

THE RHETORIC PAGE

[rhetoric: 'the art of using speech to persuade, influence, or please']

- A) Denotation and Connotation
- B) Figurative Language
- C) Meaning and Metaphor
- D) Irony
- E) Fables, Parables and Allegories

DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION #1: Essentially, a word is a sound with meaning. The speaker makes a sound; the listener connects that sound to a meaning. However, language students need to remember that there are two distinct levels, of meaning: a) **denotative** (or 'literal') meaning, and **connotative** (or 'associative') meaning.

a) denotative/literal meaning

If I say, '***Yesterday, I saw a snake***', I'm speaking literally: Yesterday, I saw a legless reptile with cold blood and scaly skin. If my listener doesn't know the meaning of the word 'snake', s/he can go to any dictionary and find out. The sentence is **denotative**—that is, literal and unambiguous.

[Remember many English words have multiple denotations. For example, the word 'spring' can denote a season, a special metal device, and a source of fresh water; context always determines the specific denotation.]

b) connotative/associative meaning

If I say, '***When I look at my brother, I see a real snake***', I am not speaking literally. I am employing a second, associative level of meaning. Literally speaking, my brother **isn't** a legless reptile with cold blood and scaly skin. I'm calling him a snake because I want my listeners to associate their feelings about snakes with my brother.

Negative, Positive and Neutral Connotations

1. **Negative** The word 'snake' has very negative connotations: they are cold slippery creatures, have big poisonous fangs, and strike with no warning. In Christian mythology, the Devil takes the form of a snake. One's personal feelings about snakes do not matter; even a snake-lover would not like to be called a snake. Words like 'pig' and 'cockroach' have similarly negative connotations. Personally, I like pigs: they are smart, cute and useful; nevertheless, I would not appreciate it someone called me a pig.

2. Positive Other words have very positive connotations. Take the word 'rose', and its adjective, 'rosy'. Almost everyone has positive feelings about real roses: they are beautiful, they smell sweet, and they bloom in warm weather. If I say, "My sister is a rose," I'm clearly paying her a compliment. If I say, "My future looks rosy", I'm expressing optimism. Words like 'sunshine' and 'honey' have similarly positive connotations.

3. Neutral Many words have neither positive nor negative connotations; they suggest no 'second level of meaning'. Take the word 'table': most of us have no special feelings about tables. Similarly, words such as 'cup' and 'computer' are neutral. In themselves, they do not create a specific impression.

Decide if the words below have 'connotative/associative' meanings, or if they're neutral. If the word has specific connotations, ask yourself whether they're positive or negative, and where the negative associations come from. [hint: if you're not sure, imagine that somebody is applying the word to YOU]

nouns

Sandwich

Crab

Belt

Shark

Pistol

Horse

Airport

Sugar

Scorpion

Cell phone

Ragweed

Oak Tree

Sailboat

Lamb

Vitamin

adjectives

Thin

Slender

Skinny

Peaceful

Passive

Inert

Determined

Stubborn

Pig-headed

Quick

Speedy

Hyperactive

Manic

Sweet

Saccharine

Connotative language can be very powerful, and very deceptive. A person who is overweight could be called 'porky' or 'full-bodied'. One word relates to pigs and is very negative; the other word suggests fullness and perfection. Here are some groups of adjectives with similar denotations, but different connotations.

Would You Rather Be:

- a) smart clever crafty intelligent foxy sly bright
- b) thin skinny scrawny slender lean willowy boney
- c) perverse unusual unique different strange weird
- d) calm cool impassive objective inert neutral detached
- e) cautious careful prudent guarded wary uncertain alert
- f) traditional old-fashioned conservative out-of-date vintage
- g) immature undeveloped youthful boyish/girlish childlike
- h) inexperienced simple innocent naïve foolish unsophisticated
- i) strong-minded stubborn determined unrelenting pig-headed

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE #1 The term *figurative language* refers to any language used in a non-literal way. The two most common types of figurative language are *simile* and *metaphor*. *Personification* and *hyperbole* are two other forms of figurative language.

Unlike simple denotative language (i.e., 'I ate a hamburger'), figurative language asks the reader/listener to use his imagination—to make connections and create pictures. Let's say you have coffee with your friend John, who looks terrible. Later on, your friend asks you how John's doing. You might respond literally, or figuratively:

option A: literal: *"He was very pale, and yawned a lot."*

option B: figurative: *"He looked like a corpse warmed up in a microwave."*

Option A is purely denotative. The words mean exactly what they seem to mean. Option B is figurative—it uses a 'simile' and some 'hyperbole'—and it demands more attention. Literally speaking, of course, it is false: John isn't a corpse and has not been in a microwave. You really want your listener to visualize, or imagine what John might look like if he were dead and then quickly warmed up. The word 'corpse' has negative connotations, of course—no one wants to resemble a dead body—but suggesting that your friend looks like a microwaved corpse IS a little bit humorous.....

Most literature relies heavily on figurative language, some of which can be complex and difficult to absorb. Occasionally, students ask why writers don't say what they mean in literal, denotative language, and make it easier for readers. There are two answers:

- 1) *Figurative language is more vivid and suggestive than literal language.*
- 2) *Figurative language requires the reader to engage actively with the text.*

....read the sentences below and decide if they are mainly literal/denotative, or mainly figurative/connotative....

