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Section II: An Introduction to Style

Figurative Language

Figurative Language

Descriptive language used to make comparisons and to employ the reader's own imagination. **Example:** See simile, metaphor, and personification.

Rhetoric

Carefully chosen words and phrases that combine to achieve artful and effective communication and even persuasion. **Example:** A political campaign speech.

Semantics

The study of meaning through signs, symbols, and words and how a person interprets these. **Example:** The sense and manner in which ideas are conveyed are both part of the semantics involved in communication.

Style

The characteristic and often perfected manner of writing by any given novelist, poet, or dramatist. **Example:** Hemingway's taut, disciplined, journalistic style came to identify and characterize all of his work as a writer.

Elements of Style: Figures of Speech

Figures of Speech

This term traditionally referred to such literary devices as simile, metaphor, and personification. Literary theorists today refer to figures of speech more in the context of rhetorical devices. **Example:** “He was one step beyond an open window when the light of the bomb was reflected, like a gigantic photographic flash, in the corridor” (24). From John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*.

Anachronism

An item or person that is “out of place” in relation to a time period. One type, *parachronism*, occurs when an object from ages past is inserted into a future time frame. **Example:** In a certain short-short story, an abacus is used in computer programming. A second type, *prochronism*, occurs when an object from the present or future appears in a historical setting. **Example:** In a novel about World War I, soldiers would listen to iPods in the trenches.

Anaphora

The repetition of a word or phrase at the very beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. **Example:** Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech, “I Have a Dream” uses that refrain to begin several lines, emphasizing the hope he was trying to instill.

Aphorism

A short, wise saying that portrays a general truth or idea held by many people. **Example:** “One man’s meat is another man’s poison.” Another example, from Nietzsche; “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”

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Apostrophe

A form of direct address spoken by a character to an inanimate object or a person who does not appear. **Example:** “Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him.” From Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

Archaism

The use of an older or obsolete word or phrase that is no longer recognized or popular in the culture. **Example:** “You bring me, tomorrow early, that file and them vittles” (food). From *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens.

Cliché

An overused and sometimes trite word or expression. **Example:** When George Orwell coined the term “Big Brother” in 1984, it was a new phrase; however, people now often use it to mean they are being watched.

Colloquialism

An expression that people may use in casual conversations but which is too informal or full of slang for proper English. **Example:** “But any kid with brains knows that there’ve been some changes in science since the days of old Mazer Rackham and the Victorious Fleet” (82). From Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game*.

Conceit

An extended metaphor or controlling image in a piece of literature. Often the conceit employs a unique image to create a relationship within the metaphor. **Example:** Many sonnets and love poems compare one’s love to a blossoming flower as the image or conceit.

Connotation

The implied and understood meaning of a phrase or expression which extends beyond the explicit dictionary definition. **Example:** An emotionally positive response is often attached to the adjective; but “scrawny” causes most people to think of an extremely skinny, unattractive person.

Denotation

The literal or dictionary meaning of a word, phrase, or clause. **Example:** A denotation of “writing” is the representation of ideas through a uniform, symbolic system of letters that form words and sentences.

Epithet

See listing in Section I, p. 4.

Euphemism

A word or phrase that, as a substitution, “softens the blow” of the direct meaning. **Example:** A friend might say that your neighbor has “passed away,” rather than telling you outright that the neighbor is dead.

Gallows Humor/Black Humor

Grotesque or morbid humor which is used to express the absurdity, cruelty, and insensitivity of the modern world. Ordinary characters or situations are exaggerated far beyond the limits of normal satire or irony. Black humor uses devices often associated with tragedy and is sometimes equated with tragic farce. **Example:** Slattery, talking to Ender in Card’s *Ender’s Game*: “I’m only fair-minded before and after battles” (207).



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Hyperbole

An overstatement or exaggeration that can be used for dramatic effect or to help paint a word picture. **Example:** “I’m dying of hunger.”

Idiom

An expression peculiar to a particular culture that conveys a meaning beyond its mere words. **Example:** After spending all of her money, a person might say that she is “flat broke.”

Invective

Harsh or abusive language. **Example:** “I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.” From Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*.

Lampoon

A written piece ridiculing or satirizing an individual group, institution, or set of ideas. **Example:** *Mad Magazine* is an extended lampoon that satirizes its featured material.

Malapropism

A ludicrous misuse of words. **Example:** Mark Twain’s characters Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn were masters of the malapropism. They jumbled words and meanings so that their speeches had comic effects.

