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Figurative Language

WHAT IS FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE?

When we speak, most of what we say is literal. When I ask my child to pick her clothes off the floor, I mean, literally, pick up those clothes. If, however, I ask my daughter to clean her pig sty of a room, I do not literally mean that her room houses pigs. I am speaking figuratively. I am expecting to her understand my displeasure through a figurative example. **Figurative language** is looking beyond what the words literally mean and figuring out what extra meaning the non-literal language adds to the text, whether it is a short story, a novel, or a poem.

When searching for meaning, we can look at the dictionary meaning of a word, the **denotation**, as something literal. We can also look at the **connotation** of a word, the emotions, and images that are evoked upon hearing a word. This can lend itself to a figurative reading. For example, if we use the image of a dove flying during a battle, it is, quite literally, a bird. However, if we consider that a dove is the symbol of peace and it was flying overhead during a battle, now we have something. Now the connotation of peace exists in our brains at the same time as the word dove, and we can build deeper meaning into the text.

Figurative language comes in many forms: imagery, simile, metaphor, personification, allusion, and symbol are some of the basics. It is important to look at the **function of words** within a text and determine why an author chose a particular example of figurative language over another. How did the author intend for this portion of the text to function, and why would that matter to the meaning of the text as a whole? Those are always the guiding questions we should ask ourselves as we read.

Imagery

When reading a text, it is important to remember that authors inset **imagery**, visually appealing language, because there are details about the world they envision that they need the reader to understand for the story to come alive. On the opening page of H.G. Well's classic tale, "The Time Machine," we get a description of the Time Traveler at a dinner party at his house. As you read the excerpt below, watch for the imagery and the function it serves:

> The Time Traveller (for so it will be convenient to speak of him) was expounding a recondite matter to us. His grey eyes shone and twinkled, and his usually pale face was flushed and animated. The fire burned brightly, and the soft radiance of the incandescent lights in the lilies of silver caught the bubbles that flashed and passed in our glasses.

Did you notice how excited the Time Traveler is to be telling his story and showing his invention to a room full of his friends? His eyes "shone and twinkled," leading the reader to believe

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he is excited to share his story and to be heard. The fire burns brightly in the hearth, creating a warm and inviting atmosphere, which the Time Traveler needs if he is to convince the people at his dinner party that he is not insane. The bubbles in the champagne "passed in their glasses," bouncing off each other the way that the men try to speak to one another, not gruff, but yet colliding every once in a while. The details that Wells selected support the growing excitement that we are supposed to mirror.

With imagery, it is important to remember that all five senses can be involved in the description and imagery can be used to emphasize various ideas in the text.

Simile

Similes are comparisons made between two unlike objects or ideas that are connected by the words "like" or "as." They are used to make an unfamiliar object or action seem more familiar. In the example below, taken again from "The Time Machine" by H.G. Wells, the Time Traveler has just shown his dinner guests a small model of his time machine. Read the excerpt below:

> One of the candles on the mantel was blown out, and the little machine suddenly swung round, became indistinct, was seen as a ghost for a second perhaps, as an eddy of faintly glittering brass and ivory; and it was gone—vanished! Save for the lamp the table was bare.

Notice how the object didn't entirely vanish at once, it was there softly, as an impression, "as a ghost," so we know it disappeared into time in slight degrees. The simile helps to explain how the event happened and clarifies the experience for the reader. Also, the concept of ghosts, like the concept of time travel, is difficult, if not impossible, to prove, so we see the author's specific choice of compared items being significant with meaning.

Metaphor

Metaphors and similes function similarly by comparing two items, but do so by saying that one thing *is* another thing, rather than saying it is *like* another thing. The purpose is still to make an idea more precise for a reader. Consider the example below from "As You Like It" by William Shakespeare.

> All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.

In this metaphor, Shakespeare is comparing our lives to a play, which takes a rather dismal look on our lives. If the world is merely a stage and we are merely actors on a stage, then we are always following someone else's direction, always putting on a facade, never being our real selves. We are merely actors. The metaphor lends itself to a more in-depth interpretation through comparison.

