

Oxymorons in Literature

“An **oxymoron** is a figure of speech that places contradictory terms next to each other in a word or phrase. As a literary device, it is used to make certain word combinations more thought-provoking to stand out.”—www.grammarly.com

An **oxymoron** is “a combination of contradictory or incongruous words (such as *cruel kindness*); something (such as a concept) that is made up of contradictory or incongruous elements.”
—www.m-w.com

“An **oxymoron** is a literary device that combines words with contradictory definitions to form a new word [bittersweet] or phrase [deafening silence]. The dichotomy of the resulting statement allows writers to play with language and meaning.”—
www.masterclass.com

Why do writers use **oxymorons**?

“The juxtaposition of two opposing words can add irony, reveal a deeper meaning behind the text, or add onto the dramatic effect.”—www.studiobinder.com

“Add dramatic effect. Writers can use **oxymorons** to dramatize feelings and situations. For example, the oxymoron “absolutely unsure” comprises contrasting definitions to support the concept of a character feeling completely uncertain. This emphasis can add a dramatic effect to a sentence or passage.

Add irony. Some **oxymorons** contain words with contrasting cultural associations. Writers can use ironic **oxymorons** like “airline schedule,” “business ethics,” and “military intelligence” to mock or poke fun.

Create a playful tone. The use of **oxymorons** adds playfulness to writing. **Oxymorons** like “seriously funny,” “original copy,” “plastic glasses,” and “clearly confused” juxtapose opposing words next to one another, but their ability to make sense despite their opposing forces adds wit to writing.

Reveal a deeper meaning. The dichotomy of an **oxymoron** often expresses a complex idea. It gives a reader pause and makes them think about the context differently. The word “bittersweet,” for example, is an **oxymoron** that reveals an object's or idea's double-sided existence.” www.masterclass.com

[List of Oxymorons](#)

Activity: With a learning partner, explain why the following pairs of words are **oxymorons**.

1. Same difference
2. Original copy
3. "Mr. Mom" (movie title)
4. Working vacation
5. Idiot savant

Oxymorons in Literature (Analysis and Discussion)

Oxymorons in *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare

Act 1

Multiple **oxymorons** exist in *Romeo and Juliet's* Act 1. In fact, a few short lines from Romeo display multiple **oxymorons**.

"Here's much to do with hate, but more with love.

Why, then, O **brawling love**, O **loving hate**,

O anything of nothing first create!

O **heavy lightness**, **serious vanity**,

Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms,

Feather of lead, **bright smoke**, **cold fire**, **sick health**. . ."

Romeo speaks these lines in Act 1 as he is pining over his unrequited love for Rosaline. He is lamenting this

love, as well as the feud between his family, the Montagues, and the Capulets. There are multiple oxymorons at play in these few lines.

"Oh brawling love, O loving hate"

Rosaline is a niece of Lord Capulet, the head of the family the Montagues are feuding with. This would make any prospective relationship taboo, which becomes evident when Romeo falls in love with another Capulet, Juliet. In these lines, "loving hate" is an **oxymoron**, as the two words are contradictory. By placing the two words together, Shakespeare is drawing attention to what plagues Romeo's heart: How can hate be love? Perhaps the answer can be found in a taboo relationship as well as in unrequited love, a love that one might hate because of the feelings of despair it leaves in its wake.

Other **oxymorons** in this passage include "heavy lightness", "serious vanity", "feather of lead", "bright smoke", "cold fire", and "sick health". All of these showcase just how conflicting his emotions are. The audience is drawn into this confusion and chaos as they consider the words spoken and the meanings carried within those contradictory terms.

***Persuasion* (1818):** An example of an **oxymoron** in Jane Austen's (1775 – 1817) romance novel includes "angry pleasure," describing Lady Russell's

contradictory feelings toward Frederick Wentworth's courtship with the young Louisa Musgrove.

***Don Juan* (1819):** Lord Byron's (1788 – 1824) epic poem about the Spanish legend of Don Juan chronicles the Battle of Ismail and includes the **oxymoron** “melancholy merriment,” perhaps describing the irony of war's victory and death.

Jane Eyre* (1847):** ***Charlotte Brontë's (1816 -1855) classic story revolves around themes of love, independence, family, and obligation. Torn between love and duty, St. John, cousin of Jane, describes his deep feelings for Rosamond Oliver as “delicious poison.” He feels an overwhelming temptation to be with the woman he loves, even knowing it will ultimately steer him off course.

***The Call of the Wild* (1903):** Jack London's (1876 – 1916) novel contains figurative language to describe the harsh beauty of the Canadian Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush. When the Aurora Borealis lights the sky, London describes it as “flaming coldly.” When Buck, the main dog in the story, is beaten into submission, London describes his pain as “exquisite agony.” The **oxymorons** mirror the contrast between the serene yet brutal landscape of the Yukon and Buck's resistance to his new environment and his primal desire to embrace it.

What is the difference between an **oxymoron** and a paradox?

“Although both a *paradox* and an **oxymoron** involve contradictions, they have an important difference. A *paradox* is a rhetorical device or a self-contradictory statement that can actually be true. While an **oxymoron** is a figure of speech that pairs two opposing words.”—www.dictionary.com [Learn More!](#)

References:

[Studio Binder](#)

[Grammarly](#)

[Study.com](#)

[Dictionary.com](#)

[Masterclass.com](#)