- 1) The restaurant burned down in less than ten minutes.
- 2) The seeds of personality are planted in childhood.
- 3) Sitting on the log, June thought she heard a dog barking in some faraway yard.
- 4) We heard footsteps in the corridor, and then a tall, broad-shouldered man wearing a black overcoat appeared in the doorway.
- 5) The hunter put on a grass-green coat with brass buttons as shiny as gold coins, swung a kidney-shaped cotton bag over his shoulder, and grabbed his brand new, French-made rifle.
- 6) Mr. Zerkov, a tall, heavy man with a blockish face, a nose like a small cauliflower, and little mousy eyes, stood before me with his legs far apart, looking a little bit like the Eiffel Tower.
- 7) It was dawn and everything was ready for Marianne's wedding; the sun was bright and warm, and the sky a lovely, pure shade of blue.
- 8) On those pre-Christmas evenings, the crowds were immense and the traffic built unbearably loud. The Santas of Fifth Avenue rang their little bells steadily and monotonously; the sound bothered Frank, but a surprising number of people dropped coins into the plastic boxes they stood next to.
- 9) Her hands were long and grimly knuckled; her dark eyes seemed trained to remain unamused by what passed before them; her nostrils flared often, always ready to sniff out disaster in a stray comment.

Meaning and Metaphor #1: Sentence-Level Metaphors

Metaphor is only one kind of figurative language, but it is the most common and essential. It might be called the engine of literature; it distinguishes creative writing from fact-based reporting. Basically, **a metaphor links two dissimilar things in a creative and meaningful way**. Metaphors can be very broad, or very specific. *Sentence-level metaphors* work in the context of a single sentence, or phrase. **Similes** are very similar to metaphors: they also link two dissimilar things, but they are easier to understand because the link is made clear with the words 'like' or 'as'. For example:

- * *Celine has a voice like honey.*
- * *The wind sounded like a person screaming.*

A metaphor makes the link *directly*, and can be harder to identify:

- * *Celine's voice is pure honey.*
- * *John heard the wind screaming through the trees.*

Clearly, a voice can't be 'pure honey'; the metaphor asks us to *transfer meaning* from 'honey' to 'voice'. For most, honey has very positive connotations: it is sweet, rich and pleasurable; therefore, a 'pure honey' voice must be sweet, rich, and pleasurable. In the second sentence, wind can't really 'scream'; it is blowing loudly and intensely. But by metaphorically linking 'scream' and 'wind'—by *transferring meaning* from one to the other—the writer creates a second, 'associative' level of meaning. Screams are associated with pain and fear; if John hears the wind 'screaming', he is probably in a difficult situation; perhaps he's lost and/or frightened. If John heard the wind 'singing in the trees', the impact of the sentence would change dramatically.

Identify the metaphors in the following brief sentences. Ask yourself:

- a) *what is linked with what?*
- b) *what is the intended meaning of the metaphor?*
- c) *what mood or feeling does the metaphor create? are the connotations positive? negative? why?*

* * * * *

1. His face was a blank wall.
His face was an open field.
His face was a disaster zone.

2. The past is an ocean
The past is an out-of-focus movie.
The past is a fairy tale.
3. You're a bottle of ice water in the middle of the desert.
You're a puppy dog trapped in a cage full of tigers.
You're a melting ice-cream cone.
4. This city is an obstacle course.
This city is a ray of light.
This city is a lost dream.
5. His words scarred my soul.
His words were beautiful rainbows.
His words set my belly on fire.
6. Mother Teresa's eyes were two jewels of love.
Hitler's eyes were two knives of flint.
Barack Obama's eyes are two deep muddy pools reflecting nothing.

now, finish off these sentences with your own metaphors....

7. The ocean roars in a loud voice.
The lake.....
The river....
8. The Downtown East Side is an open wound.
Stanley Park is.....
Vancouver Island is....
9. Hope sings a song.
Despair....
Friendship....

Meaning and Metaphor #2: Metaphor in Action

Below you will find a series of brief metaphorical passages. Read with an active imagination; identify the metaphors; determine their 'literal' meaning; consider the connotations—the 'associative meaning'—of the passage. Some will require thought and concentration. To prepare, consider this short, but complex metaphorical description of a winter storm hitting a small town in the northeastern United States:

* The sky purpled, and roaring bursts of light briefly set fire to the snow as if it were the dusty landscape of a moon. Tree branches clawed into the soggy wool of the sky.

(Lorrie Moore, Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?)

--The 'roaring bursts of light' must refer to lightning flashes, since lightning is the only kind of light that 'roars'; these flashes don't really 'set fire' to the snow, they just illuminate the snow so brightly that it seems as if it were on fire. The combined metaphors evoke the drama and intensity of the storm.

--The snow is linked to the 'dusty landscape of a moon', the snow being the 'moon dust', suggesting that the wintry, desolate landscape looks as barren as the surface of the moon.

