

Allusion

Allusion Definition

Allusion is a brief and indirect reference to a person, place, thing or idea of historical, cultural, literary or political significance. It does not describe in detail the person or thing to which it refers. It is just a passing comment and the writer expects the reader to possess enough knowledge to spot the allusion and grasp its importance in a text.

For instance, you make a literary allusion the moment you say, “I do not approve of this *quixotic* idea,” Quixotic means stupid and impractical derived from Cervantes’s “Don Quixote”, a story of a foolish knight and his misadventures.

Allusion Examples in Everyday Speech

The use allusions are not confined to literature alone. Their occurrence is fairly common in our daily speech. Look at some common allusion examples in everyday life:

“Don’t act like a Romeo in front of her.” – “Romeo” is a reference to Shakespeare’s Romeo, a passionate lover of Juliet, in “Romeo and Juliet”.

The rise in poverty will unlock the Pandora’s box of crimes. – This is an allusion to one of Greek Mythology’s origin myth, “Pandora’s box”.

“This place is like a Garden of Eden.” – This is a biblical allusion to the “garden of God” in the Book of Genesis.

“Hey! Guess who the new Newton of our school is?” – “Newton”, means a genius student, alludes to a famous scientist Isaac Newton.

“Stop acting like my ex-husband please.” – Apart from scholarly allusions we refer to common people and places in our speech.

Examples of Allusion in Literature

Let us analyze a few examples of the use of allusions in literature:

Example #1

Milton's "Paradise Lost" gives allusions a fair share. Look at the example from Book 6 below:

"All night the dread less Angel unpursu'd
Through Heav'ns wide Champain held his way, till Morn,
Wak't by the circling Hours, with rosie hand
Unbarr'd the gates of Light. There is a Cave
Within the Mount of God, fast by his Throne"

In the above lines "dread less Angel" is a reference to "Abdiel", a fearless angel. "Circling Hours" alludes to a Greek Myth "The Horae", the daughters of "Zeus" and "Themis" namely "Thallo (Spring), Auxo (Summer) and Carpo (Fall)". "With rosie hand" Milton refers to Homer's illustration of the "rosy fingered dawn" (Odyssey Book 2).

Example #2

Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus" is replete with instances of allusions. Read the example from Act III below:

"Learnèd Faustus, to find the secrets of astronomy
Graven in the book of Jove's high firmament,
Did mount him up to scale Olympus' top,
Where, sitting in a chariot burning bright,
Drawn by the strength of yokèd dragons' necks,
He views the clouds, the planets, and the stars."

Jove's high firmament refers to the outer stretches of the universe. "Olympus' top" is an allusion to Greek Mythology where Mount Olympus is home of gods. Similarly, "a chariot burning bright" refers to a Greek Myth of "god Apollo" who is said to drive the sun in his chariot.

Example #3

In Conrad's "Heart of Darkness", "the two knitting women" whom Marlow sees alludes to "Moirae" or Fates as visualized in Greek Mythology:

"The two knitting women increase his anxiety by gazing at him and all the other sailors with knowing unconcern. Their eerie looks suggest that they know what will happen (the men dying), yet don't care"

The thread they knit represents human life. The two women knitting black wool foreshadows Marlow's horrific journey in the "Dark Continent".

Example #4

We find a number of allusions in Keats's "Ode to the Grecian Urn". For example:

"Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our [rhyme](#):
What leaf-fringed [legend](#) haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?"

"Sylvan" is a goat-like-man deity of Greek mythology. "Tempe" alludes to the "Vale of Tempe" in Greece, a place (from Greek mythology) frequently visited by Apollo and other gods. Likewise, "the dales of Arcady" refers to the home of "Pan", the god of rustic music.

Function of Allusion

By and large, the use of allusions enables writers or poets to simplify complex ideas and emotions. The readers comprehend the complex ideas by comparing the emotions of the writer or poet to the references given by them. Furthermore, the references to Greek Mythology give a dreamlike and magical touch to the works of art. Similarly, biblical allusions appeal to the readers with religious backgrounds.

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