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Personification

With **personification**, giving human traits to non-humans entities, it is important to consider which entity is given which human traits? These authorial choices can reveal intentions from the author that the reader may miss if he or she isn't reading closely. Our job is, ultimately, to determine what meaning is being conveyed.

Carefully read the excerpt below, taken from the first chapter of Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights":

> One may guess the power of the north wind blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun.

When looking at the underlined portion of the excerpt, we see that the "gaunt" thorns, the scraggly, undernourished thorns, are begging the Sun for small sums of money. The setting in Wuthering Heights is so dismal that even the thorns have to beg for scraps. The personification allows us to learn more about the setting and the tone of the text.

Allusion

Allusions are references to a person, object, place, event, literary work, or idea. As we read, if we find these references, they are like bread crumbs through the wilderness of the text. If we miss the breadcrumbs, we may still find the trail and be fine. However, if we find the breadcrumbs and understand them, we may glean a deeper understanding of the text and get to the trail faster. Allusions are placed into texts to deepen our reading experience, but we can't be expected to catch all of them. So if you find an allusion that you recognize, consider why that specific reference is important and what the comparison points are for the text you are currently reading.

An example of allusion from Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," is when Creature (the monster) appeals to his creator, Dr. Frankenstein, regarding his paternal abandonment and mistreatment.

> Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel.

In this allusion to Adam from the Bible, we are reminded that Dr. Frankenstein overstepped the boundaries of science by creating Monster and also that Monster is regarded more as a demon than a human. Shelley is able to use this allusion to not only deepen characterization but also to propel her overarching themes in the text.

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Symbol

Symbols are objects that represent ideas beyond themselves, and authors incorporate them into their stories to create more complexity. In Emily Dickenson's poem, "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—", Dickenson describes her future death bed as she waits for her grand entrance into heaven. She expects that heaven's angels will lift her into the shining light with fanfare, however, what she gets instead, is a buzzing fly on her deathbed. This buzzing fly is symbolic of the insignificance of death, the mocking of the grand last adventure, and it is a depressing way to consider our passage out of this world. Dickenson uses a common pest, and a pest associated with decay and rot, as the harbinger of death. Her use of symbolism expresses her attitude toward death and establishes the theme of her poem. (For more on symbolism, check out Marco's *Symbolism* Study Guide.)

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Characterization

WHAT IS CHARACTERIZATION?

When writers craft stories, they often begin with a specific character in mind. They know who this person is. They have an idea of what this person looks like, what he believes, where he lives, and how he reacts to the world around him. What the writer then needs to do is place this person into a setting, activate a plot from the deep wells of their mind, and then bring the character to life. In writing life into that character, the author provides **characterization**: the way the character acts, thinks, speaks, and moves. Our job is to then determine *why* the author crafted a character in a certain way and *how* those choices add meaning to the text.

When Analyzing Characterization, What Should You Be Looking For?

It is important to focus on HOW the character functions within the text and WHY the author made the choices he or she did.

- As you read, you should focus on the **specific details** that an author decides to include. For example, if an author has a character bite her nails when she is stressed, that sends off a vastly different image than if the author has a character twirl her hair around her finger when she is nervous. One detail implies that the character is mildly self-destructive, while the other implies that the character is innocent and child-like. Each choice is strategic.
- Focusing on **character motives**, what motivates the character to move forward in the story, is another way to determine characterization. Is the character moving forward in the plot because they are seeking justice, because they are trying to protect a family member, because they are trying to find true love? Motivations are everywhere in literature, and it is our job, as readers, to look for them and determine not only what they are, but why they matter in relation to the work as a whole.
- Taking note of a **character's background** can offer insight into the perspective of a character. Often, the character's role in society, in history, in a socio-economic sphere can impact the way we view our character's actions and motives. A character breaking patriarchal rules in the 21st-century America isn't nearly as impressive as a character breaking patriarchal rules in 18th-century England.
- As the plot of a story progresses, characters will typically undergo some sort of **growth**, or they will intentionally remain stagnant. Either path sends a message from the author to the reader. If a character refuses to learn and the lack of growth clearly annoys the author, chances are we are

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supposed to learn something from reading this experience. The lesson that we are supposed to learn may directly relate to the meaning of the work as a whole.