--It's common knowledge that dogs 'claw' at walls when they are terrified by thunder/lightning. The image of the tree branches 'clawing' into the sky a) makes them seem alive, and 2) suggests that even Nature feels frightened by the storm;

--A 'soggy wool' sky suggests a very wet, heavy, low-hanging sky. This metaphor emphasizes the weight of the storm clouds.

The writer uses rich metaphorical language to create, in only two sentences, a very dramatic image of an intense winter storm. It would be nearly impossible to create a similar impression using literal, denotative language....

* * * * *

1. *After a failed suicide attempt, a young man looks at his reflection in a mirror:*

"The face looked at him with thirsty eyes."

[Ken Kesey, Sometimes A Great Notion]

2. *The narrator makes a philosophical observation:*

"The past is a distant, receding coastline, and we are all in the same boat."

[Julian Barnes, Flaubert's Parrot]

3. *In Australia, a group of kids dive from a small dock into a warm river:*

"The water was a flat bed of sunlight and the brown slick bodies of children bashed through into its blue underbelly."

[Tim Winton, Cloudstreet]

4. *Arriving in England after a long absence, the narrator looks at the British architecture:*

"The first building we saw on the waterside was one of those huge hotels, all stucco and pinnacles, which stare from the English coast like idiots staring over an asylum wall."

[George Orwell, Down and Out In Paris and London]

5. *The writer describes a beautiful morning in the Russian countryside:*

"It was a lovely, fresh morning; tiny flecked clouds hovered overhead in little curls of foam on the pale clear blue; a fine dew lay in drops on the leaves and grass, and sparkled like silver..."

[Ivan Turgenev, Fathers and Sons]

6. *A woman feels a pain in her stomach, and the word 'cancer' comes to her mind:*

"The word came back to her immediately with the pain but she slashed it in two...She slashed it twice through and then again until there were only pieces of it that couldn't be recognized."

[Flannery O'Connor, "A Stroke of Good Fortune"]

7. *The narrator's twin brother comes home late, half-drunk:*

"It was well past midnight when my twin stumbled into the cottage, a ragged smile wandering across his face...Liquor sweetened his breath and seeped through his brain."

[James Morrow, Bible Stories For Adults]

Meaning and Metaphor #3: Extending & Developing Metaphors

Often, writers 'extend' metaphors. This means the 'metaphorical idea' is developed in various ways. Here is a famous example from Shakespeare:

***All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...***

[William Shakespeare, As You Like It,]

Shakespeare's metaphor transfers meaning from 'stage' to 'world'. We are all 'players' on a stage, and our lives resemble theatrical performances. Shakespeare then develops the metaphor: in the same way that actors enter and exit, humans live and die; like actors for hire, we all play different roles in our lives. This metaphor extends, or develops a metaphorical idea—the link between the 'stage' and the 'world'.

Modern writers also use extended metaphors, often in complex and unpredictable ways. In the following passage, a poor American artist in Paris thinks about his life:

"I have been ejected from the world like a cartridge. A deep fog has settled down, the earth is smeared with frozen grease. I can feel the city palpitating, as if it were a heart just removed from a warm body. The windows of my hotel are festering..."

[Henry Miller, Tropic of Cancer]

This passage is rich with connotation and metaphor. The narrator links himself to a used bullet cartridge; he sees a 'fog' settling on the world and the earth 'smeared with frozen grease'. He links Paris to a heart torn from a body, and his window to a 'festering' infection. The connotations here are negatively charged, suggesting disease, decay and death. In the end, this cluster of unusual metaphors says less about Paris than about the mental condition of the narrator who comes up with the strange images: they suggest an empty and alienated man who sees nothing but decay, disease and ugliness in the world around him.

Below are some 'developed' metaphorical passages containing linked images. Find the metaphors, thinking about a) *the connections between the images*, b) *the connotations of the words*, and c) *the general effect of the passage: how does it 'feel'?*

1. *Some people on a river in Oregon look at the morning sky:*

“Unruly mobs of young clouds gather in the bright sky, riotous and surging, full of threat that convinces no one.”

[Ken Kesey, Sometimes A Great Notion]

2. *A philosopher explains his point of view:*

“Time is the stream I go fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is.”

[Henry David Thoreau, "Where I Lived"]

3. *The narrator gives his impression of Santa Monica Boulevard, the main street in Hollywood:*

“It seemed so glandular, the enormous fleshy ferns and cacti reaching toward the street as if to lure pedestrians into some fatal, steroid-laden embrace. There were, however, no pedestrians, so perhaps the plants had already eaten...”

[Jerry Stahl, Permanent Midnight]

4. *A woman wakes up, anxious and confused:*

“Her heart was a stone lying upon her breast outside of her; her pulses lagged and paused and she knew something strange was going to happen...the streaks of light were dark blue and the whole house was snoring in its sleep.”

[Katherine Anne Porter, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"]

5. *The narrator wakes up, confused and disoriented:*

“I awoke in a strange place. A dark window, speckled with rain, looked over me like a diseased mirror. The bed was a kind of minimalist arena, large and sunken; I found myself imagining an audience around the perimeter, awaiting the start of some pornographic sports event.”

