

Epithet

Epithet Definition

Epithet is a descriptive literary device that describes a place, a thing, or a person in such a way that it helps in making its characteristics more prominent than they actually are. Also, it is known as a “by-name,” or “descriptive title.”

One can find many examples of epithet, many of which were Shakespeare’s own coinages, in Shakespeare’s works. For example:

“Thou mad mustachio **purple-hued maltworms!** (*Henry IV*)

“Death lies on her like an **untimely frost**. Upon the **sweetest flower** of all the field...” (*Romeo and Juliet*).

Types of Epithet

Kenning as Epithet

Kenning examples may also be considered as epithet examples.

Kenning is a type of an epithet, which is a two-word phrase that describes an object by employing metaphors.

The Fixed Epithet

Fixed epithets are found in epic poetry that involves the repetitive use of a phrase or word for the same object. Such as in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the wife is described as “prudent,” Odysseus himself as “many-minded,” and their son Telemachus as “sound-minded.”

Argumentative Epithet

Expert orators use argumentative epithets. Short arguments use this type of epithet to give hints.

Epithet used as Smear Word

An epithet used as a smear word means a derogatory word or name for someone or something.

Misuse of Epithets

Contemporary writers and speakers take extra care when they use epithets. They do not want to misuse this device and be accused of using racial or abusive epithets.

Examples of Epithet in Literature

Example #1: *Brendon Hills* (A. E. Housman)

“Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the **coloured** counties,
And hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.”

Here, “coloured” is an epithet used to describe the pleasant and beautiful spring season in those countries where the poet wishes to enjoy his beloved’s company.

Example #2: *Beauty and Beauty* (By Rupert Brooke)

“The earth is **crying-sweet**,
And **scattering-bright** the air,
Eddying, dizzying, closing round,
With **soft and drunken laughter...**”

In this excerpt, the description of the air and earth is enhanced by the usage of epithets: “crying-sweet,” “scattering-bright,” and “soft and drunken laughter.” These epithets help in developing [imagery](#) in the minds of readers.

Example #3: *Ulysses* (By James Joyce)

“God! he said quietly. Isn’t the sea what Algy calls it: **a great sweet mother?** The **snot-green sea**. The **scrotum-tightening sea!**”

I must teach you. You must read them in the original. Thalatta!
Thalatta! She is our great sweet mother...”

In this passage, Joyce uses several epithets to describe the sea. These epithets include “a great sweet mother,” “snot-green sea,” and “scrotum-tightening sea.”

Example #4: *In Blue Evening* (By Rupert Brooke)

“My restless blood now lies **a-quiver**,
Knowing that always, exquisitely,
This **April twilight on the river**
Stirs anguish in the heart of me...”

Brooke makes use of epithets (“a-quiver,” and “April twilight on the river”) to describe the anguish and agitation he feels deep inside him.

Example #5: *The Odyssey* (By Homer)

“I’ve come,
As you surmise, with comrades on a ship,
Sailing across the **wine-dark** sea to men
Whose [style](#) of speech is very different...”

In these lines, the phrase “wine-dark” is used as an epithet in order to explain the color of the sea. This epithet enhances the description of the color of the sea.

Example #6: *In Lycidas* (By John Milton)

“What time the **gray-fly** winds her sultry horn,
Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold
A sheep-hook, or have learn’d aught else the least
That to the faithful herdman’s art belongs!”

Milton employs epithets (“gray-fly,” and “blind mouths”) in this excerpt, describing first insects, and later referring to the desire of feeding the mouths.

Function of Epithet

With the use of epithets, writers are able to describe their characters and settings more vividly, in order to give richer meanings to the text. Since they are used as a literary tool, epithets help in making the description of someone or something broader and hence easier to understand. With the help of epithets, writers and poets develop suitable images in fewer words. Besides, the metaphorical use of epithets helps in making poetry and [prose](#) vibrant and strong.