrant! fiend angelical!" Juliet is out-  
 raged at the seeming rift between Romeo's physical beauty and the  
 moral corruption that she thinks is revealed by his violent act.

Oxymorons can also create humor by exposing a speaker's  
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 that some plodding Athenian workmen propose to present to his  
 court: "Merry and tragical? Tedious and brief? / That is hot ice and  
 wondrous strange snow. / How shall we find the concord of this dis-  
 cord?" The clever nobleman is signaling his delight at the absurd  
 contradictions by describing them with equally silly oxymorons.

## Litotes

Litotes (LY-toh-teez, from the Greek word for "simple" or "plain")  
 is a FIGURE OF THOUGHT in which a point is affirmed by negating its  
 opposite. It is a special form of UNDERSTATEMENT, where the surface  
 denial serves, through ironic contrast, to reinforce the underlying

## Personification

Personification is a FIGURE OF THOUGHT (OR TROPE) in which an abstract concept, animal, or inanimate object is treated as though it were alive or had human attributes. The name refers to the process of conceiving of the literal subject as though it were a person. For example, in "Ode on Melancholy," John Keats represents that feeling as a goddess who coexists, paradoxically, with earthly delights—but delights that by their very nature are transient: "She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die; / And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu." Here Keats personifies not only Melancholy but also the worldly gifts of Beauty and Joy by picturing them as her necessarily fleeting companions.

To cite another example: in *Romeo and Juliet*, Lord Capulet uses personification to express his despair at finding Juliet supposedly dead on the morning of her wedding day: "Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir; / My daughter he has wedded." The grim representation of Death as both his daughter's bridegroom and his own prospective heir conveys the morbid turn of mind of the old father as well as the empty future he envisions now that he has lost his only child. A quite different use of the trope occurs in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* when the heroine agonizes over her decision to refuse Mr. Rochester's proposal to run off with him: "Conscience and Reason turned traitors against me and charged me with crime in resisting him." The dilemma is that Jane has just discovered that her beloved is already married, but to a long demented wife whom he cannot legally divorce. He is ardently devoted to Jane and in despair at the prospect of her leaving him, and she is torn by the conflict between standing on moral principles and offering succor to the man she loves. The personification of Conscience and Reason suggests both the complexities of moral decision-making and the irony of Jane's situation: the very forces that would usually underpin hard but righteous decisions—moral principles and rational thought—side with the suffering sinner and chastise the upright moralizer.

An extended form of personification occurs in *allegory*, in which an abstract concept is presented as though it were a character who speaks and acts as an independent being. In the medieval morality play *Everyman*, for example, the personified characters include not only the hero, Everyman, who represents all human beings as they face death and final judgment, but also such abstract qualities as Beauty, Knowledge, and Good Deeds. The play depicts the extent to which each of these abstractions is able and willing to accompany Everyman on his terrifying final journey toward the grave and the

divine reward or punishment that awaits him beyond it. Seeing the abstractions interact with the protagonist serves as a means of conveying the intricacies of the struggle for the medieval Christian to live a life of rectitude and faith and to believe in the rewards, on earth and in the afterlife, of fidelity, humility, and compassion.

Other examples of complex, sustained allegory are Edmund Spenser's sixteenth-century epic, *The Faerie Queen*, and John Bunyan's seventeenth-century work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*; allegoric episodes occur also in many of the novels and short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1946) use allegory not to exalt a subject but to satirize it.

ed by her cruel aunt to meet Mr. Brocklehurst,  
e boarding school to which she is to be sent.  
ior and simile in the following passage, speci-  
le of each. Then describe what the figures of  
about both Mr. Brocklehurst and the narrator.

hall; before me was the breakfast-room  
idated and trembling. What a miserable  
gendered of unjust punishment, made of  
l to return to the nursery; I feared to go  
n minutes I stood in agitated hesitation:  
the breakfast-room bell decided me: I must

e?" I asked inwardly, as with both hands I  
dle, which, for a second or two, resisted  
l I see besides aunt Reed in the apart-  
ian?" The handle turned, the door  
rough and curtsying low, I looked up at—  
least, appeared to me, at first sight, the  
lad shape standing erect on the rug: the  
like a carved mask, placed above the shaft

—CHARLOTTE BRONTË, *Jane Eyre*

ily Dickinson presents an extended metaphor.  
vehicle, and summarize the ways that the details  
en describe the effects on our impressions and  
al subject that the extended metaphor suggests.

th feathers—  
al—  
hout the words—  
l—  
Gale—is heard—  
storm—  
little Bird  
arm—  
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ity,  
Me.

