

# Synesthesia

## Synesthesia Definition

In literature, synesthesia refers to a technique adopted by writers to present ideas, characters, or places in such a manner that they appeal to more than one sense, like hearing, sight, smell, and touch at a given time.

Generally, the term synesthesia refers to a certain medical condition in which one of the five senses simultaneously stimulates another sense. A person with such a condition may not only see letters of the alphabet, but also associate them with particular scents. This happens when the different parts of the brain that are responsible in identifying color, sound, taste, and smell somehow get interlinked, and thus one sense triggers another sense.

## Everyday Life Examples of Synesthesia

In everyday language, we find many examples of synesthesia, such as the frequently used adjective “cool.” This word is generally associated with temperature. However, in casual conversation, we hear phrases like “cool dress,” “cool color,” or “you look cool,” wherein the visual sensation is blended with the sense of touch. Moreover, we commonly hear phrases like “loud colors,” “frozen silence,” “warm colors,” and “bitter cold.”

## Examples of Synesthesia in Literature

In literature, synesthesia is a figurative use of words that intends to draw out a response from readers by stimulating multiple senses.

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### Example #1: *The Divine Comedy* (By Dante Alighieri)

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Dante Alighieri's *The Divine [Comedy](#)* contains a good synesthesia example in literature. In the first [canto](#), the poet tells us about a place called “Inferno.” He says,

“Back to the region where the **sun is silent.**”

Here, Dante binds the sense of sight (sun) with the sense of hearing (silent).

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### **Example #2: *Ode to a Nightingale* (By John Keats)**

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We notice synesthetic imageries in John Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*:

“Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provencal song, and sun burnt mirth!”

In the above example, Keats combines visual sensation with the sensations of taste and hearing. In the same poem, he further states:

“In some melodious plot,  
Of beechen green,  
Singest of summer in full throated ease.”

Keats associates the act of melodious singing with a plot covered with green beechen trees, and thus connects visual sense with the sense of hearing.

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### **Example #3: *King Lear* (By William Shakespeare)**

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We see Shakespeare employing the synesthetic device in his play *King Lear*, Act 2, Scene 2:

“Thou art a lady: if only to go warm were gorgeous,  
Why nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,  
Which scarcely keeps thee warm.”

In the above excerpt, King Lear makes fun of his daughter Goneril for wearing revealing attire. He associates the word “warm” with “gorgeous,” which is an attempt to blend the sense of touch with the sense of sight.

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#### Example #4: *A Tuft of Flowers* (By Robert Frost)

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Robert Frost, in his poem *A Tuft of Flowers*, uses synesthesia:

“The butterfly and I had lit upon,  
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,  
That made me hear the wakening birds around,  
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground...”

In the above excerpt, the [speaker](#) reveals a blend of sensory experiences he is experiencing. The speaker’s visual sense and his sense of hearing make him aware of his surroundings.

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#### Example #5: *Dying* (By Emily Dickinson)

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Emily Dickinson, in her poem *Dying*, uses synesthesia:

“With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,  
Between the light and me;  
And then the windows failed, and then  
could not see to see.”

Here, the poetess added a visual element to the buzzing sound “buzz” by describing it as having a blue color.

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#### Example #6: *The Whole World Over* (By Julia Glass)

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The [character](#) Saga, in Julia Glass’ novel *The Whole World Over*, has a condition of synesthesia, in which she seems to sense colors in the words she reads, as illustrated below:

“The word would fill her mind for a few minutes with a single color: not an unpleasant sensation but still an intrusion...  
Patriarch: Brown, she thought, a temple of a word, a shiny red brown, like the surface of a chestnut.”

These lines are comments spoken by Duffy, who thinks that Saga's synesthesia is a distraction.

### **Function of Synesthesia**

Writers employ this device to be creative in communicating their ideas to the readers. It makes their ideas more vivid, and adds more layers of meaning to a text for the readers' pleasure. By blending different senses, writers make their works more interesting and appealing.