Antiphrasis

Definition of Antiphrasis

Antiphrasis originated from the Greek word *antiphrasis*, which means "opposite word." Antiphrasis is a figurative speech in which a phrase or word is employed in a way that is opposite to its literal meaning, in order to create an ironic or comic effect. In simple words, it is the use of phrases or words in their opposite sense from the real meaning.

The following is an example of antiphrasis:

> "Yes, I killed him. I killed him for money – and a woman – and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman. **Pretty**, isn't it…" (*Double Indemnity*, by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler).

Here, the speaker is making an ironic statement by using the opposite sense of the word "pretty." He has committed murder, yet he describes his act "pretty."

Examples of Antiphrasis in Literature

Example #1: *Home to Harmony* (By Philip Gulley)

> "Owen would just smile and eat his eggs, and maybe reach over and slap Ernie's back and say, 'That's real funny, Ernie. You're **pretty clever**.' All the while thinking to himself, you moron. What do you know? … Which, of course, he couldn't say out loud. He could think it, but he couldn't say it. When you're a public figure in a small town, you have to treat people with dignity, even Ernie Matthews …"

In this example, Owen is mocking Ernie Matthews. He comments that Ernie is "pretty clever," but what he really thinks deep inside him is the complete opposite to the literal meaning of the phrase.

Example #2: *Filthy Rich* (By Dorothy Samuels)

> "I was awakened by the **dulcet tones** of Frank, the morning doorman, alternately yelling my name, ringing my doorbell, and pounding on my apartment door ..."

Here, the real meaning of the phrase "dulcet tones" means *melodious tones.* In this particular situation, it is used in its opposite meaning. The speaker is trying to use irony to indicate that the doorman irritates him early in the morning by yelling, ringing the bell, and knocking on his door.

Example #3: *Oyster Blues* (By Michael McClelland)

> "He looked like a Vulcan fresh emerged from his forge, a **misshapen giant** not quite sure of how to maneuver in this bright new world ... His real name, the name given to him by his youthful mother before she abandoned him in a Brooklyn orphanage, was Thomas Theodore Puglowski, but his friends all called him **Tiny** ... At least, Tiny supposed, they would if he had any friends ..."

In this excerpt, the writer first describes a character named Thomas Theodore Puglowski, as "a misshapen giant," and then uses the word "tiny." Antiphrasis examples like this are meant to convey sarcasm and create humorous effect.

Example #4: *Julius Caesar* (By William Shakespeare)

> CASSIUS:
> "I did mark how he did shake ... tis true *this god* did shake ... His

In these lines, Cassius, in spite of knowing the worldly flaws of Caesar, makes an ironic remark and calls him "this god" for comic and ironic effect.

Example #5: *The Unknown Citizen* (By W. H. Auden)

"Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went.
He was married and added *five children to the population*,
Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation.
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard …"

This is an ironic poem based upon the modern form of government, which appreciates those citizens who conform to its rules, without considering whether an individual citizen is happy and free or not.

Function of Antiphrasis

Like other rhetorical devices, antiphrasis also brings about additional meanings to a text and situation. The use of opposite meanings of situations and statements in literature draws readers' interest. Besides, it makes the literary piece of writing more captivating, and helps the readers make use of their own thoughts, and understand the underlying meaning of the words and phrases. It is also frequently employed in everyday situations and expressions. Furthermore, it brings the literary piece of writing closer to real life.