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## ic Fallacy

of PERSONIFICATION, in which inani-  
 the landscape or the weather, are  
 alities or feelings. The term, which  
 ritic John Ruskin, derives from the  
 supposing that nature can sympathize  
 oods and concerns. Although Ruskin  
 rogatory term because he thought  
 " feelings, it no longer has that nega-  
 erely descriptive. Usually the pathetic  
 some aspect of the poem or narrative  
 theme, or characterization, and so  
 le, a mild, sunny day would promise  
 it is no accident that the dire events  
 t's appearance on a winter midnight.  
 young narrator in "Araby" allude to  
 the failure of his futile romantic  
 raw and already my heart misgave me."  
 he usual use of the pathetic fallacy for  
 le, the bloody battle of Chancellerville  
*Edge of Courage* is set on a lovely sum-  
 attle, the naive young private Henry  
 ed to his need for consolation: "There  
 s; and the whole mood of the darkness,  
 athy for himself in his distress." A  
 eather or the look of the landscape is a  
 signal a shift in the fortunes of charac-  
 e devastation of war, the setting accord-

ingly turns dark and threatening. Only much later, after he has  
 emerged from the battle, scarred by his experiences but grateful to  
 have survived, does the pathetic fallacy return to its usual use. The  
 young soldier is able "to turn with a lover's thirst to images of tran-  
 quil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and  
 eternal peace." The weather reflects his newly optimistic mood as "a  
 golden ray of sun [comes] through the hosts of leaden rain clouds."

## Synecdoche

Synecdoche (Sin-EK-do-key), derived from the Greek word for "to  
 take up together," is a FIGURE OF THOUGHT in which the term for part  
 of something is used to represent the whole, or, less commonly, the  
 term for the whole is used to represent a part. For example, a fleet  
 of ships may be described as "forty sails," athletes have been nick-  
 named "Muscles" and "the Toe," manual laborers called "blue col-  
 lar" workers, and the food needed for sustenance "daily bread." In  
 its basic component, the comparison between a larger and smaller  
 entity, synecdoche is closely allied with METONYMY.

## Metonymy

Metonymy (meh-TAHN-ah-mee) is a TROPE which substitutes the name  
of an entity with something else that is closely associated with it. For  
 example, "the throne" is a metonymic synonym for "the king"; "Shake-  
 speare" for the works of the playwright; the citadel "the Kremlin" for  
 the ruling body of modern Russia; and "England" or "old Norway" as  
 the designation for the king of the country. The word derives from  
 Greek roots that mean "changing a name." See also SYNECDOCHE.

At times, a mingling of SYNECDOCHE and metonymy has been  
 used with ironic effect. For example, the distraught Ophelia, in  
 shock over Hamlet's malicious tirade, says about her heretofore gen-  
 tle lover: "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword . . .  
 Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down." Here the order of  
 Ophelia's list goes against logic, associating the courtier with the  
 eye, the soldier with the tongue, and the scholar with the sword.  
 Furthermore, only "eye" and "tongue," which represent the whole  
 man by means of the part, are SYNECDOCHEs; "sword," which  
 expresses the close association between the soldier and his weapon,  
 is a metonymy. The jumbled PARALLELS provide a poignant foreshad-  
 owing of Ophelia's mental breakdown.

out of me, speaks up as a host  
for the sake of the group.  
*We could easily kill a two-year-old,*  
he says in his clear voice. The other  
men agree, they clear their throats  
like Generals, they relax and get down to  
playing war, celebrating my son's life.

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## TROPES DEPENDENT ON CONTRASTING LEVELS OF MEANING

In addition to IRONY, a number of other TROPES depend on contrasts in levels of meaning: HYPERBOLE, UNDERSTATEMENT, PARADOX, OXYMORON, LITOTES, PERIPHRAISIS, and PUN. Such FIGURES OF THOUGHT may or may not be IRONIC: the test is whether or not the speaker intends to imply an underlying meaning that differs from the literal.

### Hyperbole

Hyperbole (hi-PER-boh-lee, from the Greek word for "to exceed") is a TROPE in which a point is stated in a way that is greatly exaggerated. The effect of hyperbole is often to imply the intensity of a speaker's feelings or convictions by putting them in uncompromising or absolute terms. In this use, it is the opposite of UNDERSTATEMENT. For example, in John Donne's "The Sun Rising," the speaker declares of himself and his lover: "She's all states, and all princes, I, / Nothing else is." The hyperbolic pronouncement suggests the exclusivity and self-assurance of the impassioned lover's perspective.

