

Select Literary Devices

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

Alliteration

Repeating the initial consonant sound in a series of words.

EXAMPLE: The stealthy serpent slithered silently.

Allusion

Mentioning a place, idea, or character from history or culture to invoke a characteristic of the reference.

EXAMPLE: My boyfriend, Lewis, is such a *Romeo*. (allusion to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*)

Archetype

A symbol, character, or theme that appears in a wide range of works, often with universal meaning.

EXAMPLES: *Symbols*: sun (hope, life); water (rebirth)

Characters: hero, stepmother, healer, mentor, wise fool

Themes: quest, journey, redemption

Assonance

Repeating similar vowel sounds.

EXAMPLE: Sweet ea, ea, ea.

Caesura

A pause or break in a poetic line for emphasis, often in the middle of a line.

EXAMPLE: "To err is human; to forgive, divine." (caesura between "human" and "to forgive")

Characterization

Using details to add nuance and depth to a character.

EXAMPLE: She seemed distant and uninterested. (Direct characterization)

In response, she grunted unintelligibly and looked away. (Indirect characterization)

Connotation

Any association that readers connect to a word that is different from its literal meaning.

EXAMPLE: Often, mention of a fox carries connotations of cleverness and quickness.

Denotation

The dictionary definition of a word.

EXAMPLE: Fox: A noun referring to a small, carnivorous mammal.

Diction

Use of vocabulary, style, and devices to create a particular impression.

EXAMPLES: "Let us not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments" (elevated)

"I wandered lonely as a cloud" (common)

Flashback

Interrupting the chronological flow of a narrative with an event that occurred at an earlier time.

EXAMPLE: The story of her child's birth flashed back to the mother's own childhood.

Foil

A character with contrasting values or abilities to the protagonist.

EXAMPLE: Spock, with his cool detachment, acts as a foil to Kirk's passionate overconfidence.

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Foreshadowing

Hinting at an event in a story that will occur in the future.

EXAMPLE: Glimpses of Lisa's murderous tendencies foreshadowed the book's tragic conclusion.

Hyperbole

Using incredible exaggeration or overstatement for emphasis or humor.

EXAMPLE: I'm so hungry *I could eat a horse*.

Imagery

Using language to evoke a sensory impression or vivid picture in the reader's mind.

EXAMPLE: The rain pounded the dark ocean waves as they crashed against the rocky shore.

Irony

Implying a meaning that is the opposite of the actual meaning, for humorous or tense effect.

Verbal Irony: When a person says one thing but means the opposite.

EXAMPLE: "Great!" he cried in frustration. "That's *just great!*"

Dramatic Irony: When the reader's knowledge differs from what the character understands.

EXAMPLE: As the story neared its climax, I wanted to yell, "Don't go into that room! Can't you see it's a trap?" But the unsuspecting hero had no idea what was coming.

Metaphor and Simile

Comparisons between two unlike actions, ideas, or things. Similes use words such as *like* and *as*.

EXAMPLES: His hair looks *like* a mop. (Simile)

His hair is a mop. (Metaphor)

Oxymoron

The combination of opposite or contradictory terms.

EXAMPLES: deafening silence, jumbo shrimp, irregular pattern

Personification

Giving an object, idea, or animal human feelings, thoughts, or attributes.

EXAMPLE: The moon smiled down on them.

Point of View

The perspective from which a story is told.

EXAMPLES: Barely conscious, *I* gasped for air. (First person narration)

Barely conscious, *you* gasped for air. (Second person narration [rarely used in academia])

Barely conscious, *the girl* gasped for air. (Third person narration)

Symbol

A person, place, thing, or event that has meaning in and of itself and also stands for something more.

EXAMPLES: Sunshine often symbolizes happiness.

Rain sometimes symbolizes sadness and loneliness. At other times, it has been used to symbolize cleanliness, growth, and renewal of life.

Understatement

Intentionally falling short of describing the full extent of a subject, often for humor.

EXAMPLE: It gets *a little uncomfortable* in the sun on those 115-degree summer afternoons.