- As we read, we should watch for **character foils**—characters who operate side by side in a text yet have opposing characteristics. These usually appear in literature in order to highlight the differing characteristics of two characters and to put one character's traits in a positive light. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Romeo and Mercutio both have differing opinions on love, honor, and revenge. The impetuous nature of Mercutio allows the readers of the play to focus on Romeo's more thoughtful nature regarding Tybalt (prior to Mercutio's murder, of course). With this in mind, we then have to determine what Shakespeare wanted us to learn. Why is this foil necessary, and what do their opposing reactions and motivations reveal? What lessons should we learn?

Helpful Hints

When analyzing for characterization, it is helpful to know that authors will reveal a character to the reader in one of two ways.

1. **Direct Characterization:** This is where the author specifically states a character's attributes for us.
2. **Indirect Characterization**: This is where the author expects us to do a little detective work. Looking at each of the elements in the following PAIRS acronym can help as we analyze a text for characterization. We should always pay attention to the following and then determine WHY these elements are important and WHAT the author is trying to tell us through these various sections of detail:

   P: Physical Description: Pay attention to the appearance and dress of a character. Perhaps that can reveal what they value: think professionalism over comfort.

   A: Actions: Pay attention to the way a character acts, especially when nobody is watching. Just like real people, our characters will have strengths and flaws, and these are the moments where we learn so much about our characters and the deeper meanings in a text.

   I: Inner thoughts: Just like actions, the inner thoughts of a character can show what the character is really thinking about a subject, a person, or a situation.

   R: Reactions: Analyzing how a character reacts to setbacks and failures can often teach us more than watching how a character responds to success. It is important to note how your characters behave in reaction to a stressful scenario.

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S: Speech: Analyzing the way one character speaks to another can reveal a lot about their character, especially if the person being addressed comes from a different ethnic or socio-economic background. That is where we learn about power dynamics and meaning of the work as a whole. Also, when one character talks about another character, this is a great chance to learn more about both the speaker and the subject of the dialogue.

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Sample Analysis

In the opening lines of "Wuthering Heights" by Emily Bronte, the narrator Lockwood rides up to the house of his new landlord and meets him for the first time. This is the initial meeting of the two men.

Passage

He little imagined how my heart warmed towards him when I beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows, as I rode up, and when his fingers sheltered themselves, with a jealous resolution, still further in his waistcoat as I announced my name.

Analysis

1. Here we learn more about our narrator, Lockwood, through his own description of Heathcliff. Bronte highlights Lockwood's naïve nature as he describes his grumpy landlord who breaks social norms and refuses to shake his hand. Yet, Lockwood still admits to his "heart warming" as he reflects on the meeting, which makes Lockwood seem rather foolish.

2. Bronte ensures that Lockwood both notices and mentions the blackness of Heathcliff's eyes, which, if we believe the eyes are the windows to the soul, tells us more than we need to know about Heathcliff and his dark soul. This acts as foreshadowing for later in the text when we learn that, indeed, Heathcliff is haunted by a darkness that he cannot overcome.

3. Bronte intentionally closes Heathcliff off, even to the act of a civil handshake, portraying his off-putting mannerisms and establishing his isolated nature, and she does it right from the onset of the novel. This not only establishes Heathcliff's character, it also makes Lockwood look naive for having his "heart warmed" by such a rude gesture.

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Setting

WHAT IS SETTING?