[James Morrow, Bible Stories For Adults]

6. *A young woman watches a fireworks display:*

"After a while the scattered fireworks ceased. A longer interval of darkness followed, and then the whole night broke into flower. From every point of the horizon, gold and silver arches sprang up and crossed each other, sky-orchards broke into blossom, shed their flaming petals and hung their branches with golden fruit; and all the while the air was filled with a soft supernatural hum, as though great birds were building their nests in those invisible tree tops."

[Edith Wharton, Summer]

7. *A country woman walks up a hill to look around:*

"[A]s she mounted the prominence, she might have been the giant wife of the countryside, come out at some sign of danger to see what the trouble was. She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy blue points of light that pierced forward, surveying everything. She ignored the white afternoon sun which was creeping behind a ragged wall of cloud as if it pretended to be an intruder and cast her gaze down the red clay road that turned off the highway."

[Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person"]

8. *The writer introduces her main character, a man named Quoye:*

"A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a Crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair rucked back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips. Eyes the color of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face."

[E. Annie Proulx, The Shipping News]

Meaning and Metaphor #4: More Examples—Advanced...Here are more complex *metaphors* and *similes* taken from various texts; the images are vivid and unusual, and link up in sometimes surprising ways, so read with an active, visual imagination. Identify the 'metaphorical links'; think carefully about the actual meaning of the metaphor, and about the connotations of the language.

1. *During Prohibition, a struggling bar owner named Slade illegally serves alcohol to an unpleasant stranger who turns out becomes a powerful politician; later, the politician helps Slade become rich. The narrator reflects:*

"Perhaps that was the moment when Slade made his fortune. How life is strange and changeful, and the crystal is in the steel at the point of fracture, and the toad bears a jewel in its forehead..."

[Robert Penn Warren, All The King's Men]

2. *The writer speaks to his pet donkey, Platero, about the end of summer:*

"The coming of autumn is to me, Platero, a dog that is tied, barking long and clearly in the solitude of a yard, a court, or a garden which begins to turn cold and sad with the evening. Wherever I am, Platero, I always hear, on these days which turn yellower every day, that chained dog, barking at the setting sun."

[Juan Ramon Jimenez, Platero and I]

3. *A soldier on parade listens to a military band while looking around at the sky, and at the other soldiers:*

"Blessedly blue sky, tiny baby suns in every badge, faces unshadowed by the insanity of thoughts...Everything made of some radiant, smiling substance. And the brass rhythms: 'Ta-ta-ta-tam! Ta-ta-ta-tam!' Like brass stairs gleaming in the sun, and every step taking you higher and higher, into the dizzying blue..."

[Yevgeny Zamyatin, We]

4. *A starving artist in Paris thinks about the city:*

“Paris is simply an artificial stage, a revolving stage that permits the spectator to glimpse all phases of the conflict. Of itself, Paris initiates no dramas...Paris is simply an obstetrical instrument that tears the living embryo from the womb and puts it in the incubator. Paris is the cradle of artificial births.”

[Henry Miller, Tropic of Cancer]

5. *A criminal narrator describes a road trip he takes from Louisiana to Mexico:*

“Back through Lake Charles and the dead slot-machine country, south end of Texas, murdering sheriffs look us over and check the car papers. Something falls off you when you cross the border into Mexico, and suddenly the landscape hits you straight with nothing between you and it, desert and mountains and vultures; little wheeling specks and others so close you can hear wings cut the air (a dry husking sound), and when they spot something they pour out of the blue sky, that shattering bloody blue sky of Mexico, down in a black funnel....”

[William Burroughs, Naked Lunch]

6. *A priest in Mississippi sits by his window, looking and listening:*

“The street lamp at the corner flickers and glares, so that the bitten shadows of the unwinded maples seem to toss faintly upon the August darkness. From a distance, quite faint though clear, he can hear the sonorous waves of massed voices from the church: a sound at once austere and rich, abject and proud, swelling and falling in the quiet summer darkness like a harmonic tide.”

[William Faulkner, Light in August]

Meaning & Metaphor #5: Random metaphors....

1. *A wealthy, popular young man in London finds himself with a free evening:*

"And so I considered how to invest this cool deliverance of an evening, this sudden cargo of hours, standing at my penthouse window, gazing at a winter roovescape that seemed once more to be crowded with secrets and friends."

[Martin Amis, Success]

2. *A hotel owner observes a peculiar new guest swimming in the hotel pool:*

"[T]here in the pool swam Mr. Smith, wearing a pair of dark grey nylon bathing pants which billowed out behind him in the water, giving him the huge hindquarters of some prehistoric beast...When he saw me he stood up in the water like a myth."

[Graham Green, The Comedians]

3. *A man thinks angrily about his wife's suspicious behaviour:*

"Like all bitter men, Flint knew less than half the story and was more interested in unloading his own peppery feelings than in learning the truth."

[John Cheever, "The Trouble of Marcie Flint"]

4. *The narrator describes a mid-winter Alaskan landscape:*

"The dark spruce forest frowned on either side of the frozen waterway. The trees had been stripped by a recent wind of their white covering of frost, and they seemed to lean toward each other...."

[Jack London, White Fang]

5. *An journalist remembers a priest who was murdered after he spoke out against corruption in Southern Italy's construction industry:*

"I was still thinking about the priest's battle...Words against cement mixers and guns. And not just metaphorically. For real. To speak out, testify, take a stand. The word, with its only armor: to be spoken. A word that is a vigilant witness, that never stops seeing the truth. The only way to eliminate a word like that is to kill it."

