

Aporia

Definition of Aporia

Aporia is a [figure of speech](#) wherein a [speaker](#) purports or expresses doubt or perplexity regarding a question (often feigned), and asks the [audience](#) how he ought to proceed. The doubts may appear as rhetorical questions, often in the beginning of the text.

Aporia is a logical [paradox](#) in which the speaker sows seeds of doubt on a subject. This rhetorical strategy can make the audience feel sympathetic toward the speaker regarding the [dilemma](#) he is in.

Features of Aporia

Aporia is used as a rhetorical device in literature.

It is also called “dubitation,” which means that the uncertainty is always untruthful.

It could be a question or a statement.

It is often used in philosophy. It relates to philosophical questions and subjects which have no obvious answers.

Plato and Socrates were well-known for using aporia.

Examples of Aporia in Literature

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

“To be, or not to be: that is the question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all...”

This is a prominent example of aporia available in English literature. This is an opening [soliloquy](#), spoken by Hamlet in the famous play. Here, the statement, “To be or not to be” introduces uncertainty that characterizes the paragraph.

Example #2: *The Unnamable* (By Samuel Beckett)

“Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on.”

“...or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later?”

“...There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. I should mention before going any further...”

“Can one be aphetic otherwise than unawares? I don’t know.”

“What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple...”

“It will be I? It will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

Beckett’s entire work is characterized by the use of aporia. These passages have a lot of questioning and doubts, and deferral of meaning. For Beckett, aporia can never be considered as an invariable condition of unknowing.

Example #3: *American Buffalo* (By David Mamet)

Don: “We have a deal with the man.”

Teach: “With Fletcher.”

Don: “Yes. ”

Teach: “We had a deal with Bobby.”

Don: “What does that mean?”

Teach: “Nothing.”
Don: “It don’t?”
Teach: “No. ”
Don: “What did you mean by that?”
Teach: “I didn’t mean a thing.”
Don: “You didn’t.”
Teach: “No?”

The above excerpt is an example of aporia that illustrates a great deal of doubt in the speech. There is uncertainty, and due questioning, but it is expressed in a lighter tone.

Example #4: *The Road not Taken* (By Robert Frost)

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

In the last two lines in the given poem, the poet uses aporia, which is a self-contradictory deadlock that cannot be resolved in the text. Similarly, in the poem the readers find themselves at an impasse, while the final [evidence](#) falls into a paradox.

Function of Aporia

Aporia is an expression of doubt or uncertainty. When uncertainty and doubt are genuine, it can indicate a real impasse, and stimulate the audience to consider different options for [resolution](#). It could show the humbleness of a speaker if the doubt he expresses is genuine. However, it functions to provide guidance to the audience as to what the speaker wants to say if the doubt is insincere.

Aporia causes uncertainty, and makes the audience discover the certainty through subsequent statements of the speaker. The main objective is to provide the audience a chance to analyze and judge the situation.