At its most basic level, setting reveals the time and place of a story. However, setting does SO much more than that. It has the ability to act symbolically, it can reveal tone, and it can reveal deeper thematic elements that may be hidden in the sub-layers of the text. Setting is a powerful tool in a writer's toolbox, and it is our job, as readers, to determine what the writers want that tool to do and why that goal is important to the meaning of the work as a whole.

Setting as Symbol

When thinking of setting, we don't need to focus solely on physical locations. If the story takes place in a generic apartment in a generic city, then the physical setting doesn't actually matter that much. If, however, that generic apartment in that generic city is surrounded by discarded autumnal leaves and the people living in the apartment are on the verge of divorce, now we have something. Seasonal weather can symbolize numerous ideas, and in the example of the verge-of-divorce couple, the fall leaves can represent the decaying of their relationship. They are past the honeymoon stage (spring) and the deep happiness of summer, but once fall hits and the relationship hits its downward spiral, there isn't much for it to do except plummet into the slow (or quick) death of winter. Dismal, right? But seasons can symbolically represent the stages of life in many ways. Spring equates to birth, summer to childhood, fall to adulthood, winter to old age. This symbolism is universal. So as you read, read beyond the physical location and focus on a season. See if it turns up any symbolic meaning.

Setting as Tone

When watching movies, it is easy to notice the visual images that create setting and establish a tone. If it is a happy scene, we will usually see bright blue skies, full sunny days, and fluffy white clouds. If a character is undergoing some sort of emotional trauma, we can expect to see rain-splattered windows, dark clouds, or at the very least, a nighttime sky. That is because we associate setting with tone, and movie studios are well aware of that. In literature, the same strategy applies. In the novel "Wuthering Heights" by Emily Bronte, one of the main characters, Heathcliff, overhears a snippet of a conversation that damages his ego, and he runs away from home. He runs away from a warm kitchen with the smells of food and the presence of family and into a dark and stormy night with thunder and rain so torrential that he can't hear as his childhood friend chases him out into the storm and yells for him. The tone in this scene is dark and hopeless, and Heathcliff stays gone for three years. The contrast of the warm kitchen to the storm highlights the tragic tone in this section of text.

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Setting as Theme

Setting can serve various functions at once, including establishing place and time, setting a tone, and being a symbol, but it can also establish or reinforce a theme in a text. For example, in "Frankenstein," Mary Shelley ensures that lightning strikes and storm winds blow every time, Frankenstein's scientific creation, Monster, comes back into the narrative. This is because he is such an aberration to nature that nature itself revolts when Monster enters the stage. Shelley creates a setting that actively reinforces the theme of science versus nature.

Sample Analysis

In "The Story of an Hour," published in 1894 by Kate Chopin, the story opens with Louise Brently being informed that her husband was killed in a train accident. Her initial response is immediate sobbing, and she locks herself in her bedroom. The narrative below is what happens next in the story. Notice how the view from her window, the setting, can be analyzed in various ways:

Passage

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

Analysis

1. Chopin creates this spring-time setting in contrast to the dire news of Louise's husband's death because she is establishing the contrast between how we expect her to feel and how she actually feels. The setting establishes the tone as being fresh and new rather than dark and decaying.

2. This "delicious breath of rain" is not a storm, not a dark moment; it is the promise of a symbolic cleansing, a sunny shower, a life-giving rain—not what we would expect after her husband's death. This contrast emphasizes the theme of freedom from marital oppression that the narrator feels.

3. The birds are part of the setting, and Chopin elects to include them intentionally. Since they are part of the setting and birds in flight traditionally represent freedom, it is interesting that these birds are stationary. Since these birds are sitting, they have the potential for flight, for freedom, but they are not embracing it. This is similar to Louise's situation in this moment because with her husband gone she is free from the standards an 1890s wife must live up to, but she isn't taking advantage of that freedom yet.

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How to Read Poetry

Reading poetry can be the most intimidating part of the AP® English Literature exam, but just like most aspects of good test-taking, it's a skill that you can practice and improve. As with many things in life, having a good attitude helps. If you can only think about how much you hate poetry and how bad you are at reading it, you're unlikely to improve. But if you approach it with an open mind and understand that a perfect, complete understanding of a poem is never required on the exam, you'll be fine.

