

Flashback in Literature | Definition, Types & Examples

What Are Literary Devices?

A **literary device** is a technique or structure employed by authors to enhance meaning, progress a storyline, enliven their characters or settings, and enrich the themes in their work. A few common literary devices include irony, metaphor, allegory, foreshadowing, and imagery. One device that can be used to increase understanding about a character, situation, or overall time frame is called a **flashback**.

What is a Flashback in Literature?

The flashback definition in literature refers to an interruption in the chronological order or timeline of a narrative to give additional information or backstory needed to further the reader's understanding. In a flashback, the current action of the story is interrupted by a clear or distinct memory to reveal important or interesting past events and background information. Why do authors use flashbacks? Flashbacks as literary devices often reveal information about a character's past, which could include disclosing personal secrets or inner conflict. The flashback may occur at any point in the work and may be of any duration and in any previous time sequence. A flashback typically extends beyond the simple narration of previous events by a character to include **vivid language** regarding the setting and events, shifting the time frame into the past. In addition to relating important character background information, authors may also use flashbacks to foreshadow important events or to create interest within the chronological flow of the story.

Types of Flashbacks

The technical term for a flashback is **analepsis**. The definition of analepsis refers to the interruption of the overall chronology of the narrative to include a past event or situation that will reveal important background information relating to the events or characters. The opposite of analepsis is **prolepsis**, which is also known as a flashforward. Within the realm of analepsis are several types of flashbacks.

- A **dream sequence flashback** occurs when a character envisions or recalls previous events in a dream. One example from literature is found in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. In the beginning of the novel, Mr. Lockwood's upsetting dream about Cathy, who has already died, sets the stage for key elements of the plot.
- A **straight break flashback** in the narrative happens when the narrator interrupts the chronological flow of the text to give additional backstory designed to enhance the reader's understanding of the events or characters. Brandon Sanderson often uses straight break flashbacks in his writing as interludes in the text, especially through short chapters in alternate time frames that are strategically placed between larger sections of text set in the main time frame.
- A **memory flashback** is a type of flashback where events or dialogue in the narrative cause a character to remember previous events. Montag in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* has a flashback as a vivid memory about meeting Faber which is provoked by Montag's **epiphany** regarding books and desire for a mentor.

- A **foreshadowing flashback** happens when the information in the flashback creates suspense about a future event or gives away the ending, allowing the chronology of the narrative to explain the details leading to the foreshadowed events. For example, in the opening of the Magnus Chase series by Rick Riordan, the protagonist informs the reader that he has died. This foreshadowing flashback provides a [narrative hook](#), and the opening section of the book then fills in the details leading up to the impending death.

Flashback Examples in Literature

Flashbacks are used in many genres of literature. One example of analepsis, or flashback, in young adult [fantasy literature](#) is in the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. Flashbacks in the seven novels are employed in several unique ways, including by allowing the characters to experience the flashback as if they were happening in the present through the use of magic. For example, in book five, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, readers experience a flashback through the eyes of the protagonist Harry as he enters the memory of his professor, Severus Snape. This flashback serves to create sympathy for the character of Snape and give background on the relationship of several of the characters. The timing of the flashback is important, as giving this information earlier in the series would have removed some of the suspense and mystery surrounding the characters.

An example of flashback in classical literature is in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. After rejecting an offer of marriage from Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet receives a letter which details a situation from years prior involving Mr. Darcy's sister Georgiana. This new information gives insight into several of the characters and their motives at a crucial point in the plot. Another well-known example of flashback in [classical literature](#) is found in Homer's *Odyssey*, where information about Odysseus prior to the opening of the text, en route home from Troy, is related in the epic poem through flashback.

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* uses a continuous flashback as the narrator recalls her childhood and fills in the reader with details needed to understand the plot, finally coming full circle with Jem breaking his arm. This type of continuous flashback is most often found in coming-of-age literature where the narrator relates events from their childhood, but continuous flashback can also be found in novels where the narrator is an adult in the main timeframe of the novel, such as in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

In [Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities](#), the letter read in Book 3 Chapter 10 is an example of flashback given through a letter. Through the letter, important backstory is revealed regarding the character of Dr. Manette. The letter vividly describes events in the past and transports the chronology to a previous time frame.

Lesson Summary

Flashback is a type of **literary device** used to create interest in the flow of the narrative, provide background information or sympathy for a character (including secrets or inner conflicts), or reveal background information necessary to drive the plot. A flashback interrupts the present narrative with a memory of events, often vivid, set in the past. Flashback, also called **analepsis**, may come in many forms, including **dream flashbacks** (when a character has fallen asleep and dreams of past events), **straight break flashbacks** (when the story's chronology clearly shifts to past events), **memory flashbacks** (when events or dialogue cause a character to relive a memory), or **foreshadowing flashbacks** (when information is given about the future and then

flashback is used to fill in the missing timeline). Flashbacks can be found in all genres of literature and may occur at any point in the chronology and last for any duration of time.

