

Metonymy

Metonymy Definition

Metonymy is a [figure of speech](#) that replaces the name of a thing with the name of something else with which it is closely associated. We can come across examples of metonymy both from literature and in everyday life.

Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Metaphor

Metonymy is often confused with another figure of speech called “[synecdoche](#).” These devices resemble one another, but are not the same. Synecdoche refers to a thing by the name of one of its parts. For example, calling a car “a wheel” is a synecdoche, as a part of a car – the “wheel” – stands for the whole car.

In a metonymy, on the other hand, the word we use to describe another thing is closely linked to that particular thing, but is not a part of it. For example, the word “crown” is used to refer to power or authority is a metonymy. It is not a part of the thing it represents.

Metonymy is also different from a [metaphor](#), which draws resemblance between two different things. For instance, in the sentence, “You are sunlight and I moon,” (*Sun and Moon* by Miss Saigon), sunlight and the moon, and humans are quite different things without any association. However, metaphor attempts to describe one thing in terms of another based on a supposed similarity.

Metonymy, however, develops a relation on the grounds of close association, as in “The White House is concerned about terrorism.” The *White House* here represents the people who work in it.

Examples of Metonymy in Everyday Life

We use metonymy frequently in our everyday life. For a better understanding, let us observe a few metonymy examples:

“England decides to keep check on immigration.” (*England* refers to the government.)

“The pen is mightier than the sword.” (*Pen* refers to written words, and *sword* to military force.)

“The Oval Office was busy in work.” (The *Oval Office* is a metonymy, as it stands for people who work in the office.)

“Let me give you a hand.” (*Hand* means help.)

Examples of Metonymy in Literature

Example #1: *Julius Caesar* (By William Shakespeare)

The given lines are from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Act I:

“Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your **ears**.”

Mark Anthony uses “ears” to say that he wants the people present to listen to him attentively. It is a metonymy because the word “ears” replaces the concept of paying attention.

Example #2: *Gone with the Wind* (By Margaret Mitchell)

This line is from Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone with the Wind*:

“I’m mighty glad **Georgia** waited till after Christmas before it secedes or it would have ruined the Christmas parties.”

Scarlett uses the word “Georgia” to point out everything that makes up the state: its citizens, politicians, and the government. It is a metonymy extremely common in the modern world, where the name of a country or state refers to a whole nation and its government. Thus, it renders brevity to the ideas.

Example #3: *Out, Out* (By Robert Frost)

These lines are taken from *Out, Out*, by Robert Frost:

“As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The **life from spilling**“

In these lines, the expression “The life from spilling” is a metonymy that refers to the spilling of blood. It develops a link between life and blood. The loss of too much blood means loss of life.

Example #4: *Yet Do I Marvel* (By Countee Cullen)

These lines are from Countee Cullen’s poem *Yet Do I Marvel*:

“The little buried mole continues blind,
Why **flesh** that mirror Him must someday die...”

Here, Cullen uses “flesh” to represent humans, and questions God about why we have to die when we are created in His likeness.

Example #5: *Lycidas* (By John Milton)

These lines are from *Lycidas*, written by John Milton:

“But now my **oat** proceeds,
And listens to the herald of the sea
That came in Neptune’s plea,
He asked the waves, and asked the felon winds,
What hard mishap hath doomed this gentle swain?”

In the above-mentioned lines, John Milton uses “oat” for a musical instrument made out of an oat stalk. Thus, “oat” represents the song that the poet is composing next to the ocean.

Function of Metonymy

Generally, metonymy is used in developing literary [symbolism](#), meaning it

using metonymy, texts exhibit deeper or hidden meanings, thus drawing readers' attention. In addition, the use of metonymy helps achieve conciseness. For instance, "Rifles were guarding the gate" is more concise than "The guards with rifles in their hands were guarding the gate."

Furthermore, metonymy, like other [literary devices](#), is employed to add a poetic color to words to make them come to life. The simple ordinary things are described in a creative way to insert this "life" factor to literary works.