Poetry appears in two different contexts on the exam, and it requires a slightly different approach in each context.

Poetry on the Multiple-Choice Section

If poetry gives you a hard time, keep in mind that you can choose the order in which you do the passages in the multiple-choice section. Do the prose passages first if you're better at those, and leave the poetry ones for the end.

Once you start working on a poetry passage, here are a few tips that can make it easier to manage:

- Read the poem through once quickly, aiming for a basic, literal understanding of the poem.
  - You won't catch all nuance the first time you read through, and that's okay. Focus on the parts you can understand first.
  - Don't worry about interpreting the poem at this point; you won't know exactly what types of interpretations will be required until you get to the questions, so don't waste time trying to guess.
  - Reading without interpreting means you're just looking for broad ideas, and thinking about the literal meaning of words. If the poem contains a lot of symbolism, it will become clearer when you're dealing with specific questions.
- After you give the poem a quick first read, go to the questions. When a question refers to a specific line, go back to the poem and read that line plus a few lines above and below it to place it in context. For example, if a question asks about line 5, which is in the middle of an 8-line stanza, read the entire stanza.
- Once you've read the relevant portion of the poem, think about how you might answer the question if there were no multiple-choice answers *before* you look at the answer choices.

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If you run into words you don't know or a part of the poem that doesn't make sense, skip over it the first time through. Don't get stuck!

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- Use process of elimination heavily, especially if you struggle with poetry.
  - Start by eliminating answer choices you know for sure are wrong—if you're not quite sure about an answer choice, don't eliminate it right away.
  - Refer back to the poem as necessary to keep eliminating answer choices until you get down to one.
  - If you can't choose between two answer choices, just guess and keep moving—you don't have a lot of time, so don't get stuck.

Poetry on the Free-Response Section

The first essay in the free-response section is the Poetry Analysis Essay, so you have to deal with poetry right off the bat. Unlike the multiple-choice section, in which you'll be required to look at several different aspects of a poem, the poetry essay has one specific question, so be sure to start by reading the prompt and making sure you've identified that question. Once you're ready to tackle the poem itself, here are the steps you should follow:

1. Read the title.

The title can give you an indication of what the author had in mind when they were writing the poem, which may be helpful in understanding what it's about.

2. Read the poem through once for a basic, literal understanding.

Try to get an idea of what the poem is about before you start to worry about interpreting it. As on the multiple-choice section, you aren't aiming for 100% comprehension here.

3. Read again, looking for evidence related to the essay task.

Go through the poem a second time and circle or underline things that you notice in the poem that will help you answer the question. Make notes in the margin about why you're marking those things. Focus on things you can actually describe rather than a part of the poem you might think "sounds important" but that you're having trouble understanding.

4. Put your ideas together into a thesis.

Look at the evidence you marked in step 3 and identify trends and/or similarities. Types of evidence you noted in more than one place or different types of evidence that lead to the same interpretation can come together to form part of a thesis statement.

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Diction

WHAT IS DICTION?

Diction, simply put, is word choice. How does an author create a tone, set a mood, establish a setting, make us realize a character is nervous? All through selective diction. You can never say that an author just "uses diction" in a text. You may as well say that the writer uses words to tell a story. No—your job is to tell us if the writer is using tense diction to establish a suspenseful tone or to hasten the speed of the scene. Your job, as an analytical reader, is to tell us why the author chose certain words to do a certain job or to create a certain effect.

When Analyzing Diction, What Should You be Looking for?

