

Essential Question: What is allusion in literature?

Allusion is a brief, unexplained reference to a well-known person, historical event, organization, literary work, place, or something cultural. Authors often allude to Biblical stories, mythology, as well as cultural and historical icons.

Example 1:

From **"Nothing Gold Can Stay" (1923) by Robert Frost**

"Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay."

Here, iconic American poet Robert Frost **makes an allusion to the Biblical Garden of Eden** ("so Eden sank to grief") to strengthen this idea that nothing—not even Paradise—can last forever.

Example 2:

"The Waste Land" (1922) by T. S. Eliot

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

T. S. Eliot's well-regarded poem, "The Waste Land" is filled to the brim with literary allusions, many of which are fairly obscure.

Immediately in this poem, Eliot thrusts an allusion at us: the mention of April being "the cruellest month" sharply **contrasts with the opening of medieval English poet Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales***, which describes April as a cheerful, lively month filled with stories, pilgrimages,

and "sweet-smelling showers." To Eliot, April is exceptionally cruel because of the pain associated with the regeneration of life.

Being unaware of this literary connection here would make you miss the almost sarcastic play on words Eliot does with his antithetical view of April and spring as a whole.

Example 3:

To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) by Harper Lee

"Are we poor, Atticus?"

Atticus nodded. "We are indeed."

Jem's nose wrinkled. "Are we as poor as the Cunninghams?"

"Not exactly. The Cunninghams are country folks, farmers, and the crash hit them hardest."

This quotation from Harper Lee's renowned novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* contains an allusion to the "crash," that is, the Stock Market Crash of 1929, which resulted in the Great Depression.

The word "crash" alone could confuse readers who are unaware of the historical event or who do not understand when and where the novel takes place (answer: 1930s America, so right smack in the middle of the Great Depression).

Example 4:

The Outsiders (1967) by S. E. Hinton

"Ponyboy."

I barely heard him. I came closer and leaned over to hear what he was going to say.

"Stay gold, Ponyboy. Stay gold ... " The pillow seemed to sink a little, and Johnny died.

The line "Stay gold, Ponyboy" from S. E. Hinton's classic coming-of-age story is an example of both **external** *and* **internal allusion**.

Earlier on in the novel, Ponyboy and Johnny talk about Robert Frost's famous poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (see above). In other words, **this scene has a direct reference to a real poem that originated from *outside* the novel.**

When Johnny later tells Ponyboy to "stay gold" as he lay dying, this is both an external allusion (in that it refers to the poem by Frost) *and* an internal allusion (in that it alludes to the boys' previous discussion and analysis of the poem).

Example 5:

***1Q84* (2009) by Haruki Murakami**

The allusion here isn't a specific quotation but rather the title of 2009 bestselling novel, *1Q84* by Japanese author Haruki Murakami.

While English speakers might not see the connection right away, the title of this dystopian novel is an allusion to George Orwell's, ***1984***. How? You

see, in Japanese, the letter "Q" is pronounced the same way as the number nine, making the title sound as if you're saying "1984" or "one nine eight four" in Japanese.

Indeed, Murakami is well-known for his allusions and references to **Western pop culture**, which is likely one of the reasons he has developed into an international sensation.

Essential Question: Why do authors use it?

Authors use allusion to emphasize and develop the overall theme of a work.

“An allusion is a literary device writers use to develop characters, frame storylines, and help create associations with well-known works. An allusion is different from foreshadowing, which is a reference to something that has not happened yet. Writers use both to give readers more insight; however, allusion is for creating context, while foreshadowing is for creating tension. Writers use allusions as stylistic devices to help contextualize a story by

referencing a well-known person, place, event, or another literary work. They do not have to explicitly explain these references; more often than not, writers choose to let readers fill in the blanks.

Writers might elect to use an allusion to communicate an idea or description quickly. For example, an author might call something “Tiffany Blue”—a reference to the specific blue the jeweler Tiffany & Co. has used in its branding since the 1800s—rather than using a full sentence to describe the precise shade.

Alternatively, a writer could use allusions as a way to relate more closely to their readers, by referencing people, events, or other pop culture touchpoints with which they are likely to be familiar. For example, an author who writes about a character with “a Cheshire grin” is betting on readers understanding the reference to the Cheshire cat in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.”

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Essential Question: How can you better recognize allusion in books and poetry?

1 Many writers use the same (or very similar) allusions in their texts. Therefore, if you can familiarize yourself with the major people, places, events, objects, and ideas that are alluded to in stories and poetry, you'll be better equipped to identify them right away.

As mentioned before, Biblical allusions, as well as allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, are common in Western texts. Here are some allusion examples to know in these categories:

- **Hercules (or Herculean)** — Often used to emphasize strength
- **Pandora's Box** — Describes big (and usually unexpected) consequences or a possible source of trouble
- **Cupid** — God of love; used to describe someone romantic or in love
- **Garden of Eden** — Used to discuss paradise, beauty, and/or downfall

- **Noah/Noah's Ark** — Used to talk about big or nearly impossible tasks
- **David and Goliath** — Describes a battle or face-off between two in which the weaker one, or underdog, might actually have a better shot at winning
- **Tower of Babel** — Often used to describe the crumbling or tragic end of something

#2: Look for proper nouns that don't fit with the rest of the text.

Most allusions are connected to specific people, places, or pieces of art—in other words, all things that generally have proper nouns (i.e., capitalized names).

If you ever come across a proper noun in a book or poem that doesn't immediately ring a bell (and isn't mentioned again later on, meaning it's not a new character), then it's most likely an allusion to something originating from *outside* the world of the text.

References:

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<https://blog.prepscholar.com/allusion-examples#:~:text=So%20Eden%20sank%20to%20grief,even%20Paradise%E2%80%94can%20last%20forever.>