[Roberto Saviano, Gomorra]

6. *The writer describes a 'wash' [= dry riverbed] in a Southern California desert:*

"Most of the year, the wash is as dry as chalk. During the summer months, however, superheated air rises from the scorched earth like bubbles from the bottom of a boiling kettle...Frequently, the updrafts create cells of muscular, anvil-headed cumulonimbus clouds that can rise thirty thousand feet or more..."

[Jon Krakauer, Into the Wild]

7. *The writer thinks about a man named 'Phaedrus', who went insane years before:*

"He was systematic, but to say he thought and acted like a machine would be to misunderstand the nature of his thought. It was not like pistons and wheels and gears all moving at once, massive and coordinated. The image of a laser beam comes to mind instead; a single pencil of light of such terrific energy in such extreme concentration it can be shot at the moon and its reflection seen back on earth. Phaedrus did not try to use his brilliance for general illumination. He sought one specific target and aimed for it and hit it. And that was all."

[Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance]

Meaning and Metaphor #6: Shakespearean Metaphor

Shakespeare's plays are difficult not only because they use an older form of English, but because they are metaphorically rich. In 1600, theatre directors had no special effects, no lighting, no scenery. To help audiences visualize scenes and emotions, Shakespeare filled his language with complex metaphors that are often challenging for modern readers. They require concentration and imagination. In Romeo and Juliet, Romeo first sees Juliet at a party; he responds this way:

**“O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of the night
As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!”**

[Romeo and Juliet, I. v. 44-47]

- * Juliet teaches 'the torches to burn bright'. If Juliet can 'teach torches to burn', she must be *brighter than fire*.
- * She hangs on the 'cheek of the night/As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear'. Calling Juliet a 'rich jewel' in an 'Ethiop's ear' suggests she is as valuable as a precious stone, and as beautiful as a lovely ear-ring. The link between 'cheek' and 'night' seems odd, until we recall that young lovers often first kiss each other in the night. Juliet hangs from an 'Ethiop's ear' because Ethiopians have skin that is dark like the night.
- * Juliet's beauty is 'too rich for use, for earth too dear'. Beauty 'too rich for use' suggests that Juliet is so beautiful that she should not be 'used' in any practical way. Like a creature from another world, she is 'too dear' for earth. 'Dear' means 'cherished', but it also means 'expensive', or 'pricey'.

The overall effect of this short passage is complex: Juliet is linked to fire, and therefore passion and danger. Like a jewel, she is beautiful and valuable; like an 'Ethiop's' ear-ring, she is exotic; like an angel, she is too precious for earth. We understand that Romeo sees Juliet as seductive, beautiful, and pure of heart.

Hamlet, Shakespeare's most famous play, is about Hamlet, whose father, the King of Denmark, is murdered by Hamlet's uncle Claudius. After murdering his brother, Claudius marries Hamlet's mother and becomes king. Hamlet finds out the truth of the murder from his father's ghost, who asks Hamlet to avenge his murder. The play is about Hamlet's uncertain efforts to kill Claudius; it is also about his complex relationship with his mother. Here are some metaphorical passages taken from Hamlet. As usual, identify the 'metaphorical links'; figure out how they operate; consider the connotations/ associations of the metaphor.

1. *Angry with his mother and ex-girlfriend, Hamlet says of women in general,*

"God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another."

2. *The ghost of Hamlet's father speaks of where he has been:*

**"...I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze they young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end."
Like quills upon the fearful porcupine.**

3. *After not taking an opportunity to kill his uncle, Hamlet refers to himself:*

"I am pigeon-livered."

4. *Hamlet responds to friends who are trying to trick him into revealing his plans:*

**"Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me,
you cannot play upon me."**

5. *Disillusioned by what he knows, Hamlet thinks about the 'world' in general:*

**"...'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely."**

6. *Disgusted with his own cowardice, Hamlet contemplates suicide:*

**"To be or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them."**

IRONY #1: INTRODUCTION Irony is a complex idea. It operates on different levels, in different ways. In daily conversation, irony adds humour and colour to our words; in literature, irony creates complexity and makes subtle points. Before we look at a few categories of irony, let's consider irony in general.

Irony involves a *discrepancy*, or *incongruity*, either between words and meaning, or expectations and results. 'Verbal irony' is a simple form of irony. Imagine this scenario:

Scenario #1: *One day I buy a big truck that burns a lot of gas. My friend says, "Well I can see you're doing your part to help the environment."*

Something doesn't make sense here. My friend says I'm helping the environment, but he must know that big trucks burn lots of gas and DON'T help the environment. His words don't make literal sense; I have to assume he is speaking indirectly—that is, ironically. He really means the opposite: my truck will HURT the environment.