Hyperbole may be comic, as in the tall tales of the American West, or serious, as in cases where the excessive feeling signals an ominous imbalance. For example, Othello, greeting his new wife after surviving a perilous storm, says:

O my soul's joy!  
If after every tempest come such calms,  
May the winds blow till they have wakened death!

Although he means only to show his overwhelming elation and relief, the hyperbole is also an instance of TRAGIC IRONY, in that it foreshadows the loss of control that will later lead Othello to act on his violently overwrought feelings to the point that they do indeed "waken[ ] death" for his beloved and himself.

## Understatement

Understatement is a form of IRONY in which a point is expressed as less, in magnitude, value, or importance. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio's wound he has just received as "a scratch." He elaborates with a second understatement: "Marry, 'tis enough to create a sort of double take, with the force of the thing—here, that Mercutio is well aware that he has been blown—intensified by the restraint with which it is expressed. In this sense, the TROPE is the opposite of HYPERBOLE, in which the feeling is greatly exaggerated.

Understatement is a favorite device of Old English poetry, in which the enormous odds against the hero or the odds of everyday life are downplayed in order to create irony. (See also LITOTES.) For example, one of the episodes described in the epic *Beowulf* ends with the description of a funeral pyre for the slain warriors: "Fire swallowed up all of those whom war had taken away from the world: their strength had departed."<sup>1</sup> The euphemistic "taken away" for "killed," and the understatement "strength" for "life"—of course "strength" is obliterated by the devastating destruction that war has wrought upon the warriors. It also serves to underline the unspoken truth which they have faced the harsh odds against the world.

Understatement may also be used for comic effect. For example, Jonathan Swift's *ESSAY* describing a grotesque and starving man in his native Ireland by using the word "poor" as food has the seemingly innocuous title "A Modest Proposal."

In more recent times, such writers as Ernest Hemingway and Franz Kafka have made highly effective use of understatement. For example, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* ends with a scene between the PROTAGONIST/NARRATOR, Jake Barnes, and the promiscuous femme fatale, Brett. Jake, who has been wounded in war, has been futilely in love with Brett. At this point, he has just rescued her after her latest disappearance. He has been steadily drunker as he has listened to her. Brett turns to him with one of the flirtatious appeals that has tormented him throughout the novel: "Oh, Jake, we have had such a damned good time together." Rather than expressing his frustration and anger directly, Jake undercuts her with a sardonic understatement: "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

1. Trans. Talbot Donaldson.

## Understatement

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With Exercises

Understatement is a form of IRONY in which a point is deliberately expressed as less, in magnitude, value, or importance, than it actually is. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio dismisses the fatal wound he has just received as "a scratch." He elaborates on the figure with a second understatement: "Marry, 'tis enough." The effect is to create a sort of double take, with the force of the implied meaning—here, that Mercutio is well aware that he has suffered a death blow—intensified by the restraint with which it is expressed. In this sense, the TROPE is the opposite of HYPERBOLE, in which an attitude or feeling is greatly exaggerated.

Understatement is a favorite device of Old English poetry, in which the enormous odds against the hero or the desperate conditions of everyday life are downplayed in order to achieve a grim irony. (See also LITOTES.) For example, one of the historic battles described in the epic *Beowulf* ends with the description of the funeral pyre for the slain warriors: "Fire swallowed them—greediest of spirits—all of those whom war had taken away from both peoples: their strength had departed."<sup>1</sup> The euphemism of the verb "taken away" for "killed," and the understatement of the final clause—of course "strength" is obliterated by death—suggest the devastating destruction that war has wrought upon the once stalwart warriors. It also serves to underline the unspoken courage with which they have faced the harsh odds against their survival.

Understatement may also be used for comic or satiric effect. For example, Jonathan Swift's ESSAY describing a grotesque plan for alleviating starvation in his native Ireland by using the babies of the poor as food has the seemingly innocuous title "A Modest Proposal."

In more recent times, such writers as Ernest Hemingway and Franz Kafka have made highly effective use of understatement. For example, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* ends with a DIALOGUE between the PROTAGONIST/NARRATOR, Jake Barnes, and Brett Ashley, the promiscuous femme fatale. Jake, who has been left impotent by a war wound, has been futilely in love with Brett for years. At this point, he has just rescued her after her latest disastrous affair and gotten steadily drunker as he has listened to her reminiscences of it. Brett turns to him with one of the flirtatious appeals with which she has tormented him throughout the novel: "Oh, Jake . . . we could have had such a damned good time together." Rather than vent his frustration and anger directly, Jake undercuts her self-serving bathos with a sardonic understatement: "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

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