Diction falls under the umbrella of figurative language and is most interesting when it is used figuratively rather than literally because it allows us, the readers, room for interpretation. We need to be able to determine when a word is being used to connote something beyond itself by knowing the two levels of word usage:

- Denotation: this is when a writer is using the dictionary definition of a word. If the characters get into a car, it is a car. We can keep reading for more detail later, but we aren't likely to find it here.
- Connotation: this is the emotional baggage that we attach to certain words, or the images and ideas that come to mind when we read a word. So if the characters raced to the Porsche, opened the convertible top, and sped along the beach road, we know we are dealing with ideas of freedom and liberation and youth. The specific words change the connotation. Had the characters gotten into a hearse and drove down a dark, tree-lined street, we would be dealing with an entirely different image.

Helpful Hints

You will look at the effects of specific diction in both poetry and prose, so keep in mind that the words a poet uses are incredibly significant because a poet is dealing with a limiting medium compared with the novelist.

1. Watch for repetition of words or phrases. Authors will do this to emphasize important ideas, significant themes, or development of characterization, and we don't want to miss the bigger picture. These examples of repetition are easier to find in poems because poetry is such a condensed form. It can be more challenging to track down repetition in a novel, but it is not impossible to find if you

Why Diction Matters

Writers carefully consider which words to use to best accomplish their rhetorical goals.

Consider the evolution of the following sentence:

- The stone looked like it could roll down the hill.
- The rock was about to crash down the mountain.
- The boulder was destined to come crashing down the cliff.

The sentence starts out without a lot of excitement, but it gets progressively more dramatic with each version. Each sentence conveys more or less the same idea, but each one fulfills a different rhetorical purpose.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT DICTION:

In the free-response section of the test, it isn't enough to just bring diction up; you have to be specific about it. First give a description of the type of language the author uses—is it objective? Subjective? Literal? Abstract? Then be sure to explain why an author has used particular words and how those words helped achieve a specific purpose.

Adjectives for Describing Diction

high or formal	low or informal	neutral
precise	exact	concrete
abstract	plain	simple
homespun	esoteric	learned
cultured	literal	figurative
connotative	symbolic	picturesque
sensuous	literary	provincial
colloquial	slang	idiomatic
neologistic	inexact	euphemistic
trite	obscure	pedantic
bombastic	grotesque	vulgar
jargon	emotional	obtuse
moralistic	ordinary	scholarly
insipid	proper	pretentious
old-fashioned		

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read carefully and closely. Not all texts will use repetition, but it is a tool that is often utilized.

2. Also remember that many times authors will choose words that will exaggerate (hyperbolize) or understate a topic. This allows the writer to emphasize a point that is important to them without explicitly saying it is important.
3. Authors will often leave some words and phrases intentionally ambiguous, which allows for various interpretations, making for richer analysis. College Board will often choose texts that have moments of ambiguity so that students are given the chance to stretch their analytical muscles.

Sample Analysis

In the opening line of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe chose dark, ominous diction to establish the setting for the story. As you read the opening lines below, pay special attention to the words that are underlined:

> During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.

Approaching these in order and focusing strictly on the word choices, it is clear that the "dull, dark" day is not only using alliteration to draw the reader's attention, but also making it clear to the reader that this setting is not one of joy. It is autumn, certainly not spring. Spring has a connotation of rebirth, hope and joy. Autumn has the connotation of decay and death, which is far more fitting to this text. The clouds "hung oppressively low," indicating that the world does not feel open for the traveler. This isn't a bright cloudless day with a man on a joy ride; this is a man with a heavy world pressing down on him as he travels. And, as his journey for the day closes, rather than say that the sun was fading, Poe instead focused on the "shades of evening" moving in. This creates a more invasive and threatening scenario rather than the soft fading of light. These small exercises in selective diction work together to establish a tone of oppression and foreboding. Nothing good can come of this travel. Poe has made sure of that.

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Symbolism

WHAT IS SYMBOLISM?