Meiosis

An understatement used for ironic effect. **Example:** In Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio declares his mortal wounds merely “a scratch.”

Metaphor

A direct comparison of two unlike things without the use of “like” or “as.” A metaphor can create an effective word picture for the reader. An especially long metaphor is called an “extended” metaphor. **Example:** In *Lord of the Flies*, the boys in Jack’s tribe are called savages until that eventually becomes their label.

Mixed Metaphor

A pair or more of ineffective, descriptive comparisons that confuse the reader with their incompatibility and contradictory images. **Example:** Those snakes told us of our plans and stabbed us in the back. (student example)

Onomatopoeia

The use of words whose sounds seem to imitate the sound of the object or action being named. **Example:** The word “hiss” itself sounds like a snake moving its tongue. The word “splash” reverberates almost like the sound of something hitting water.

Oxymoron

A descriptive phrase that combines two contradictory terms to create a totally fresh image or idea. **Example:** Jumbo shrimp, working vacation, planned spontaneity. See <http://www.oxymoronlist.com/>

Paradox

A statement that appears to be absurd but which actually may bear truth. In literature, a paradox may also refer to a situation that seems to be contradictory—or both true and false. **Example:** In *The Pirates of Penzance*, the audience learns the paradox of Frederic’s

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birthday when told that a person's fifth birthday is the day he turns twenty; this paradox is true because of leap-year birthdays.

Parallelism

The use of symmetrical sentence structure or phrasing to create either an effect or a more telling comparison.

Example: Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, in which he writes: "The world will little note or long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."

Personification

A figure of speech in which an inanimate object or animal is given human qualities or characteristics. **Ex-**

ample: "...my thoughts hum in my brain..." from *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Remarque 210).

Pun

A play on words, often humorous, that builds on words which sound similar, yet have unrelated meanings.

Example: "I am a mender of bad soles," declares the cobbler in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

Rhetorical Question

A question posed to provoke thought rather than to generate an answer. This type of question may have an implied or obvious answer that the audience already knows. **Example:** "*To be or not to be*" *Hamlet* in Shakespeare's is a device to trigger deeper thought and is not a question to be answered.



Section II: An Introduction to Style

Sarcasm

The use of invectives or harsh terms to indicate weakness or fault. Sarcasm can be cutting and cynical and may be displayed by an action as well as by words.

Example: George Orwell uses sarcasm to chastise government in both *Animal Farm* and *1984*.

Simile

Indirect comparison between two unlike objects using the words “like” or “as”. The comparison helps create an effective word picture. **Example:** In John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, Dr. Fujii is “squeezed...like a morsel between two huge chopsticks” (11).

Synecdoche

A metaphor that presents a part of a person or item as used for the whole or the whole as used for a part.

Example: In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald refers to groups or classes of wealthy people as East Egg and West Egg, indicating where their communities of homes were located.

Trope

A word picture or figure of speech. **Example:** Similes, metaphors, metonymy, irony, synecdoche, personification, and hyperbole are all considered tropes.

Stylistic Techniques

Allusion

An author’s reference to a person, place, event, or piece of literature which he expects his audience to recognize or understand. **Example:** In John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, the author assumes his readers’ familiarity

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with the Biblical flood and the Moses story, mentioned at the end of the book.

Caricature

A representation of a character in which, in literature, his or her characteristics are exaggerated to produce a comic effect. **Example:** In Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the "Duke" is a caricature designed to satirize and create humor.

Consciousness, Stream of

A style of writing in which the author uses interior monologue to show how the mind works. The unbroken flow of a character's thoughts and perceptions are revealed either directly (first-person narrative) or indirectly through free-wheeling discourse. **Example:** See James Joyce's *Ulysses* ("Stream of consciousness," Modernism, 63).

Epiphany

In literature, a sudden revelation that illuminates meaning or understanding—an "aha" moment. **Example:** At a socialist rally, Jurgis Rudkis finally realizes that his hard work will never be rewarded in Sinclair's *The Jungle*.

Foreshadowing

A hint of what is going to happen next. **Example:** In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the speech by Friar Lawrence about the mingling of good and evil foreshadows the coming entanglements in the play.



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In Media Res

A Latin expression that means that the story actually starts in the middle of the action. **Example:** Since the *Odyssey* starts *in Media Res*, with Odysseus imprisoned, an audience already familiar with the character Odysseus can forego mention of his background and go to the heart of the action.

