

A Few Literary and Poetic Devices:
(words underlined in **bold** represent “figurative” language)

1. Alliteration, consonance and assonance

- The repetition of sounds where consonance uses consonants and assonance uses vowels

Ex. From “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore –
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
“’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door –
Only this and nothing more.”

2. Allusion

- a literary device in which an author uses subject matter refer to an event, place, or other work – usually not directly stated
- An indirect reference to a piece of knowledge not explicitly mentioned in the text, e.g. “Chocolate was her Achilles Heel”

Ex. When Nature sleeps and stars are mute,
To mar the silence ev’n with lute.
At rest on ocean’s brilliant dyes
An image of Elysium lies:”

3. **Analogy**

- A literary device that creates a relationship based on parallels or connections between two ideas. By establishing this relationship, the new idea is introduced through a familiar comparison, thus making the new concept easier to grasp. Analogy is more extensive and elaborate than either a simile or a metaphor.

Ex. From *Romeo and Juliet*

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet.
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,”

4. Apostrophe

- An apostrophe used in literature is an arrangement of words addressing a non-existent person or an abstract idea in such a way as if it were present and capable of understanding feelings.

Ex. “Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so
For, those, whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow,
Doe not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.”

5. Antithesis

- Two sentences of contrasting meaning in close proximity. This creates a contrast using two of divergent elements that come together into a uniform whole.

Ex. From John Donne's "Community"

Good we must love, and must hate ill
For ill is ill, and good good still;
But there are things indifferent,
Which we may neither hate, nor love,

6. Asyndeton and polysyndeton

- Asyndeton is the omission or absence of a conjunction between parts of a sentence. Asyndeton shortens a sentence, thus lending greater focus to the meaning of the words.

Ex. From *Heart of Darkness*: "An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was thick, warm, heavy, sluggish."

- Polysyndeton occurs when conjunctions (e.g. *and*, *but*, *or*) are used repeatedly in quick succession, often with no commas, even when the conjunctions could be removed or prove unnecessary.

Ex. From *Pride and Prejudice*: "Mrs. Hurst and her sister allowed it to be so—but still they admired her and liked her, and pronounced her to be a sweet girl, and one whom they would not object to know more of."

7. Couplet

- Two lines that typically rhyme and have the same meter in poetry. It concludes both Shakespearian and Spenserian sonnets. In these sonnets, the couplet often draws a conclusion from the lines before it.

Ex. "This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long."

8. Euphony and cacophony

- Euphony is the repetition of vowels and smooth consonants to create a pleasant sound.

Ex. From Dickinson: "Success is counted sweetest\By those who ne'er succeed."

- Cacophony is the use of words with sharp, harsh and unmelodious or discordant sounds.

Ex. From Coleridge: "With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,\Agape they heard me call."

Ex. From Lewis Carroll's "The Jabberwocky"

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,an
And the mome raths outgrabe."

9. **Hyperbole and understatement**

- **Hyperbole:** a figure of speech, which involves an exaggeration of ideas for the sake of emphasis

Ex. From W.H Auden's poem "As I Walked One Evening",

I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,
I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry

- **Understatement:** a figure of speech used to intentionally make a situation seem less important than it really is, usually having an ironic effect

Ex. The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

10. Imagery

- writing that uses words to create a physical sense (picture, smell, feeling) in a poem, makes writing seem more realistic

Ex. When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold, (Sonnet 73)

11. Irony

- The expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect. Also, a state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects and is often amusing as a result. Finally, irony is a literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of the character's words or actions are clear to the audience or reader while remaining unknown to the character.

Ex. This morning
I watched 'As Time Goes By'
As time went by.

Ex. From "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge writes:
"Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink."

12. Colloquial, informal or jargon (style of language)

- Colloquial or informal language is a type of writing that has a casual register and is similar to an “everyday” conversation. It is considered an especially non-self-conscious style of writing. It also includes the regional language or sayings of the people, such as “bless her heart.”

Ex. From *Catcher in the Rye*: “When you’re dead, they really fix you up. I hope to hell when I do die somebody has sense enough to just dump me in the river or something.”

Ex. From John Donne’s “The Sun Rising”

“Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run?
Saucy pedantic wretch,”

- Jargon is often confused with slang, but is unique in that it is used to convey particular meanings to people who are aware of certain terms. There is a jargon within certain professions and subjects that includes unique phrases and abbreviations

Ex. From *Hamlet*: “This fellow might be in’s time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. . .”

13. Litotes

- Derived from a Greek word meaning “simple,” litotes is a figure of speech which employs an understatement by using double negatives or, in other words, a positive statement is expressed by negating its opposite expressions. For example, using the expression “not too bad” for “very good.” Similarly, saying “She is not a beauty queen,” implies “She is ugly” or saying, “I am not as young as I used to be” in order to avoid saying “I am old.”

Ex. “I am **not unaware** how the productions of the Grub Street brotherhood have of late years fallen under many prejudices.” (Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*)

Ex. “Are you aware, Mrs. Bueller, that Ferris does not have what we consider to be an exemplary attendance record?”

14. Metaphor, conceit and/or extended metaphor

- A metaphor is an implicit, implied or hidden comparison between two things or objects that are very different from each other but have some characteristics common between them. In other words, a resemblance of two contradictory or different objects is made based on a single or some common characteristics.

Ex. That quiz was a piece of cake.

- A conceit, or an extended metaphor, is usually a surprising or unexpected comparison that is more elaborate and can be carried throughout the length of the entire poem.