1. What is the primary purpose of a literary device?

- a) To lengthen a story
- b) To enhance meaning and enrich themes
- c) To complicate the plot
- d) To introduce new characters

Answer: b) To enhance meaning and enrich themes

2. Which of the following is NOT a common literary device?

- a) Irony
- b) Allegory
- c) Alliteration
- d) Flashback

Answer: c) Alliteration

3. What does a flashback in literature typically do?

- a) Interrupts the chronological order to provide background information
- b) Predicts future events in the story
- c) Describes the setting in detail
- d) Introduces new characters

Answer: a) Interrupts the chronological order to provide background information

4. What is the technical term for a flashback?

- a) Analepsis
- b) Prolepsis
- c) Epilogue
- d) Prelude

Answer: a) Analepsis

5. Which type of flashback occurs in a dream?

- a) Straight break flashback
- b) Memory flashback
- c) Dream sequence flashback
- d) Foreshadowing flashback

Answer: c) Dream sequence flashback

6. In 'Fahrenheit 451,' what triggers Montag's flashback?

- a) A conversation with another character
- b) A dream
- c) Reading a book
- d) His epiphany about books

Answer: d) His epiphany about books

7. What is the opposite of analepsis?

- a) Metaphor
- b) Irony
- c) Prolepsis
- d) Allegory

Answer: c) Prolepsis

8. In 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix,' how is the flashback experienced?

- a) Through a letter
- b) Through a dream
- c) Through a character's memory
- d) Through magical means

Answer: d) Through magical means

9. Which novel uses a continuous flashback as its narrative structure?

- a) A Tale of Two Cities
- b) To Kill a Mockingbird
- c) Pride and Prejudice
- d) The Odyssey

Answer: b) To Kill a Mockingbird

10. In 'A Tale of Two Cities,' how is the flashback presented?

- a) Through a character's dream
- b) In a letter
- c) Through a character's memory
- d) As a separate chapter

Answer: b) In a letter

Irony in Literature Definition, Types & Examples

What Is Irony?

One of the most powerful literary devices writers use is **irony**, when the actual meaning of a word is the opposite of what is stated or an outcome is different from what is expected. Irony can be humorous or will show the incongruity between appearance and reality, that is, when a situation is at odds with what is real. Thus, it can be used as a social critique.



Three Types of Irony

Three types of irony demonstrate its extensive use in literature: *verbal*, *situational*, and *dramatic irony*. Each type is used for a literary effect such as humor or to give readers the pleasure of discovery.

Verbal Irony

Writers and speakers use **verbal irony** to mean the opposite of what is actually stated, usually for humor. There are several types of verbal irony.

- **Socratic irony** occurs when someone pretends ignorance to reveal someone else's ignorance or inconsistency, especially to encourage learning. An [example of Socratic irony](#) is when someone says "I'm confused, I thought you read *Macbeth*. Why don't you know anything about it?"
- **Sarcasm** occurs when someone says, "Oh, marvelous!" to mean something unfortunate, opposite the literal meaning. An [example of sarcasm](#) is found in *The Hunger Games*, when Katniss says, "District 12. Where you can starve to death in safety."
- **Understatement** in which a speaker uses a word of lesser severity to increase the severity of the unstated, more appropriate word. For example, at a diplomatic summit, a diplomat might say, "We have reached an impasse" to emphasize how a breakdown of talks has stalled trade agreements.
- **Hyperbole** or [exaggeration](#) in which overstatement expresses a more extreme case than is warranted. For example, if world events prohibit travel, a teenager might say "I'll die if I can't go to Paris!"

Situational Irony

Unexpected endings of stories create **situational irony**. [O. Henry](#), especially good at situational irony, demonstrates its use in "[The Gift of the Magi](#)", memorable for its ironic ending. In the story, a poor couple, James and Della Dillingham, want to buy expensive Christmas gifts for each other. Della has long, luxuriant hair while James has an antique pocket watch that he loves. To afford their Christmas gifts, Della sells her luxuriant hair to buy a platinum watch chain for James; James sells his antique watch to buy a tortoiseshell comb with gems on it for Della's hair.

Another famous short story writer, Guy de Maupassant, used situational irony to surprise readers. One especially memorable story is "The Necklace." In the story, the Loiseles have a rich friend, [Madame Forestier](#), who owns a diamond necklace. On one special occasion, the beautiful Mathilde Loisel borrows the diamond necklace to show off her beauty and to experience what it would be like to live a rich lifestyle. However, Mathilde loses the necklace. Rather than admit what happened, the Loiseles spend ten years replacing the expensive necklace. In fact, however, the original necklace was paste, a fake. The irony is that Mathilde, through all the hard work she endured, destroys her priceless beauty. The situational irony emphasizes the story's theme of how appearances can deceive.