'*Literary irony*' (= *dramatic/structural irony*) generally involves an *incongruity* between what readers/characters expect, and what actually develops. It is more complex than verbal irony. Consider this summary of a famous short story:

Scenario #2: *A wealthy man feels he has a special destiny. He doesn't know what that destiny is, but the feeling is so strong that he avoids all serious commitments in order to be ready when it arrives. He doesn't take up a profession, get married, invest his money, or indulge in pleasure; he lives a frugal life and waits for his special destiny. One day he meets a woman who also senses that he has a special fate. They become close, but the man never proposes marriage; he doesn't want to be distracted when his destiny arrives. The woman accepts this. Together they wait. Years pass. The woman dies. The man, now old, visits her grave. Staring at her gravestone, he suddenly realizes that he loved the woman; at this moment he understands that his special destiny has already arrived: He is a man who never lived at all—a very special person with a very special fate, indeed. He falls on the grave in tears...*

[based on "The Beast in the Jungle" by Henry James]

The irony here is complex. The *discrepancy* exists between the 'special destiny' both protagonist and reader expect, and what actually arrives. The irony is sharpened because the man DOES have a special destiny; it's just not what he anticipated. The irony makes a point, and suggests a theme: people's grand dreams and illusions often distract them from what reality offers them.

Several Key Points re: Irony

A. **Irony depends on shared recognition.** In scenario #1 above, my friend doesn't mean exactly what his words say; he assumes I will recognize the irony. If I don't, I might respond: "Are you stupid? Big gas-burning trucks don't help the environment." This would kill the irony, and lead to a communication breakdown. For verbal irony to work, both speaker and listener must recognize it.

In literary irony, the shared recognition exists between writer and reader. In Scenario #2, the writer expects his readers to appreciate the 'ironic twist' at the end of the story—yes, the man does have a special fate, just not the special fate he expected—and the writer expects the reader to consider the significance of the ironic ending. A reader who doesn't see the irony in this story will miss a good deal (perhaps all) of the story's meaning. When it comes to literary irony, both writer and reader need to be 'on the same page'.

B. **Irony serves a purpose.** In example #1, my friend could just say, "Hey, your big truck is going to hurt the environment". When he says the opposite, I think: *No, you're wrong, big trucks don't help the environment.* This is my friend's exact point; his verbal irony pushes me to acknowledge the same conclusion as him. I may argue, but the irony has served its purpose.

In example #2, the 'ironic twist' at the end illustrates the theme of the story. Like the man, many of us feel special, and spend our lives expecting something fantastic to happen to us. Perhaps we ignore day-to-day details because they don't seem important enough. The ironic ending reminds the reader that one who dreams too big may never wake up to his real life. Equally, it suggests that it can be dangerous to get exactly what you wish for.....

In conclusion: **irony is not simply a decoration, or a joke: it serves a specific purpose.** If we miss irony in literature, we miss a good deal of meaning.

C. **Irony operates in context.** For irony to work, it must be recognized as irony, either in conversation, or in a literary work. Sometimes, the irony is obvious, sometimes subtle; in all cases, *it arises from context, and depends on that context.*

In example #1, we might say the context is a conversation between two friends. I know my friend is intelligent and aware of basic environmental issues; I understand the context, and 'catch' the irony quickly. In example #2, I need to see the whole arc of the story in order to catch the irony. The man's realization at the end is not ironic all by itself; it is ironic within the context of this man's life story: we must understand what he expects of his life in order to appreciate the cruel irony at the end.

IRONY #2: Verbal Irony vs. Sarcasm

- Verbal Irony: "The use of words to mean something very different from what they appear on the surface to mean."
- Sarcasm: "Mocking, contemptuous, or ironic language intended to convey scorn or insult."

Sarcasm is similar to irony: sarcastic words mean something different than what they say on the surface. We can, however, identify a *difference of intent* between irony and sarcasm. Imagine I get 0% on an exam. You say:

* ***"Wow, you're a real genius!"***

Clearly, your words mean the opposite of their 'surface meaning', and so they are ironic: I am definitely not a genius. The comment, however, seems more sarcastic than ironic: your purpose seems to be to mock and insult me, nothing more. *Verbal irony* tends to be more clever and meaningful. Imagine you respond to my 0% this way:

* ***"Well, it might be time to think about withdrawing your application for Harvard!"***

This too is ironic since your words don't mean what they appear on the surface to mean. You know I haven't really applied to Harvard. But the sarcastic edge is gone; rather than just pointing out that I'm too stupid to be a genius, your irony points out that I won't get into a good university unless I get better grades. This seems more like a true observation than a personal insult. I may even laugh at the 'Harvard' comment—after all, it's a bit silly for most of us to imagine we're going to Harvard. If I enjoy ironic conversation, I might want to 'extend' the irony. I could respond,

* ***"Good idea—then I think I'll buy a bunch of beer with all the tuition money I'll save. I really need to drown my sorrows."***

So: *Verbal irony* and *sarcasm* are both forms of irony since both express ideas incongruous with 'surface' meaning. But sarcasm tends to insult in a personal, sometimes cruel way. *Irony is subtler, often involves humour, and makes a point.*

Read and consider the following statements: Do they sound *'sarcastic'* or *'ironic'*? If ironic, what point does the irony make? [n.b. There aren't any 'right' answers here; sometimes the line between sarcasm and irony is not so clear, and depends on one's perceptions...]