Ex. John Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning"

15. Metonymy

- A figure of speech that replaces the name of a thing with the name of something else with which it is closely associated, for example "here come the suits" in place of "the school administrative team," or, resist "the man" as opposed to resist "those in power."

Ex. Famous saying: The pen is mightier than the sword. *The pen is metonymy for the communication of ideas and the sword is metonymy for military action or for authoritative power.*

Ex. From "Out, Out" by Robert Frost

"As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling"

Ex. From Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" Act I

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears."

16. Onomatopoeia

- The formation of a word from a sound associated with what is named (e.g., *cuckoo*, *sizzle*).

Ex. From Shel Silverstein's "Hungry Mungry":

Up came twenty angry policeman shouting, "Stop and cease."
Mungry opened his mouth and "Gulp," he ate the police.
Soldiers came with tanks and guns.
Said Mungry, "They can't harm me."
He just smiled and licked his lips and ate the U.S. Army.

Ex. From Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Morte D'Arthur"

"I heard the ripple washing in the reeds\And the wild water lapping on the crag"

17. Oxymoron

- A figure of speech that combines contradictory words and ideas

Ex. It's the same difference

Ex. From Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Lancelot and Elaine":

"The shackles of love straiten'd him
His honour rooted in dishonour stood
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true"

18. Pacing

- When a writer controls the momentum or speed of the poem. Narrative pace determines how quickly or how slowly the writer takes a reader through a story. Pacing relies on the combination of mood and emotion as these elements play out in the dialogue, setting, and action. Consider how abrupt or terse the writing might be. Dialogue is often fast-paced, while exposition slows things down. Dearth of adverbs and adjectives will also quicken pace.

19. Paradox

- A statement or proposition that, despite sound (or apparently sound) reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems senseless, logically unacceptable, or self-contradictory. It is a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained it is in fact true.

Ex. JULIET: "My only love sprung from my only hate!"

Ex. From Oscar Wilde: "I can resist anything but temptation."

20. Parallelism

- Using similar components in grammar, construction, sound, or meter in order to provide rhythm and flow

Ex. Like father, like son. **OR** Easy come, easy go.

Ex. From *Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."

21. Personification

- A figure of speech in which a thing, an idea, or an animal is given human attributes. The non-human objects are portrayed in such a way that we feel they have the ability to act like human beings.

Ex. From *Romeo and Juliet*

"When well-appeared April on the heel
Of limping winter treads."

22. Repetition

- Repetition consists of repeating a word, phrase, or sentence, and is common in both poetry and prose. It is a rhetorical technique to add emphasis, unity, and/or power.

Ex. The repetition of "Do not go gentle" and "rage, rage against the dying of the light" in the Dylan Thomas poem build intensity throughout the poem until the final heroic couplet at the end.

Ex. From T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday"

"Because I do not hope to turn again\ Because I do not hope\ Because I do not hope to turn..."

23. Chiasmus or antimetabole (reversals)

- Chiasmus is a rhetorical device in which two or more clauses are balanced against each other by the reversal of their structures in order to produce an artistic effect.

Ex. "Never let a Fool Kiss You or a Kiss Fool You."

Ex. "Lust is what makes you keep wanting to do it, Even when you have no desire to be with each other. Love is what makes you keep wanting to be with each other, Even when you have no desire to do it." (Judith Viorst)

- Antimetabole is repetition of words in the consecutive clauses but in an inverted or transposed order:

Ex. "You forget what you want to remember, and you remember what you want to forget."

Ex. "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

24. Rhetorical question

- A question that has an obvious and understood answer. The question is asked just for effect or to lay emphasis on some point discussed when no real answer is expected.

Ex. "Who knows?"

Ex. From *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare

SHYLOCK: "If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?
And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

25. Rhetorical shift

- A slight change in topic to elaborate or explain or to move from one point or idea to another.

Ex. Just about any volta in a sonnet.

26. Rhythm

- Rhythm demonstrates the long and short patterns through stressed and unstressed syllables and is commonly used in verse form. Each couple of a stressed and unstressed syllable = a foot.

Ex. Shall **I** compare thee to a **summer's** day?

27. Simile or extended simile

- A figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, used to make a description more emphatic or vivid. Also known as the Homeric simile or epic simile, an extended simile is typically used in epic poetry to intensify the heroic stature of the subject and to serve as decoration.

Ex. "I wandered lonely as a cloud," (Wordsworth)

Ex. of epic simile: "Her mind in torment, wheeling like some lion at bay, dreading the gangs of hunters closing their cunning ring around him for the finish."

28. Synecdoche

- Synecdoche is a literary device in which a part of something represents the whole, or it may use a whole to represent a part. Synecdoche may also use larger groups to refer to smaller groups or vice versa. It may also call an object by the name of the material that object is made of, or it may refer to something in a container by the name of that container.

Ex. "Look at that gray beard over there, he can hardly walk without a cane!"

Ex. "In our house, mom is the breadwinner."

Ex. "Heavy is the head that wears the crown." (This is a unique turn of phrase that appears to include both synecdoche *and* metonymy).

Ex. From Shelly's "Ozymandias"

"Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them."

29. Zeugma or syllepsis

- Zeugma (or syllepsis) is a rhetorical device whereby one single phrase or word joins together different parts of a sentence and often two ideas/words of varied importance.

Ex. "Dost sometimes counsel take...and sometimes tea."

Ex. "Covered themselves with dust and glory."

Ex. "John and his license expired last week."