Dramatic Irony

Playwrights use **dramatic irony**, a type of incongruity in which the audience understand what is truly happening while the character or characters do not until much later in the play. Dramatic irony increases a reader's or audience's anticipation as they await the moment when the characters understand the true nature of their situation. Types of dramatic irony include *tragic irony*, *structural irony*, and *cosmic irony*.

- **Tragic irony** is used in Greek drama to emphasize the nature of hubris, or a character's prideful action or errors. Sophocles used dramatic irony in *Oedipus Rex*, for example. The audience understands the error of Oedipus's actions long before he, himself realizes what he has done. The irony is tragic because Oedipus's actions lead to his untimely death.
- **Structural irony** is an incongruity that pervades the structure of a literary work. Sometimes authors will choose a protagonist or a narrator who has limited understanding of a situation and therefore misinterprets the actions of other characters or the story's events. Such a character is called an **unreliable narrator**. When unreliable narrators relate the story, readers see through the narrator's mistakes throughout the story's structure, thereby forcing the reader to reinterpret the story's ironic meaning. An example of structural irony is the novel *The Go-Between* by L. P. Hartley, a story told by a young boy who carries messages between two adulterous and aristocratic lovers. Because he is too young to

understand physical love and is not a member of the aristocracy, he does not fully understand his part in the lovers' deceptions. Readers must "read between the lines" to fully grasp the irony of the story.

- **Cosmic irony**, or irony of fate, is a literary device in which writers depict characters who are controlled by fate or the gods, forces that are indifferent to what happens to the characters or their aspirations, often highlighting the need for social change. Writers of naturalism like Thomas Hardy depict characters who struggle helplessly against fate. The characters who experience cosmic irony are simply overwhelmed by events or are unable to control them. For example, in Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*, one of the characters, Mrs. Yeobright, decides to send a gift of gold coins to her son to repair their relationship. She gives the coins to Christian Cantle, a simpleton who loses the coins in a game of chance. Thus, fate intervenes so that instead of repairing the relationship, the situation is worsened.

Irony Examples in Literature and Real Life

Irony examples in literature and real life are numerous.

- An **example of verbal irony** can be found in the movie, *The Lion King*, just before Simba's father is killed in a stampede. Scar says he wants to show Simba a surprise and Simba asks, "Hey, Uncle Scar, will I like the surprise?" Scar answers, "It's to die for," as if Simba is getting a spectacular surprise. The meaning is ironic, however, since the phrase expresses how something is desirable enough to risk life and limb, though not literally. Simba thinks Scar is using the exaggeration of the phrase, but Scar knows the surprise will result in the literal death of Simba's father.
- Kate Chopin's short story, "The Story of an Hour" is a good example of situational irony. The protagonist, Mrs. Mallard, learns her husband has died in a train accident. The story is about how, despite the bad news, Mrs. Mallard is overjoyed to be free of marriage. When she learns that her husband has, indeed, survived the accident, she dies. Her physician concludes she has died from "joy that kills." The doctor represents society's expectations about a woman's role in marriage, the expectation that she loves being married. Readers, therefore, must interpret the irony of the pronouncement, since Mrs. Mallard has died not from joy but from the horror of being chained once more to her husband.
- *Romeo and Juliet* is a good **example of dramatic irony**, especially in the scenes where Juliet has taken the elixir that imitates death. To warn Romeo that he should not believe reports of Juliet's death, the Friar sends word to Romeo. The message does not reach Romeo, however, and the scene that should be the reunion of two heroic lovers, is, instead, a tragic ending as the lovers take their own lives. The dramatic irony occurs because the audience knows the truth about Juliet's potion and anticipates the horror of Romeo's discovery of the sleeping Juliet. That the two take their own lives out of erroneous belief increases the tragedy of the story.

Ironies occur frequently in real life. A husband and wife are advised to get a life-saving vaccine. The wife, a sweet-tempered nurse who cares for the sick, gets the vaccine but the husband, a cold, mean-spirited man, refuses to be vaccinated. The wife, supposedly protected by the vaccine, dies, but the husband, ironically, never gets ill.



Lesson Summary

Irony meaning is the use of a word that is opposite its true meaning. The powerful literary devices, irony, occurs when the actual meaning of a word is the opposite of what is stated, thereby showing an incongruity, that is, a situation at odds with what is true or real. Irony creates humor or is used for social critique.

There are three types of irony used in literature including:

Verbal irony, when someone means the opposite of what is actually stated. Types of verbal irony include the following:

- **Socratic irony** or pretending ignorance to encourage dialog.
- **Sarcasm** or humorously expressing the opposite of the literal meaning of a word.
- **Understatement** or emphasizing the effects of a literal meaning by minimizing its importance.
- **Hyperbole** or exaggeration.