As an AP® Literature student, College Board, without a doubt, expects you to be able to identify a symbol and explain the function of that symbol—*why* does it exist in the text? In order to do this, you need to know what a symbol actually is. Simply put, a symbol is an object that represents an idea beyond itself. A common example is a wedding band. It is circular in shape, which means it doesn't have a starting or stopping point: it is infinite, similar to the love that the couple feels for one another. At its core, it is just a band of metal shaped into a circular form, but it tells people that the person wearing it is married and that they are engaged into a legal bond to another person. That tiny strip of metal represents so much more than what it actually is. Therefore, it is a symbol. Now, if only finding and analyzing symbols in literature were that easy.

When Analyzing Symbolism, What Should You be Looking for?

Your job as an astute reader is to determine *which* objects in a text are symbols and which are just objects. Some symbols are easy to pick up on because they are relatively universal. A dove symbolizes peace, spring represents new life and rebirth, doors and gates represent thresholds of opportunity, birds and feathers represent flight, escape, and freedom. These are fairly universal because they are so often portrayed in literature and popular culture.

In Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, The protagonist and novel namesake, Jane, is an orphan living in her Aunt's home, and it is clear from the first page that she is an unwelcome intrusion. Young Jane steals away into a curtained corner of the room, a glass window pane separating her from the world on one side and a heavy red curtain blocking her from sight on the other. In her hands she reads "Bewick's 'History of British Birds.'" As a small child trapped in a home with a family who doesn't want her, reading a book about birds while sitting next to a closed window highlights her desire to leave, to escape, to fly away, and also emphasizes the idea that she can't leave, that she is trapped by the ominous presence of the family who is supposed to be caring for her. This passage is strategic and heavily symbolic, making it rife with opportunities for analysis.

Our job as literary detectives is not only to determine what symbols are and what they mean, but also to determine how these symbolic settings, actions, events, or objects can add to the overall meaning or complexity of a text. In the example of Jane Eyre, when Jane is an adult and her aunt calls on her for a favor, it is important to remember the symbolism of a small girl wanting to escape when we see how Jane reacts to her family.

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It is telling of her characterization and many overarching themes in the novel. Connecting the symbol from early in the book to the events later in the book is what gives the analysis more richness and depth.

Helpful Hints

It is important to remember that not all symbols will be actual objects. They can also be settings, seasons, actions, characters and events.

Also remember that not all symbols will be universal symbols. While some symbols may hold similar meanings across texts, some symbols are specific to a particular text. Take, for example, the red letter A from The Scarlet Letter. Most of us now know that is represents, or symbolizes, adultery, but when the book first came out in 1850, few would have known what it stood for. It was specific to that text.

When engaging in analysis, it is helpful to consider that symbols can represent a character's perspective as much as it can an overarching theme or deeper meaning. In "The Scarlet Letter," the letter A begins by representing the word "adultery," but as Hester engrains herself into the community, the community changes its opinion of her and the symbol shifts to represent the word "able." That shift would make excellent fodder for a literary analysis essay focusing on transformation or characterization.

The most important thing to remember about symbolism is that there is rarely a single correct interpretation. Many symbols require textual context and reader experience in order to bring them to light and assign meaning to them. That works in your favor as an analyzer of literature because it offers you the freedom to take interpretive leaps in your analysis.

Sample Analysis

In the opening of Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, two distinguished men are walking through the streets of London, through a beautifully kept neighborhood, and they come across a door attached to "a certain sinister block of buildings." The door is described as such:

> The door, which was equipped with neither bell nor knocker, was blistered and distained. Tramps slouched into the recess and struck matches on the panels; children kept shop upon the steps; the schoolboy had tried his knife on the mouldings; and for close on a generation, no one had appeared to drive away these random visitors or to repair their ravages.

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The door is later revealed to lead to the home of the infamous Mr. Hyde, who is later described as "downright detestable" and giving "a strong feeling of deformity" although no deformity is outwardly visible. The door is described in such a way that it is symbolic of the character of Hyde: rough, neglected, abused, not given much thought or repair. The door is a target for vandalism because there is an air about it that is similar to Hyde. Something is off balance, but nobody can definitively say why, so it is allowed to exist in its state of "otherness."

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