

# Exemplum

## Definition of Exemplum

Exemplum is a rhetorical device that is defined as a short tale, [narrative](#), or [anecdote](#) used in literary pieces and speeches to explain a doctrine, or emphasize a [moral](#) point. They are generally in the forms of legends, folktales, and fables.

An exemplum clarifies and proves a point. The best examples of exemplum are found in stories of medieval times, such as *The Two City Dwellers and the Country Man*, *The King and His Wife*, and *The Cursed Dancers of Colbeck*.

## Characteristics of Exemplum

The plural form of exemplum, also called “exemplification,” is “exempla.” Its subject matters are usually based on folktales, legends, fables, and real life history; in which a moral point is raised by emphasizing the good or bad characteristics of a [character](#). The moral teaching in exemplum comes at the beginning, while a [parable](#) will have it at the end.

## Types of Exemplum

Aristotle has divided exemplum into two [categories](#):

**Real Exemplum** – This is from mythology or actual history.

**Fictional Exemplum** – These are from invented facts expressed in the form of parables, fables, and brief comparisons.

## Examples of Exemplum in Literature

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Example #1: *The Canterbury Tales* (By Geoffrey Chaucer)

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“A FRERE ther was, a wantown and a merye,  
A limitour, a ful solempne man.  
In alle the ordres foure is noon that can  
So muche of daliaunce and fair langage.  
He hadde maad ful many a mariage  
Of yonge wommen, at his owne cost ...  
As doon the sterres in the frosty night.  
This worthy limitour was cleped Huberd.”

This story is a direct attack on the corruption in the Catholic Church during the 14th century in Europe. Two of the characters, “The Summoner” and “The Friar,” are criticized severely because of their evil acts and their greed. The exemplum is *those who engage themselves in greed and extortion will be thrown into hell*.

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#### Example #2: *Democracy* (By Joan Didion)

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“In Flaundres whylom was a companye  
Of yonge folk, that haunteden folye,  
As ryot, hasard, stewes, and tavernes,  
Wher-as, with harpes, lutes, and giternes ...

O cursed sinne, ful of cursednesse!  
Thou blasphemour of Crist with vileinye  
And with his precious herte-blood thee boghte,  
Thou art so fals and so unkinde, allas!”

This is the *Pardoners Tale* from Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. It is among the exemplum examples that talk about how *greed can destroy everything, and that it is the cause of all evil*. In this story, nobody got to [claim](#) the most coveted treasure, since the characters involved ended up killing each other.

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#### Example #3: *Parallel Lives* (By Plutarch)

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“It being my purpose to write the lives of Alexander the king, and of Cesar, by whom Pompey was destroyed, the multitude of their great actions affords so large a field that I were to blame ... When once Alexander had given way to fears of super natural influence, his mind grew so disturbed and so easily alarmed ... But a diseased habit of body, caused by drugs which Olympias gave him, had ruined not only his health, but his understanding.”

The excerpt is about an exemplum of the legendary Alexander the Great. The moral point of this narrative is that *an individual can change a person's, as well as a whole nation's, destiny*. Plutarch shows how, in history, characters like Alexander the Great have shaped the destinies of states and individuals.

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#### **Example #4: *The Legend of Cleopatra* (By Geoffrey Chaucer)**

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“After the death of Ptolemy the king,  
Who of all Egypt had the governing,  
There reigned his queen, Cleopatra;  
And, truth to tell, Antonius was his name ...  
Now, where to find a man as reliable,  
Who will for love his death so freely take,  
I pray God may never our heads so ache!”

This story is about Cleopatra, and how many wicked men betrayed her.

### **Function of Exemplum**

Exemplum is one of the most widely used rhetorical devices in written works and oratory. Initially, it was employed by preachers in Christian homiletic writings, and stories in their sermons to guide audiences. Preachers used historical figures as good and bad examples in order to encourage listeners to do good deeds and avoid committing sin. Moreover, it is used as a basic method of [argument](#) and employed in everyday life.