

Foil

Foil Definition

In literature, a foil is a [character](#) that shows qualities that are in [contrast](#) with the qualities of another character. The objective is to highlight the traits of the other character. The term *foil*, though generally being applied to a contrasting character, may also be used for any [comparison](#) that is drawn to portray a difference between two things.

What we observe in literature very often is that a foil is a secondary character who contrasts with the major character to enhance the importance of the major character. The etymology of the term *foil* testifies the aforementioned [assertion](#) as the word is taken from the practice of backing gems with foil (tool), so that they shine more brightly.

Examples of Foil in Literature

Example #1: *Paradise Lost* (By John Milton)

Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book I, is based on the comparison of two contrasting characters: God and Satan. Satan, in the entire work, appears as a foil to God. The negative traits of Satan and the positive traits of God are frequently compared, which consequently brings to the surface not only the contrast between the two characters, but also "justify the ways of God..." We reach a conclusion that it is only just for Satan to be expelled from the paradise because of his refusal to give in to the will of God.

Example #2: *Wuthering Heights* (By Emily Bronte)

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte depicts two contrasting settings that are foils to each other. The entire action of the [narrative](#) takes place in two

neighboring houses: *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*. While describing *Wuthering Heights* in chapter 12, the narrator says:

“There was no moon, and everything beneath lay in misty darkness: not a light gleamed from any house, far or near all had been extinguished long ago: and those at Wuthering Heights were never visible...”

The description of *Thrushcross Grange*, in contrast to the *Wuthering Heights*, creates a calm and peaceful [atmosphere](#).

“Gimmerton chapel bells were still ringing; and the full, mellow flow of the beck in the valley came soothingly on the ear. It was a sweet substitute for the yet absent murmur of the summer foliage, which drowned that music about the Grange when the trees were in leaf.”

The foils in these settings also help in the development of the foils in the characters, as the people from *Wuthering Heights* are unsophisticated, and are foils to those from *Thrushcross Grange*, who have a refined disposition.

Example #3: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (By Robert Louis Stevenson)

In his novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson explores the [theme](#) of [doppelganger](#) in which Hyde is not only an evil double of the honorable Dr. Jekyll, but also qualifies as his foil. Dr. Jekyll creates Hyde through a series of scientific experiments, in order to prove his statement:

“Man is not truly one, but truly two.”

He means that the human soul is a mixture of evil and good. In other words, every man's foil exists in himself. Hyde is the manifestation of the evil that existed in otherwise honorable Dr. Jekyll. Being a respectable Victorian gentleman, Jekyll can never fulfill his evil desires. Therefore, he separates his “evil-self,” giving him a separate identity, and thus invents his own foil.

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

Foil examples are also found in plays. We notice in William Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar* a twofold foil. Cassius is a foil to Brutus, and Brutus is a foil to Antony. Both Cassius and Brutus conspire to kill Caesar, but Cassius is more prone to treachery than Brutus is, and thus easily gives in to his evil ambition.

Brutus, on the other hand, hesitates to join the plot without careful analysis of the whole scenario. Cassius even goes to the extent that he does not shy away from writing phony letters to convince Brutus to join the plot. Brutus, in contrast, is bent on relying on his own reason, and his awareness of his dignified obligations as a Roman, to do the inevitable. Moreover, Brutus is a foil to Antony because Brutus's honesty and simplicity are in clear contrast to Antony's qualities of deception and over-ambition.

Function of Foil

In [fiction](#), a foil is important in the development of the story's characters. The comparison of the contrasting traits of the characters helps the readers to not only understand their personalities, but also to comprehend the importance of their roles in a work of literature.