

Cacophony

Cacophony Definition

If we speak literally, cacophony points to a situation in which there is a mixture of harsh and inharmonious sounds. In literature, however, the term refers to the use of words with sharp, harsh, hissing, and unmelodious sounds – primarily those of consonants – to achieve desired results.

Common Cacophony Examples

In everyday life, an example of cacophony would be the amalgamation of different sounds you hear in a busy city street or market. You hear sounds of vehicles, announcements on loudspeakers, music, and chatter of people, or even a dog barking at the same time and without any harmony. You can rightly point to the situation as being the cacophony of a busy street or market. We can notice the manifestation of cacophony in language as well. For instance, in the sentence,

“I detest war **because cause** of war is always trivial.”

The phrase “because cause” is cacophonous as *because* is followed by the word *cause*, which has a similar sound, but different meaning. Generally, it sounds unpleasant as the same sound is repeated in two different words.

Similarly, a discordant sound of a musical band, tuning up their musical instruments, is an example of cacophony.

Cacophony and Euphony

Cacophony is opposite to [*euphony*](#), which is the use of words having pleasant and harmonious effects. Generally, the vowels, the semi-vowels, and the nasal consonants (e.g. l, m, n, r, y) are considered to be euphonic.

Cacophony, on the other hand, uses consonants in combinations that require explosive delivery (e.g., p, b, d, g, k, ch-, sh- etc.).

Examples of Cacophony in Literature

In literature, the unpleasantness of cacophony is utilized by writers to present dreadful or distasteful situations. Let us look at a few Cacophony examples in literature:

Example #1: *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (By Lewis Carroll)

Abundant use of cacophonous words can be found in Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem *Jabberwocky*, in his novel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*.

" 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves, and
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

In the excerpt, we see a collection of nonsense words, which are at the same time unmelodious. After reading the poem, Alice, the main [character](#) of the novel, gives her impression, which clearly reflects the purpose of the poem. She says:

"Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that's clear, at any rate."

Example #2: *The Bridge* (By Hart Crane)

Another example of cacophony is found in Hart Crane's poem *The Bridge*:

“The nasal whine of power whips a new universe...
Where spouting pillars spoor the evening sky,
Under the looming stacks of the gigantic power house
Stars prick the eyes with sharp ammoniac proverbs,
New verities, new inklings in the velvet hummed
Of dynamos, where hearing's leash is strummed...
Power's script, – wound, bobbin-bound, refined –
Is stopped to the slap of belts on booming spools, spurred
Into the bulging bouillon, harnessed jelly of the stars.”

The disorder and confusion of the industrial world has been expressed here by the writer, through deliberate selection of cacophonous words and phrases.

Example #3: *Gulliver's Travels* (By Jonathan Swift)

Look at the following excerpt from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*:

“And being no stranger to the art of war, I have him a description of cannons, culverins, muskets, carabines, pistols, bullets, powder, swords, bayonets, battles, sieges, retreats, attacks, undermines, countermines, bombardments, sea-fights...”

In order to describe the destructive consequences of war, the writer chooses words and arranges them in an order that produces an effect that is unmelodious, harsh, and jarring, which corresponds with the subject matter.

Example #4: *Rime to the Ancient Mariner* (By Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

Read the following lines from Coleridge's *Rime to the Ancient Mariner*:

“With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
Agape they heard me call.”

These lines illustrate cacophony by using the words *black*, *baked* and *agape*, which corresponds with the severity of the situation faced by the Mariner and other people on board.

Function of Cacophony

Writers use cacophony as a tool to describe a discordant situation using discordant words. The use of such words allows readers to picture and feel the unpleasantness of the situation the writer has described through words.