Situational irony occurs in stories with an ending that is surprising or unexpected or opposite of what should be true. The effect of situational irony is used for humor or to create an incongruity, that is, a contradiction between what is real and what is false.

Dramatic irony occurs when the audience of a play is aware of the true circumstances of a story, but the character or characters do not realize what is truly happening until much later in the play. The effect is to increase the humor of a comedy or the grief of a tragedy. Types of dramatic irony include the following:

- **Tragic irony** is used in Greek drama to emphasize the nature of hubris, or a character's prideful action or errors.
- **Structural irony** is an incongruity that occurs when a protagonist or a narrator does not fully understand the story's situation and therefore misinterprets the actions of other characters or the story's events. Such a character is called an **unreliable narrator**.
- **Cosmic irony** occurs when fate or the gods seem to work against a character's aspirations and actions.

Irony examples in literature and real life include the following:

- *The Lion King* has verbal irony when Scar says he has a surprise for Simba "that's to die for," a phrase that implies something spectacular. Simba's father, however, really dies when Simba goes to see his so-called surprise.
- Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is an example of situational irony. Mrs. Mallard, who has heart trouble, believes she has been released from the chains of marriage when her husband is killed in an accident. However, when he shows up alive, she dies, not out of "joy that kills," as her doctor thinks, but out of horror that she is chained again in marriage.
- *Romeo and Juliet* is an example of dramatic irony when Juliet drinks a potion that makes her seem to die. Romeo never receives the message that Juliet is really alive. Believing her to be dead, Romeo takes his own life. Juliet, awakening and seeing the dead Romeo, takes her own life as well. The potion that is supposed to bring the lovers happily together ends up being the very thing that causes their death.
- Real-life examples of irony occur every day. A sweet wife receives what she believes is a life-saving vaccine while her mean-spirited husband does not receive the vaccine. Ironically, she dies but he lives.

1. Shakespeare uses ____ in the plot of Romeo and Juliet when Juliet fakes her death to be with Romeo, but Romeo doesn't know this and kills himself.

verbal irony

situational irony

sarcasm

dramatic irony

2. Saying the opposite of what you mean, sometimes for humorous effect, is an example of ____.

situational irony

verbal irony

dramatic irony

comedy

3. How do dramatic irony and situational irony differ?

Dramatic irony depends on the audience's expectations being met.

Dramatic irony depends on the audience knowing something the characters don't.

Situational irony depends on the audience knowing something the characters don't.

Situational irony depends on the audience's expectations being met.

4. In The Story of an Hour, Louise's relief at learning that her husband has been killed in an accident is an example of ____.

dramatic irony

situational irony

verbal irony

sarcasm

5. That only the audience knows Louise's husband is not dead in The Story of an Hour is an example of ____.

situational irony

sarcasm

verbal irony

dramatic irony

6. What is the essence of irony in literature?

a) Using complex words

b) Presenting the truth directly

c) Conveying the opposite of the literal meaning

d) Creating straightforward situations

7. Which is not a type of irony?

a) Verbal irony

b) Situational irony

c) Literal irony

d) Dramatic irony

8. What does Socratic irony involve?

- a) Exaggerating a situation
- b) Pretending ignorance to reveal another's ignorance
- c) Describing events **literally**
- d) Predicting future events

9. Which literary work is an example of situational irony?

- a) "The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry
- b) "Macbeth" by William Shakespeare
- c) "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald
- d) "The Odyssey" by Homer

10. What type of irony is used in Greek drama to emphasize hubris?

- a) Structural irony
- b) Verbal irony
- c) Tragic irony
- d) Cosmic irony

1. Shakespeare uses _____ in the plot of Romeo and Juliet when Juliet fakes her death to be with Romeo, but Romeo doesn't know this and kills himself.

1. verbal irony

2. situational irony

3. sarcasm

4. dramatic irony



2. Saying the opposite of what you mean, sometimes for humorous effect, is an example of _____.

1. situational irony

2. verbal irony

3. dramatic irony

4. comedy



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1. Dramatic irony depends on the audience's expectations being met.

2. Dramatic irony depends on the audience knowing something the characters don't.

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4. Situational irony depends on the audience's expectations being met.



4. In The Story of an Hour, Louise's relief at learning that her husband has been killed in an accident is an example of _____.

1. dramatic irony

2. situational irony

3. verbal irony



4. sarcasm

5. That only the audience knows Louise's husband is not dead in *The Story of an Hour* is an example of _____.

1. situational irony

2. sarcasm

3. verbal irony

4. dramatic irony 

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4. d) Cosmic irony