

Apostrophe

Apostrophe Definition

In literature, apostrophe is a [figure of speech](#) sometimes represented by an exclamation, such as “Oh.” A writer or [speaker](#), using apostrophe, speaks directly to someone who is not present or is dead, or speaks to an inanimate object.

It is important not to confuse apostrophe, the literary device, with the apostrophe punctuation mark (‘). The punctuation mark shows possession, or marks the omission of one or more letters (contraction). Apostrophe in literature is an arrangement of words addressing a non-existent person or an abstract idea in such a way as if it were present and capable of understanding feelings.

Examples of Apostrophe in Literature

English literature is replete with instances of apostrophe. Let us have a look at a few examples.

Example #1: *Macbeth* (By William Shakespeare)

William Shakespeare makes use of apostrophe in his play *Macbeth*:

“Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand?
Come, let me clutch thee!
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.”

In his mental [conflict](#) before murdering King Duncan, Macbeth has a strange vision of a dagger and talks to it as if it were a person.

Example #2: *The Star* (By Jane Taylor)

Jane Taylor uses apostrophe in the well-known poem, *The Star*:

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are.
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.”

This poem became one of the most popular nursery rhymes told to little children – often in the form of song. In this nursery [rhyme](#), a child speaks to a star (an inanimate object). Hence, this is a classic example of apostrophe.

Example #3: *Frankenstein* (By Mary Shelly)

Look at how Mary Shelly uses apostrophe in her novel *Frankenstein*:

“Oh! Stars and clouds and winds, ye are all about to mock me; if ye really pity me, crush sensation and memory; let me become as naught; but if not, depart, depart, and leave me in darkness.”

Talking to stars, clouds, and winds is apostrophe.

Example #4: *Death Be Not Proud* (By John Donne)

“Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.”

Here, Donne speaks to death, an abstract idea, as if it were a person capable of comprehending his feelings.

John Donne once more uses apostrophe in his poem *The Sun Rising*:

“Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains, call on
us?
Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run?
Saucy [pedantic](#) wretch ...”

The poet addresses the sun in an informal and colloquial way, as if it were a real human being. He asks the Sun in a rude way why the Sun appeared and spoiled the good time he was having with his beloved.

Example #5: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (By James Joyce)

James Joyce uses apostrophe in his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

“Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the
reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the
uncreated conscience of my race.”

Being able to talk to something abstract – like *life* itself – is possible only in literature.

Example #6: *To a Stranger Born in Some Distant Country Hundreds of Years from Now* (By Billy Collins)

In this excerpt, the poet uses conventional apostrophe starting with “O”:

“O **stranger** of the future!
O **inconceivable being**!
Whatever the shape of your house,
However you scoot from place to place,
No matter how strange and colorless the clothes you may wear,
I bet nobody likes a wet dog either.

I bet everyone in your pub,
Even the children, pushes her away.”

The speaker is talking to an imaginary [character](#), the “stranger.”

Example #7: *Sire* (By W. S. Merwin)

Another apostrophe example comes from the poem *Sire*, written by W. S. Merwin:

“Forerunner, I would like to say, silent pilot,
Little dry death, future,
Your indirections are as strange to me
As my own. I know so little that anything
You might tell me would be a revelation.”

Function of Apostrophe

By employing apostrophe in their literary works, writers try to bring abstract ideas or non-existent persons to life, so that the nature of emotions they want to communicate comes across in a better way. It is more convenient for readers to relate themselves to abstract emotions when they observe them in their natural surroundings. In addition, the use of apostrophe motivates readers to develop a [perspective](#) that is fresh, as well as creative.

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