

You probably already use **hyperbole** when you speak and write without even thinking about it. People often use hyperbole for a poetic, dramatic, and/or comedic effect.

Hyperbole is a figure of speech that uses extreme exaggeration for **emphasis**. (A **figure of speech** is a nonliteral word or phrase used to impress, persuade, or engage the reader or listener.)

Hyperbole is regularly used in comedy. It is also used to describe how a person feels and/or used to emphasize a point.

Here are some examples of hyperbole that you might already use. Can you explain what these expressions really mean? What is the writer or speaker emphasizing?

1. The movie took forever.
2. I am so hungry, I could eat a horse.
3. He is so tall, he could touch the top of the Eiffel Tower.

4. My feet are killing me.
5. The pen is mightier than the sword.
6. Our teacher is older than dirt.
7. I died of embarrassment.
8. I love you to Neptune and back.
9. The baby is so cute that you could get a cavity by looking at him.
10. Our vacation will cost an arm and a leg.

Literary Analysis of Hyperbole

Examples of hyperbole in literature.

Example 1:

From *The Tragedie of Macbeth* (1606) by William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616).

After killing King Duncan in Act II, Scene 2, Macbeth realizes there is no way to absolve himself of his sin:

Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No. This my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

Explanation: The guilt makes Macbeth feel as though his hands will never again be clean—a hyperbolic sentiment in itself. He emphasizes this by saying that if he attempted to “wash his hands,” he would turn the green sea red. This

powerful hyperbole, which marks the apex of the play's rising action, underlines the guilt and disgust Macbeth experiences after killing King Duncan.

Example 2:

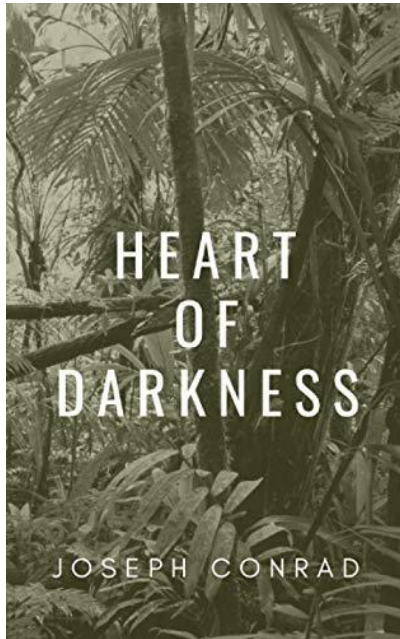
From “**Quinceañera**” from *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1991) by Judith Ortiz Cofer (1952 – 2016)

In this poem about navigating puberty, family, and society's expectations of womanhood, Cofer uses vibrant imagery and figurative language to convey her discomfort and confusion:

... “My hair
has been nailed back with my mother’s
black hairpins to my skull. Her hands
stretched my eyes open as she twisted
braids into a tight circle at the nape
of my neck. ...

Explanation: In this stanza, Cofer describes her mother's hairstyling technique as nailing the hair to her skull. Obviously hyperbolic, Cofer is conveying how uncomfortable the application of hairpins and braiding of her hair feels."

Example 3:



From *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad (1857 – 1924)

Conrad's novella seems to praise and criticize imperialism at once. After 30 days at sea, Marlow, Conrad's narrator/protagonist, encounters a group of Africans who have worked themselves sick to build a railroad and have been left for dead.

"I had to wait in the station for ten days—an eternity."

While 10 days is much shorter than an eternity, Conrad is using hyperbole to describe his protagonist's discomfort. Perhaps Marlow, a willing participant in exploitative colonialism, feels guilty when seeing this system in action. Thus, his time at the station seems to drag on.

Example 4:

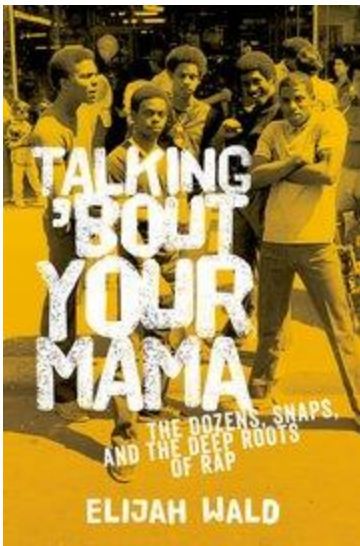
From *Slaughterhouse Five* (The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death) (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1922 – 2007)

This intensely dark comedy is based on the author's real experiences in World War II. Vonnegut was interned in Dresden, Germany, and survived the city's bombing, which killed around 25,000 civilians.

“There was a fire-storm out there. Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn.

It wasn’t safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead.”

It almost seems strange to call this hyperbole, as 90 percent of the city’s center was destroyed. However, Dresden wasn’t a literal “big flame,” and the sky, while darkened by smoke, likely wasn’t entirely blacked out.



Vonnegut is using exaggeration to help the readers understand how intense and horrifying that moment was.

Reference:

<https://www.supersummary.com/hyperbole/>