Irony

A literary device in which action or language stands in contrast to what appears to be true or expected. **Example:** “Dr. Fujii hardly had time to think that he was dying before he realized that he was alive...” (11). From John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*.

Types of Irony

Cosmic Irony

A literary device that contrasts what a character attempts to become and what actually happens, due to forces of the universe. **Example:** When protagonist Henry in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* thinks he has survived he instead is suddenly “war” confronted with the true attack or second assault.

Dramatic Irony

Also called Tragic Irony, this occurs when what a character says or believes contradicts what the audience knows to be true. In these circumstances, a character’s words and actions have one meaning for the character and an entirely different meaning for the audience. **Example:** In Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, when

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John Proctor “forgets” the specific Commandment against adultery, his audience senses the dramatic irony of his Freudian omission.

Situational Irony

A literary device in which the expected action and the actual action are in direct contrast, usually due to forces out of the control of the characters. **Example:** Some of the situations that occur with Willie Loman in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* are, lamentably, ironic.

Structural Irony

This occurs when a naïve protagonist holds a view or outlook that differs from the one the author holds. The reader will usually feel intellectually superior to the protagonist, and empathy for the hero often suffers. **Example:** In *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift uses structural irony effectively when his naïve narrator relates tales and judgments of people whom he encounters through the skewed lens of conservative morality/pride.

Verbal Irony

A figure of speech in which a character says one thing but actually means the opposite. Sarcasm often falls into the classification of verbal irony. **Example:** When Hamlet says, “I am too much i’ the sun,” he is using both a pun (sun/son) and verbal irony.

Melodrama

A drama of any type that relies on stereotypes or two-dimensional characters whom the audience recognizes.

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An exaggeration of emotions, behaviors, and events is often evident in a melodrama. **Example:** Melodramas often use a serialized story line, damsels in distress, and characters who are clearly good or evil, as in the early silent film, “The Perils of Pauline”.

Pathos

Pathos is the manner in which a play or story’s action causes the audience to feel pity for a character. In drama, it occurs mainly in tragedy, but can be found in comedy, too. **Example:** Readers often come to sympathize with, and then pity, Jonas in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, as more and more implications of Elsewhere are revealed.

Poetic Diction

A manner of speaking or expression that is used mainly in poetry and not in casual conversation. **Example:** William Wordsworth’s poem, “*Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*,” provides a classic example of the elevated language of some poetry.

Poetic License

The privilege of a writer to take liberties with grammatical rules and structure for desired poetic effects. **Example:** e. e. Cummings is a poet who has made the most of the freedoms of poetic license.

Theme

The overriding or dominant idea in a story that is a universal statement about humanity. The theme is the central meaning in a piece of writing and the message that the author wishes the audience to *understand* and *take away*. Theme may be represented in an indirect

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fashion, and differing devices may be used to hint at theme: the title, certain quotes, a repeated observation, a recurring motif. **Example:** Justice, dignity, and freedom are all themes in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

Thematic Connections

Archetype

A pattern from which copies can be made or, in literature, a symbolic character: the hero, scapegoat, outcast, ne'er-do-well, etc. The heroic quest, as plot, is an archetype that adds depth to the literature. **Example:** Bilbo Baggins in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* represents the archetype of the reluctant hero on his journey.

Imagery

A word picture or sensory impression created by a writer's adept choice of words. **Example:** In *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair is literally able to sicken his readers with the raw imagery he employs in his descriptions of conditions within Chicago's meatpacking plants.

Motif

A recurrent and conspicuous thematic element. **Example:** In Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, one motif is that of dishonesty. Early in the novel, just after the intercalary exchange, Ender thinks, "Sometimes lies were more dependable than the truth" (2).

Symbol



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The literary device of using a person, object, or action to stand for something else—often an abstract idea. **Example:** In many pieces of literature, the dove as a universal symbol represents peace. In *Moby Dick*, a constructed symbol—devised by author Herman Melville to convey a specific meaning—is the white whale as his symbol of evil.

Thesis

The essential argument that a writer presents in a work—usually in a work of nonfiction. When perceptible in fiction, it generally “drives” the piece of literature. **Example:** In Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, the author’s thesis is that the Chicago meatpacking industry exploits its poor and desperate immigrant workers and that the government should intervene on their behalf.

Tone

The atmosphere created by a writer regarding either his subject or his audience. A by-product of the author’s attitude, the tone of a literary work can range from defiant to accommodating. **Example:** A tone of subtle rage is established by Art Spiegelman, author of the thought-provoking *Maus I* and *Maus II*.



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