

# Metalepsis

## Definition of Metalepsis

Metalepsis is derived from the Greek word *metōnymia*, which means “substitution” or “sharing.” It is a [figure of speech](#) like [metonymy](#) or [metaphor](#). However, it is an advanced form of figurative speech in which one thing refers to another thing that is only slightly related to it. There are two ways to make this association. One is through showing causal relationship to seemingly unrelated things. The other is through indirect intermediate replacement of terms.

## Features of Metalepsis

Metalepsis is a reference in which a phrase or a word taken from figurative speech is employed in a new [context](#). Metalepsis is also known as *transumption*. According to Werner Wolf, “It is a fictional representation that consists of different levels and worlds, among which unconventional transgression takes place.”

Metalepsis often conveys metaphorical expression by using a word associated with a thing that it is being referred to. In addition, this figure of speech could be a reference for a literary work, such as if somebody says, “Something smells in Denmark,” it would be considered to be a reference to Shakespeare’s famous play *Hamlet*.

## Examples of Metalepsis in Literature

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

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“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the **last syllable of recorded time**;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. . . .  
Life's but a **walking shadow**, a **poor player**....”

There are many examples of metalepsis in Shakespeare’s works, since he multiplies metaphors and duplicates figures of speech in various guises. He works on one figure, and then moves onto the next and continues from where he started off. There is a concatenation of different figures that quickly pile on one another as shown in bold.

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#### **Example #2: *Out, Out* (By Robert Frost)**

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“As he swung toward them holding up the hand  
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep  
The **life from spilling**...”

In these lines, the poet makes reference to keeping the “life from spilling,” meaning the spilling of blood. He makes a connection between blood and life, which means too much loss of blood shows loss of human life.

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#### **Example #3: *Lycidas* (By John Milton)**

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“But now my **oat** proceeds,  
And listens to the herald of the sea  
That came in Neptune’s plea,  
He asked the waves, and asked the felon winds,  
What hard mishap hath doomed this gentle swain?”

In the passage above, Milton uses “oat” as a musical instrument that is made from an oat stalk. Therefore, the word “oat” is employed as a reference to the song that the poet composes beside the ocean.

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#### **Example #4: *Gone with the Wind* (By Margaret Mitchell)**

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“I’m mighty glad Georgia waited till after Christmas before it secedes or it would have ruined the Christmas parties.”

Here, Georgia is used to develop a relationship between politicians, government, and citizens. It is now common to use the name of a country to refer to its government and its whole nation.

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#### **Example #5: *Dr. Faustus* (By Christopher Marlowe)**

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“Was this the **face** that launched a thousand ships  
and burnt the topless towers of Ilium? “

A reference is made here to a mythological figure called Helen of Troy, who was abducted by Paris, which led to the idea of using a thousand ships for starting the Trojan war. Here, the word “face” is used as metalepsis.

### **Function of Metalepsis**

Generally, it is employed in a literary text to develop [symbolism](#) and metaphor, by giving profound meanings to ideas and objects. By using metalepsis, the text shows deeper and hidden meanings, and therefore draws the attention of readers. In addition, it adds more poetic effect to the piece of writing. The readers are provided with allusions using another figure of speech in order to make them understand the hidden meaning communicated through it.

Also, it is used in literary comedies because the words in [allusion](#) could cause a comical [exaggeration](#). However, in narratology, metalepsis plays with the structure of a fictional book, since the narrator may seem separated from the action, but he interacts in the middle of the story to create heightened effect and deeper meanings for the readers. A survey of metalepsis examples will help us understand the functions of this device.