

# Flashback

## Flashback Definition

Merriam Webster defines the word *flashback* as “an interruption of the chronological sequence (as of a film or literary work) of an event of earlier occurrence.”

Flashbacks are interruptions that writers do to insert past events, in order to provide background or [context](#) to the current events of a [narrative](#). By using flashbacks, writers allow their readers to gain insight into a [character](#)’s motivations, and provide a background to a current [conflict](#). Dream sequences and memories are methods used to present flashbacks.

When I went out of the drawing room, the first thing that came into view in the open corridor was the picture of my brother. [I just got the point why my mother used to see that portrait hours after he was killed in WWII, and she left only when she saw any one of us coming to her.] I just heard steps, and when I looked back, there was nothing that I could see. It was just a feeling of the past.

The sentence enclosed in brackets is a flashback. It has interrupted the current event in the form of a sudden thought, giving us an insight into the past of the narrator.

## Examples of Flashback in Literature

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### Example #1: *The Holy Bible* (By Various Contributors)

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The Bible is a good source of flashback examples. In the *Book of Matthew*, we see a flashback has been used when Joseph, governor of Egypt, sees his brothers after several years. Joseph “remembered his dreams” about his brothers, and how they sold him into slavery in the past.

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### **Example #2: *Death of a Salesman* (By Arthur Miller)**

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Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* uses flashback to narrate Willy Loman's memories of the past. At one moment, Willy talks with his dead brother while playing cards with Charley. He relives a past conversation in the present. This demonstrates a character that is physically living in the present, but mentally living in the memories and events of the past.

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### **Example #3: *The Cruel Mother* (By Anonymous)**

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Another example of flashback is the [ballad](#) of *The Cruel Mother*, in which a mother remembers her murdered child. While going to church, she remembers her child's birth, growing up, and death. Later, she thinks back further to a distant time in her past to remember how her own mother was ruthless to her.

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### **Example #4: *Wuthering Heights* (By Emily Bronte)**

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Emily Bronte's famous novel *Wuthering Heights* starts off with Cathy, one of the main characters, dead. Mr. Lockwood sees Cathy's name written all over the windowsill, and then has a vexing dream about her. When he talks about the dream to Heathcliff, Heathcliff becomes distressed, and Mr. Lockwood wants to know why the mention of Cathy upsets him.

The flashbacks are means to bring Cathy back to life, so Mr. Lockwood has a better perception of why Heathcliff was so upset. The flashbacks show the development of the love that Heathcliff and Cathy had for each other, and how their poor decisions separated them. It would not have the same effect, if Ellen had only told Mr. Lockwood that Cathy was a person that Heathcliff loved and that she died.

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### **Example #5: *Birches* (By Robert Frost)**

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Robert Frost, in his poem *Birches*, employs flashback. In this poem, a character sees swaying birch trees and says:

“So was I once myself a swinger of birches. And so I dream of going back to be.”

He goes back to the days of his childhood, and then returns to the present and says:

“I’d like to get away from earth awhile, and then come back to it and begin over.”

The narrator remembers and desires for the freedom and joy he experienced as a child, swinging on birch trees, and wishes to return to that moment of his childhood.

### **Function of Flashback**

The use of a flashback is to convey to the readers information regarding the character’s background, and give them an idea of the character’s motives for doing certain things later in the story. Therefore, a flashback in the story deepens inner conflict. It provides stimulus for the conflict, deepens the touching effects, and allows the reader to sympathize even with the villain.

Another function of flashbacks in a narrative is to increase tension. A mere mention of a past event makes readers wish to know the secrets. So, he reads on to find out what the secret is, and how terrible it is that it provides the [motivation](#) for the conflict in the story.

Often, the function of flashback in poetry is to convey an idea of the happiness that the poet enjoyed in the past, but presently does not enjoy those pleasures. Poets use flashback to [contrast](#) a character’s unhappy circumstances in the present to the happy days of his past.