

## Introductory Rhetorical Devices for Honors American Literature

*Rhetorical device—Particular use of word patterns, styles, and literary concepts used to clarify, make associations, and focus the writing in a piece of literature.*

**Allusion**—A figure of speech which makes brief, even casual reference to a historical or literary figure, event, or object to create a resonance in the reader or to apply a symbolic meaning to the character or object of which the allusion consists. For example, in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the surname of the protagonist, George Milton, is an allusion to John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*, since by the end of the novel, George has lost the dream of having a little ranch of his own to share with his friend Lennie.

**Analogy**—Comparison of two things that are alike in some respects. *Metaphors* and *similes* are both types of analogies.

**Aphorism**—A concise statement designed to make a point or illustrate a commonly held belief. The writings of Benjamin Franklin contain many aphorisms, such as "Early to bed and early to rise/Make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

**Catharsis** Meaning "purgation," catharsis describes the release of the emotions of pity and fear by the audience at the end of a tragedy. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the importance of catharsis. The audience faces the misfortunes of the protagonist, which elicit pity and compassion. Simultaneously, the audience also confronts the failure of the protagonist, thus receiving a frightening reminder of human limitations and frailties. Ultimately, however, both these negative emotions are purged, because the tragic protagonist's suffering is an affirmation of human values rather than a despairing denial of them.

**Colloquialism**—Ordinary language; the vernacular. For example, depending on where in the United States you live, a sandwich is called a sub, a grinder, or a hero.

**Delayed sentence**—A sentence that withholds its main idea until the end. For example: Just as he bent to tie his shoe, a car hit him.

**Diction**—An author's choice of words to convey a tone or effect.

**Dramatic irony:** Dramatic irony creates a discrepancy between what a character believes or says and what the reader or audience member knows to be true. Tragic irony is a form of dramatic irony found in tragedies such as *Oedipus the King*, in which Oedipus searches for the person responsible for the plague that ravishes his city and ironically ends up hunting himself.

**Epiphany**—A sudden or intuitive insight or perception into the reality or essential meaning of something usually brought on by a simple or common occurrence or experience.

**Euphemism**—Substitution of a milder or less direct expression for one that is harsh or blunt. For example, using "passed away" for "dead."

**Foil**—A person or thing that makes another seem better by contrast.

**Foreshadow**—To hint at or present things to come in a story or play.

**Hyperbole**—An overstatement characterized by exaggerated language.

**Imagery**—Sensory details in a work; the use of figurative language to evoke a feeling, call to mind an idea, or describe an object. Imagery involves any or all of the five senses.

**Irony:** verbal, dramatic, and situational—A situation or statement characterized by significant difference between what is expected or understood and what actually happens or is meant. Irony is frequently humorous, and can be sarcastic when using words to imply the opposite of what they normally mean.

**Isocolon**—Parallel structure in which the parallel elements are similar not only in grammatical structure, but also in length. For example, "An envious heart makes a treacherous ear" (Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston).

**Juxtaposition**—Placing of two items side by side to create a certain effect, reveal an attitude, or accomplish some other purpose.

**Malapropism:** a ludicrous misuse of words that sound alike

**Mood**—The feeling or ambience resulting from the tone of a piece as well as the writer/narrator's attitude and point of view. The effect is created through descriptions of feelings or objects that establish a particular feeling such as gloom, fear, or hope.

**Oxymoron** A condensed form of paradox in which two contradictory words are used together, as in "sweet sorrow" or "original copy."

**Parallelism**—Recurrent syntactical similarity where several parts of a sentence or several sentences are expressed alike to show that the ideas in the parts or sentences equal in importance. It also adds balance, rhythm, and clarity to the sentence. For example, "I have always sought but never found the perfect painting for that wall."

**Situational irony**—This exists when there is an incongruity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens due to forces beyond human comprehension or control. The suicide of the seemingly successful main character in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Richard Cory" is an example of situational irony.

**Symbolism**—A person, place, thing, event, or pattern in a literary work that designates itself and at the same time figuratively represents something else. The use of one object to suggest another hidden, object or idea.

**Tone**—The attitude a literary work takes towards its subject and theme.

**Verbal irony**—Verbal irony is a figure of speech that occurs when a person says one thing but means the opposite. Sarcasm is a strong form of verbal irony that is calculated to hurt someone through, for example, false praise.