

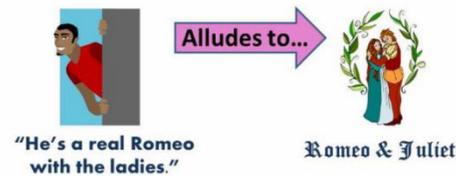
## Literary Devices, Techniques and Figures of Speech

Reading passages (both long and short) include questions about the authors' use of literary techniques and figures of speech—tools authors use to convey meaning or to lend depth and richness to their writing.

The following list contains 25 common literary techniques and figures of speech. The most useful ones have been underlined:

**Alliteration:** The repetition of similar sounds, usually consonants, at the beginning of words. For example, Robert Frost's poem "Out, out—" contains the **alliterative phrase** "sweet-scented stuff."

**Allusion:** A reference within a literary work to a historical, literary, or biblical character, place, or event. For example, the title of William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* **alludes to** a line from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.



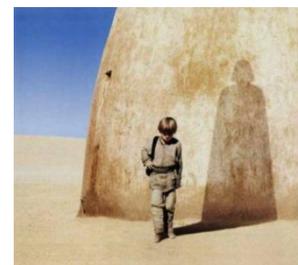
**Assonance:** The repetition of vowel sounds in a sequence of nearby words. For example, the line "The monster spoke in a low mellow tone" (from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Lotus-Eaters") contains assonance in its repetition of the "o" sound.

**Caricature:** A description or characterization that exaggerates or distorts a character's prominent features, usually for purposes of mockery. For example, a **cartoon** of a gaunt Abraham Lincoln with a giant top hat, a very scraggly beard, and sunken eyes could be considered a caricature.

**Cliché:** An expression, such as "turn over a new leaf," that has been **used and reused** so many times that it has lost its expressive power.

**Epiphany** [ih-pif-uh-nee]: A sudden, powerful, and often spiritual or life changing realization that a character experiences in an otherwise ordinary moment. For example, the main character in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* **has an epiphany** during a walk by the sea.

**Foreshadowing:** An author's deliberate use of hints or suggestions to give a **preview of events** or themes that do not develop until later in the narrative. Images such as a storm brewing or a crow landing on a fence post often foreshadow ominous developments in a story.



**Hyperbole** [hi-pur-buh-lee]: An excessive overstatement or conscious exaggeration of fact. "I've told you that a million times already" is a **hyperbolic** statement.

**Idiom:** A common expression that has acquired a meaning that differs from its literal meaning, such as "It's raining cats and dogs" or "That cost me an arm and a leg."

**Imagery:** Language that brings to mind **sensory impressions**. For example, in the *Odyssey*, Homer creates a powerful image with his description of “rosy-fingered dawn.”

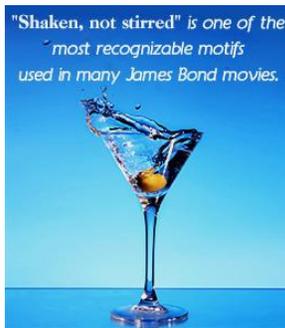
**Irony:** Broadly speaking, irony is a device that emphasizes the contrast between the way things are expected to be and the way they actually are. A historical example of irony might be the fact that people in medieval Europe believed bathing would harm them when in fact not bathing led to the unsanitary conditions that caused the bubonic plague.

**Metaphor:** The comparison of one thing to another that **does not use the terms “like” or “as.”** A metaphor from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*: “Life is but a walking shadow.”

**Simile** [*sim-uh-lee*]: A comparison of two things through the use of the words **like** or **as**. The title of Robert Burns’s poem “My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose” is a simile.

SIMILES	METAPHORS
• Her heart is like gold.	• Her heart is gold.
• The world is like a stage.	• The world is a stage.
• He eats like a pig.	• He is a pig.
• You are like a rock.	• You are a rock.
• Your eyes are like sunshine.	• You are my sunshine.
• Poor as dirt.	• Sea of sand.

**Motif:** A **recurring** structure, contrast, or other device that develops a literary work’s major themes (see below). For example, shadows and darkness are a motif in Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, a novel that contains many gloomy scenes and settings.



**Onomatopoeia:** The use of words like pop, hiss, or boing, in which the spoken sound resembles the actual sound.

**Oxymoron:** The association of two terms that seem to **contradict** each other, such as “same difference” or “wise fool.”

**Paradox:** A statement that seems contradictory on the surface but often expresses a deeper truth. One example is the line “All men destroy the things they love” from Oscar Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol.”

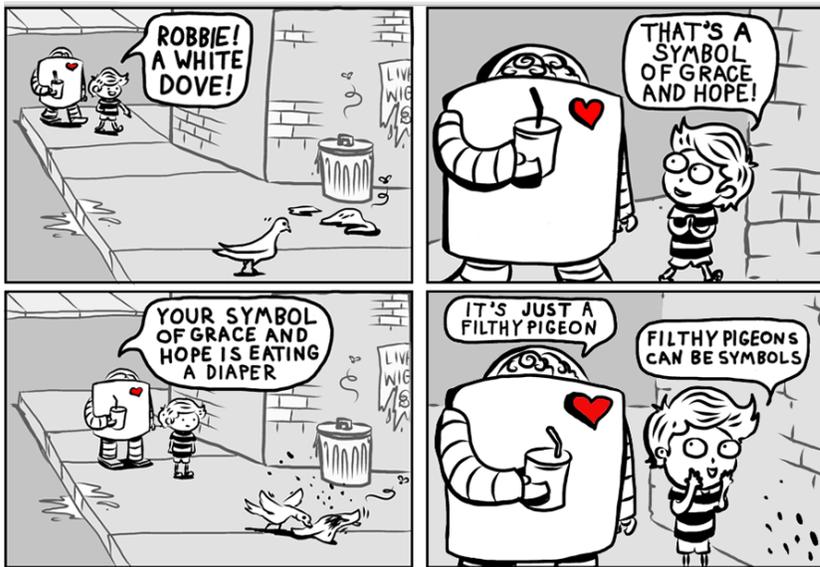
**Personification:** The use of **human characteristics** to describe animals, things, or ideas. Carl Sandburg’s poem “Chicago” describes the city as “Stormy, husky, brawling / City of the Big Shoulders.”



**Pun:** A **play on words** that uses the similarity in sound between two words with distinctly different meanings. For example, the title of Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a pun on the word earnest, which means serious or sober, and the name “Ernest.”

**Rhetorical question:** A question asked not to elicit an actual response but to make an impact or call attention to something. “Will the world ever see the end of war?” is an example of a rhetorical question.

**Sarcasm:** A form of verbal irony (see above) in which it is obvious from context and tone that the speaker means the opposite of what he or she says. Saying “That was graceful” when someone trips and falls is an example of sarcasm.



**Symbol:** An object, character, figure, place, or color used to represent an abstract idea or concept. For example, the two roads in Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” symbolize the choice between two paths in life.

**Thesis:** The central argument that an author makes in a work. For

example, the thesis of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* is that Chicago meat packing plants subject poor immigrants to horrible and unjust working conditions, and that the government must do something to address the problem.

**Tone:** The general atmosphere created in a story, or the author’s or narrator’s attitude toward the story or the subject. For example, the tone of the Declaration of Independence is determined and confident.

**Theme:** A fundamental, universal idea explored in a literary work. The struggle to achieve the American Dream, for example, is a common theme in 20th-century American literature. “Oppression of women”, “Facing Reality”, “Injustice”, “Desire for Power”, “Love”, “Friendship”, “War” or “Death” are other examples of themes.



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