1. *I trip over my own feet and fall. You say:*

- a) **"You're a real athlete, aren't you."**
- b) **"Are you sure you're ready for the Olympics?"**

2. *A poor person on Robson Street asks me for some money. I say:*

- a) **"Are you blind as well as broke? There's a bank machine right behind you."**
- b) **"Sure, and in view of the global economic downturn, I'll give you my very best interest rate."**

3. *The United States decides to invade Canada. I say:*

- a) **"Given America's recent financial performance, I'm not sure this is too promising for the Canadian economy."**
- b) **"I guess they got sick of invading countries that fight back."**

4. *Your spouse gives you a broom and tells you to clean up the house. You say:*

- a) **"Right away, boss, just don't hit me."**
- b) **"So when did the redistribution of labour become a priority in our household?"**

5. *Your investment adviser tells you he's lost all of your money. You say:*

- a) **"Given your brilliant advice, I'm not surprised."**
- b) **"Good news. Now I won't feel so guilty about having food on my table when so many others around the world are starving."**

6. *Your English teacher announces, "Everyone got 100% on the exam." You say:*

- a)
- b)

7. *The college president announces, "Tuition fees will increase 400%." You say:*

- a)
- b)

IRONY #3: Situational Irony

Although writers might create sarcastic characters, writers themselves are rarely sarcastic; however, they frequently employ irony to make points and add depth to their works. Sometimes the narrative 'voice' is ironic, as in Edith Wharton's famous short story, "*Roman Fever*". More frequently, writers use *situational irony* to shed light on characters, and reveal their underlying intentions. Here is a simple example of situational irony:

A Texas oil millionaire goes to inspect one of his many oil wells. As he's examining a well with his foreman, the huge oil drill malfunctions, a great stream of crude oil gushes up out of the well, and the millionaire slips, falls, and drowns in the oil.

The language is straightforward, but obviously the situation is ironic. Why? Because the source of the millionaire's wealth causes his death. This is unexpected, and incongruous; at the same time, it seems appropriate—many of us believe that excessive wealth is a sign of excessive greed. So although it's unexpected, the drowning of an oil baron in a pool of his own oil points toward a moral lesson: too much money can be a source of evil and misfortune. It also suggests that oil, a highly valuable commodity, is also a destructive force.

Situation B: *A lazy student named Jack has to write an English essay, so he hires a tutor. Jack tells the tutor he needs a good mark to pass the course, and the tutor writes an excellent essay for Jack, who is so pleased that he pays his tutor double and hands in the essay. Jack's teacher reads the first paragraph, shakes his head, and without reading any further, gives the paper an F. The essay is so good the teacher immediately knows someone as lazy as Jack couldn't have written it.*

The discrepancy between what Jack wants and what Jack gets creates the *situational irony* here. The irony is sharpened because on one level, he does get what he wants—an excellent essay. However, getting what he wants leads directly to what he doesn't want—a failing grade. The 'ironic twist' suggests that when we want something too desperately, we can engineer our own defeat.

Below you will find some 'situations'. Some are ironic, some or not. Decide which ones are, and be prepared to explain the irony.....

1. An armoured car carrying 5 million dollars in cash runs off a cliff and plunges into the ocean. Everyone inside drowns and the money is lost.
2. An armoured car carrying a million dollars in cash crashes into a van which is transporting a gang of bank robbers to court; the robbers survive the accident, kill the guards, get out of the van, steal the cash, and escape to the Bahamas, where they lead lives of luxury.
3. A fireman goes home after saving six people from a terrible house fire. He leaves the stove on and dies when his house goes up in flames.
4. A fireman goes home after saving six people from a burning house. That night, he dies of a heart attack in his sleep.
5. I want to give up teaching and become a journalist, so I take a journalism course at Langara College; it's really hard, but I get good marks. Afterwards, I have trouble getting a job as a journalist, and return to teaching.
6. John Smith gets really depressed and decides to commit suicide by jumping from a cliff into the ocean. Just before he jumps, a woman approaches and asks him for directions. They talk and then go for coffee. John falls in love, marries the woman, and lives happily ever after.
7. I buy an expensive battery-powered car because I want to help the environment. The day after buying the car, I get into a terrible accident; I'm okay, but the car is destroyed.
8. I buy an expensive battery powered car because I want to help the environment. The day after buying the car, a front-page story in the newspaper announces that lead in batteries causes four times more harm to the environment than gasoline exhaust. *[this example is not fact-based]*

IRONY #4: Dramatic ('Structural') Irony

Sometimes irony occurs within the 'arc' of an entire novel or play. We can call this *dramatic*, or '*structural*' irony. It is similar to 'situational irony', but broader in scope.

In order to understand dramatic irony, you need to keep in mind the overall plot structure. Here is a 'narrative arcs' loosely based on a story we often study in English 1101. (*n.b. I have altered names and a few details.*) Identify and explain the '**dramatic/structural**' irony.

A middle-aged married man who frequently has love affairs travels alone to a resort town. He is handsome and sophisticated, and often leaves his wife and children at home so he can 'have some fun'. At the resort, he notices a lovely young woman also traveling alone. He easily seduces her, and they have a romantic week. Soon, the man gets bored; the woman is too young and naïve for him, and he worries that perhaps she is falling in love with him. "That would be unfortunate," he thinks. When she has to leave he is relieved and satisfied. He has made one more 'conquest', without suffering any unpleasant consequences.

