

Dichotomy

Definition of Dichotomy

Dichotomy is from the Greek word *dichotomia*, which means “*dividing in two*.” Dichotomy is a literary technique that divides a thing into two equal and contradictory parts, or between two opposing groups. In literary works, writers use this technique for creating conflicts in their stories and plays. Its common examples in literature are good and evil, soul and body, real and imaginary, heaven and hell, male and female, and savage and civilized, among others. Often, dichotomy appears in a single [character](#); however, sometimes writers use separate characters for representing opposing ideas.

Use of Dichotomy in Everyday Speech

We need to improve infrastructure of this country; therefore, we will have to raise taxes.

He is simple, yet strangely entangled in intuition.

The income of this company is increasing; while its revenue, on the other hand, is decreasing.

U.S. society claims to be the most affluent society in the world, but still there is a clear demarcation between rich and poor.

Examples of Dichotomy in Literature

Example #1: *Doctor Faustus* (By Christopher Marlowe)

Good Angel: “O Faustus! lay that damned book [aside](#),
And gaze not upon it lest it tempt thy soul.”

Evil Angel: “Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art,
Wherein all Nature’s treasure is contain’d ...”

Good Angel: “Sweet Faustus, think of Heaven, and heavenly things.”

Evil Angel: “No, Faustus, think of honour and of wealth.”

This is the most notable example of dichotomy, where good and bad angels represent two parts of Faustus’s consciousness. Good angel asks Faustus to repent, and ensures his path to heaven; while bad angel asks him to seek power, lust, and knowledge that would lead to eternal damnation.

Example #2: *Heart of Darkness* (By Joseph Conrad)

Conrad has employed different dichotomies in his novel *Heart of Darkness*, such as light versus dark, turmoil versus calmness, and savagery versus civilization. In this story, the most significant dichotomy is savagery and civilization, as in the novel the imperialistic powers are of the view that they are representing civilization, while the natives are symbolizing savagery.

However, as the story progresses, the civilized imperialistic powers are engaged in brutality against the locals. Kurtz himself presents an example of dichotomy as, though he is a modern civilized man, he becomes savage and brutal while living among savages. He realizes this in the end saying, “*The horror...the horror.*”

Example #3: *As You Like It* (William Shakespeare)

William Shakespeare opens his play, *As You Like It*, by providing a dichotomy of city versus country life, where the pastoral mood depends on this [contrast](#). In Act I, Scene I of the play, Orlando talks about life’s injustices with Oliver, and complains by saying that he “*know[s] no wise remedy how to avoid it.*”

When later in this scene, Charles shows a relation between Duke Senior’s whereabouts and his followers, the remedy becomes clear as he says:

“... in the forest of Ardenne ... many young gentlemen ... fleet the

Many people heal in the dense forest, lovers unite, and duke returns to his throne. However, Shakespeare reminds his readers that life is not permanent in Ardenne. As the characters get ready to move back to the court, the author does not favor country life over city life. Instead, he suggests a necessary and delicate balance between these two sides.

Example #4: *Beowulf* (By Anonymous)

You can find a perfect example of dichotomy in the old English poem, *Beowulf*. This one expounds upon the [theme](#) of good versus evil, where Beowulf is a good character, and three monsters are evil characters. Beowulf is a larger-than-life personality, who kills Grendel, his mother, as well as the dragon. As a descendent of Cain, Grendel is evil, selfish, and strives for personal gain. Beowulf is a triumphant hero, who fights for others, serves them, and defends them.

This poem also contains the dichotomy of light versus darkness, such as when Grendel appears to attack on mead hall at night, which shows evil and dark attacking good and light. Like Grendel, death represents darkness, whereas treasures Beowulf receives represent light.

Function of Dichotomy

You can find the use of dichotomy in literature, linguistics, philosophy, politics, mathematics, and life science, which is proof of its wide scope. Since it presents a striking contrast between two opposite objects or persons, it gives a better understanding to the readers by emphasizing the differences between opposite qualities of two things, or the same thing. In other words, it allows the readers to see conflicting sides with more clarity. It is also a very useful literary tool to identify things and ideas, and to differentiate contradictions between them.