

Pathetic Fallacy

Pathetic Fallacy Definition

Pathetic [fallacy](#) is a literary device that attributes human qualities and emotions to inanimate objects of nature. The word *pathetic* in the term is not used in the derogatory sense of being miserable; rather, it stands for “imparting emotions to something else.”

Difference Between Pathetic Fallacy and Personification

Generally, pathetic fallacy is confused with [personification](#). The fact is that they differ in their function. Pathetic fallacy is a kind of personification that gives human emotions to inanimate objects of nature; for example, referring to weather features reflecting a mood. Personification, on the other hand, is a broader term. It gives human attributes to abstract ideas, animate objects of nature, or inanimate non-natural objects.

For example, the sentence “The somber clouds darkened our mood” is a pathetic fallacy, as human attributes are given to an inanimate object of nature reflecting a mood. But, the sentence “The sparrow talked to us” is a personification because the animate object of nature – the sparrow – is given the human quality of “talking.”

Examples of Pathetic Fallacy in Literature

Lets us analyze some examples of pathetic fallacy in literature:

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

Shakespeare uses pathetic fallacy in his play *Macbeth* to describe the dark murder of the [character](#) Duncan. In Act 2, Scene 3, Lennox says:

“The *night has been unruly*. Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i’ th’ air, *strange screams* of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New hatched to the woeful time. The obscure bird
Clamored the livelong night. Some say the *Earth*
Was feverous and did shake.”

The pathetic fallacy examples in the above lines describe the ominous [atmosphere](#) on the night of Duncan’s murder. The *unruly* night, the *screams of death* in the air, and the *feverous* earth depict the evil act of murder that happened a night before.

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

Emily Bronte’s novel *Wuthering Heights* is full of pathetic fallacies. The title itself shows the use of this device, as the word *wuthering* means “blowing strongly with a roaring sound.” Therefore, “Wuthering Heights” means uproarious and aggressive weather that represents the nature of its residents. There are lots of instances in the novel in which the mood of nature portrays the nature of events in the [narrative](#).

For example, the character Lockwood is trapped in a snow storm before the nightmare scene, the “wild and windy” night at the time of Mr. Earnshaw’s death, the “violent thunderstorm” on the night Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights, and the stormy weather outside when Cathy makes a choice between Heathcliff and Edgar indicates her inner turmoil.

Example #3: *Ode to Melancholy* (By John Keats)

Keats employs pathetic Fallacy in his *Ode to Melancholy*:

“But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a *weeping cloud*
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all
And hides the green hills in an April shroud”

The feeling of melancholy has been described by attributing the human emotion of weeping to the clouds.

Example #4: *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* (By William Wordsworth)

William Wordsworth, in his poem *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, says:

“I wandered *lonely as a cloud*
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,”

The poet describes clouds as lonely, in order to describe his own state.

Example #5: *Great Expectations* (By Charles Dickens)

Charles Dickens makes use of pathetic fallacy in his novel, *Great Expectations*. At the beginning of Chapter 39, his [protagonist](#), Pip, comments on the “wretched weather”:

“Day after day, a vast heavy veil had been driving over London from the East, and it drove still, as if in the East there were an Eternity of cloud and wind. So *furious* had been the gusts, that high buildings in town had had the lead stripped off their roofs; and in the country, trees had been torn up, and sails of windmills carried away; and gloomy accounts had come in from the coast, of shipwreck and death. Violent blasts of rain had accompanied these *rages* of wind, and the day just closed as I sat down to read had been the worst of all.”

The *furious* gusts, and the *rages* of wind indicate the confused inner world of Pip.

Function of Pathetic Fallacy

By employing pathetic fallacy, writers try to bring inanimate objects to life, so that the nature of emotions they want to convey is understood in a better way. This is because it is easier for readers to relate to abstract emotions when they observe it in their natural surroundings. In addition, the use of pathetic fallacy encourages readers to develop a [perspective](#) that is new as well as creative.