Back in his city, he returns to his regular life with renewed enjoyment. Life is good and he is happy. But after several weeks, he realizes he is still thinking about the young woman. Soon, he can't stop thinking about her; he suspects he loves her, and remembering how affectionate she was, imagines that she really loves him, too. He doesn't have her address, but he knows the name of the small town where she lives, and eventually becomes so desperate to see her that he travels there. On the second day, he notices her on the other side of the street: She is with a bearded man and two young children. He follows her, finds out where she lives, and the next day waits until she leaves the house alone. He approaches her and tells her he loves her and wants to marry her. She laughs and says,

"I didn't know you were so simple-minded. That was just a quick affair. We had some fun but it's over now, so please go away. As you can see, I'm a married woman."

FABLES, PARABLES and ALLEGORIES [+ a little Symbolism....]

Parables, fables, and allegories are easily confused with one another. Here are some of the differences between these closely related terms.

Fable: A fable is a brief story illustrating a moral. Fables often include talking animals or animated objects as the principal characters. They are briefer than parables, and are not explicitly religious or moral; they focus more on practical aspects of everyday life. Unlike allegories, fables are not 'symbolic'; the figures that appear do not represent or 'symbolize' something else. Rather, they teach a short lesson about life. The sixth century Greek writer Aesop is the most famous author of fables. One of the best known of his fables concerns a fox who attempts to get some grapes hanging from a high branch; he fails, and walks away, thinking: "Those grapes were probably too sour for me anyway." The lesson here is clear: *Don't feel bad about what you can't get.*

Parable: A parable is an anecdote or short narrative designed to reveal some religious principle, moral lesson or general truth. Rather than using abstract discussion, a parable teaches by telling a story with real occurrences. Parables are often associated with the teachings of Jesus Christ as recounted in the Bible. Well-known parables include the story of "The Prodigal Son" and "The Good Samaritan." Some non-religious works may serve as parables as well. Herman Melville's novel *Billy Budd* demonstrates that absolute good—such as the impressionable, naïve young sailor—may not co-exist with absolute evil—the villain Claggart.

Allegory: An allegory is longer and more involved than fables and parables. In a true allegory, virtually every element of the narrative has a meaning beyond the literal level of the story. In this sense, allegories could be called extended metaphors in which specific events and characters reflect a 'second level of meaning'. Allegories may revolve around religious, moral or even political issues. Probably the most famous allegory in English literature is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), in which the hero Everyman flees the City of Destruction. He travels through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, visits Vanity Fair, passes Doubting Castle, and finally arrives at the Celestial City. The allegory is Christian: it represents the journey of the human soul tempted by doubt and pride as it struggles toward the salvation waiting in heaven—'the Celestial City'. Although not 'pure' allegories, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and some of Flannery O'Connor's short stories are allegorical in nature.

Symbols and Symbolism: Most commonly, symbols are seemingly ordinary objects that convey a larger, 'non-literal' meaning within a literary work. Symbolism is the act of using the object in such a way. Symbols are not as common as students think; a 'true' symbol must be carefully developed by a writer, and will almost always play a central role in the story. In *Janus*, for example, Ann Beattie spends a lot of time describing Andrea's beloved bowl, which is central in the narrative; she carefully 'charges' the bowl with significance, without defining exactly what it means. In *Good Country People*, Flannery O'Connor makes Joy-Hulga's wooden leg central to the action, as well as reflective of the main characters' psychology: Joy-Hulga is as proud as a peacock of her wooden leg, and treats it like her 'soul'; the demonic Manly Pointer is sexually attracted to the leg, and eventually steals it the owner—perhaps as the devil steals souls from proud, self-deluded atheists? Definitely, the wooden leg symbolizes much more than a wooden leg.

In a sense, fables, parables and allegories are all 'symbolic' because they all refer to a larger meaning beyond the text; however, they rarely use symbols in a specifically literary way. In the story of the fox and the grapes, for example, neither the fox nor the grapes really 'symbolize' anything: they are not charged with special meaning. They are familiar items used to illustrate a common-sensical truth, or moral message.

To distinguish more clearly, let's take the Arab **fable** of the frog and the scorpion:

Fable: *A frog and a scorpion met one day on the bank of the River Nile. The scorpion asked the frog to carry him across the river on his back. Afraid of the scorpion, the frog refused until the scorpion promised not to sting him. Then they crossed the river, the scorpion on the frog's back. As soon as they reached the far bank, the scorpion stung the frog. "But you promised you wouldn't," croaked the frog as it lay dying. The scorpion was surprised: "Only a very silly frog could imagine that a few words would change my nature. I am a scorpion; what else can I do?"*

Fable to Parable: *If we turn the frog into a devout, righteous father and the scorpion into a careless, cruel son who promises to change his ways but doesn't, we might develop a short parable about the unchangeable wickedness of human nature.*

Parable to Allegory: *If we developed the plot of this short fable, introduced a few more characters, and turned the frog into a man named "Mr. I. M. Good" and the scorpion into a man named "Mr. Will Hurt", we might end up with an extended allegory about the evil lying in wait for the honest man.*