

Parrhesia

Definition of Parrhesia

Parrhesia is borrowed from a Greek word that means “to speak boldly, freely, or with bombastic bluntness.” It is saying something boldly and freely without leaving any doubt behind. It involves not only the freedom of speech, but also implies the use of truth in speech or writing. In Parrhesia, writers open their minds and hearts fully to the readers or [audience](#) through [discourse](#), and a [speaker](#) makes it clear what his opinion is. In simple words, it is a direct expression shown through words.

Evolution of Parrhesia

Parrhesia first appeared in Euripides as a rhetorical device in Greek literature, and it evolved through several centuries. Later on, parrhesia was introduced in Athenian democracy. Finally it entered into the field of philosophy, where Socrates was known as a true parrhesiastic writer. Examples of parrhesia are found in the works of Seneca, a famous Greek Epicurean, who is famous for having used parrhesia.

Examples of Parrhesia in Literature

Example #1: *King Lear* (By William Shakespeare)

Kent: “Royal Lear
Whom I ever honoured as king,
Lov’d as my father, as my master follow’d ...
This hideous rashness ...”

Kent shows a respectful protest to King Lear on behalf of Cordelia, which is an example of parrhesia. Though he wins sudden banishment and the

enmity of the king, he persuades the audience through his uprightness and honesty.

Example #2: *The Canterbury Tales* (By Geoffrey Chaucer)

“Ne that a monk, whan he is cloisterlees,
Is lykned til a fish that is waterlees;
This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloistre ...

...Upon a book in cloistrealwey to poure,
As Austin bit? How shal the world be served?
Lat Austin have his swink to him reserved...”

Chaucer criticizes a monk through free speech in this passage, by saying that the monk is supposed to do his duty for the church and the welfare of people; but instead, he involves himself in other [activities](#) like hunting.

Example #3: *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (By James Joyce)

“The muddy streets were gay. He strode homeward, conscious of an invisible grace pervading and making light his limbs. In spite of all he had done it. He had confessed and God had pardoned him ... It was beautiful to live in grace a life of peace and virtue and forbearance with others...”

Here, the narrator boldly reports the [dialogue](#) and thoughts of the [character](#). He speaks in such a way as if the character himself is speaking directly and freely.

Example #4: *Animal Farm* (By George Orwell)

“Now, comrades, what is the nature of this life of ours? Let us face it: our lives are miserable, laborious, and short.”

“No, comrades, a thousand times no! The soil of England is

“Man is the only real enemy we have. Remove Man from the scene, and the root cause of hunger and overwork is abolished for ever.”

In this passage, all the animals listen carefully to Old Major, who tells them the plain truth – that their lives are miserable and laborious solely due to human oppressors. He instructs them through free speech that human beings are the only reasons for their plight.

Example #5: *A Modest Proposal* (By Jonathan Swift)

“These mothers instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want of work, or leave ...

I think it is agreed by all parties that this prodigious number of children in arms, or on backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is, in the present deplorable state of the kingdom, a very great additional grievance.”

The writer brings into play a sense of melancholy, and delivers a fearless speech for the children and women begging on Ireland’s streets. He shows his grievance about their miserable condition, and suggests that if anyone does something positive for them, it would be a great service.

Function of Parrhesia

Since parrhesia is free speech, this straight, bold language is preferably used in an attempt to gain the attention of readers, and then to change their beliefs instantly. Often, parrhesia is employed for logical and [moral](#) purposes; however, sometimes writers use negative parrhesia in order to unleash their ideas boldly and freely without forethought. Parrhesia examples are in literary and philosophical works. Also, politicians, religious zealots, and the business [community](#) use it frequently as a rhetorical device.