Syntax

Syntax Definition

Syntax is a set of rules in a language. It dictates how words from different parts of speech are put together in order to convey a complete thought.

Syntax and Diction

Syntax and <u>diction</u> are closely related. Diction refers to the choice of words in a particular situation, while syntax determines how the chosen words are used to form a sentence. More often than not, adopting a complex diction means a complex syntactic structure of sentences, and vice versa. In combination, syntax and diction help writers develop tone, mood, and <u>atmosphere</u> in a text, along with evoking readers' interest.

Examples of Syntax in Literature

Syntax in Poetry

The general word order of an English sentence is Subject+Verb+Object. In poetry, however, the word order may be shifted to achieve certain artistic effects, such as producing rhythm or melody in the lines, achieving emphasis, and heightening connection between two words. The unique syntax used in poetry makes it different from prose. Let us consider the following examples of syntax:

Example #1: Beyond Decoration (By P. J. Kavanagh)

In casual conversations, we can simply say, "I cannot go out" to convey our inability to go out. P. J. Kavanagh's poem *Beyond Decoration* does not rely on merely stating a prosaic "I cannot go out." Rather, he shifts the syntax

and says "Go out I cannot," which lays a much stronger emphasis on the inability to go out conveyed by the word "cannot."

Example #2: Lycidas (By John Milton)

Similarly, John Milton shifts words in his poems frequently. Let us analyze lines from his poem *Lycidas*:

"Thee, Shepherd, thee the woods and desert caves, With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown, And all their echoes mourn"

The modified word order in the above lines is Object+Subject+Subject Complement+Verb.

Syntax in Prose

Syntax affects the nature of a prose text as well. It enhances its meanings, and contributes toward its tone. Quickness, decisiveness, and speed are added to a text by using short phrases, clauses, and sentences. Whereas, in a text where the subject matter is serious, requiring contemplation, long, convoluted sentences are used to slow down the pace of a prose text. The two syntax examples below show a distinct use of syntax:

Example #3: The Joy Luck Club (By Amy Tan)

"That night I sat on Tyan-yu's bed and waited for him to touch me. But he didn't. I was relieved."

Here, Amy Tan uses short sentences to communicate in a powerful and concise manner.

Example #4: A Farewell to Arms (By Ernest Hemingway)

"They left me alone and I lay in bed and read the papers awhile,

decorations and then reached down and brought up the bottle of Cinzano and held it straight up on my stomach, the cool glass against my stomach, and took little drinks making rings on my stomach from holding the bottle there between drinks, and watched it get dark outside over the roofs of the town."

Ernest Hemingway uses long and complex structures to emphasize the laziness of his <u>character</u>.

Syntax in Shakespeare

Writing all of his plays and sonnets in iambic <u>pentameter</u>, Shakespeare habitually reversed the general order of English sentences by placing verbs at the ends of the sentences.

Example #5: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

"What light from yonder window breaks?"

Instead of using the common expression, "What light breaks from yonder window," Shakespeare emphasized his meaning by using different syntax.

Example #6: Richard III (By William Shakespeare)

In *Richard III*, Shakespeare deliberately reverses the word order of a sentence, turning a common description: "And all the clouds that lowered upon our house buried in the deep bosom of the ocean," into:

"And all the clouds that lower'd upon our house in the deep bosom of the ocean buried."

Function of Syntax

To convey meaning is one of the main functions of syntax. In literature, writers utilize syntax and diction to achieve certain artistic effects, like mood, and tone. Like diction, syntax aims to affect the readers as well as