Literary Devices: Metaphor, Irony, and Symbolism



- **Goal:** notice, name, and interpret three high-frequency devices with evidence
- **Metaphor:** implied comparison; one thing described as another
- **Irony:** tension between expectation and reality, or said and meant
- **Symbolism:** a concrete object or action carrying abstract meaning
- **Roadmap:** definitions, recognition strategies, pitfalls, guided practice, classroom use

Course Map and Learning Goals

Three learning stages:

- Recognition: name the device
- Interpretation: explain its effect
- Evaluation: judge competing readings

Learning objectives:

- Identify devices in short excerpts
- Support interpretations with textual evidence
- Design discussion prompts

Key terms to distinguish first:

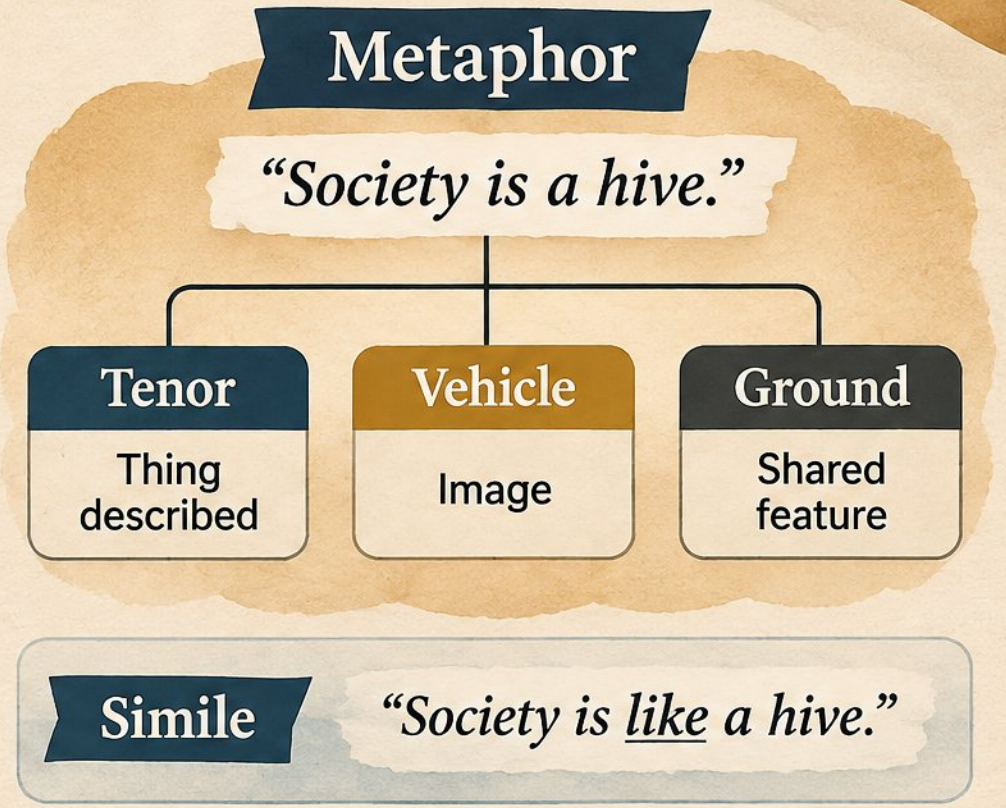
simile, sarcasm, allegory, motif, metonymy

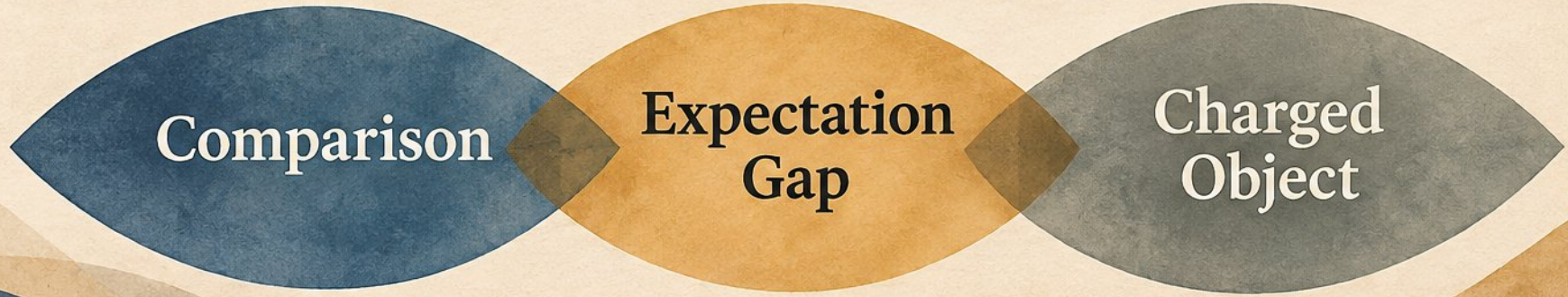


Assessment: annotation tasks, short analytical responses, discussion participation

Metaphor: From Comparison to Conceptual Mapping

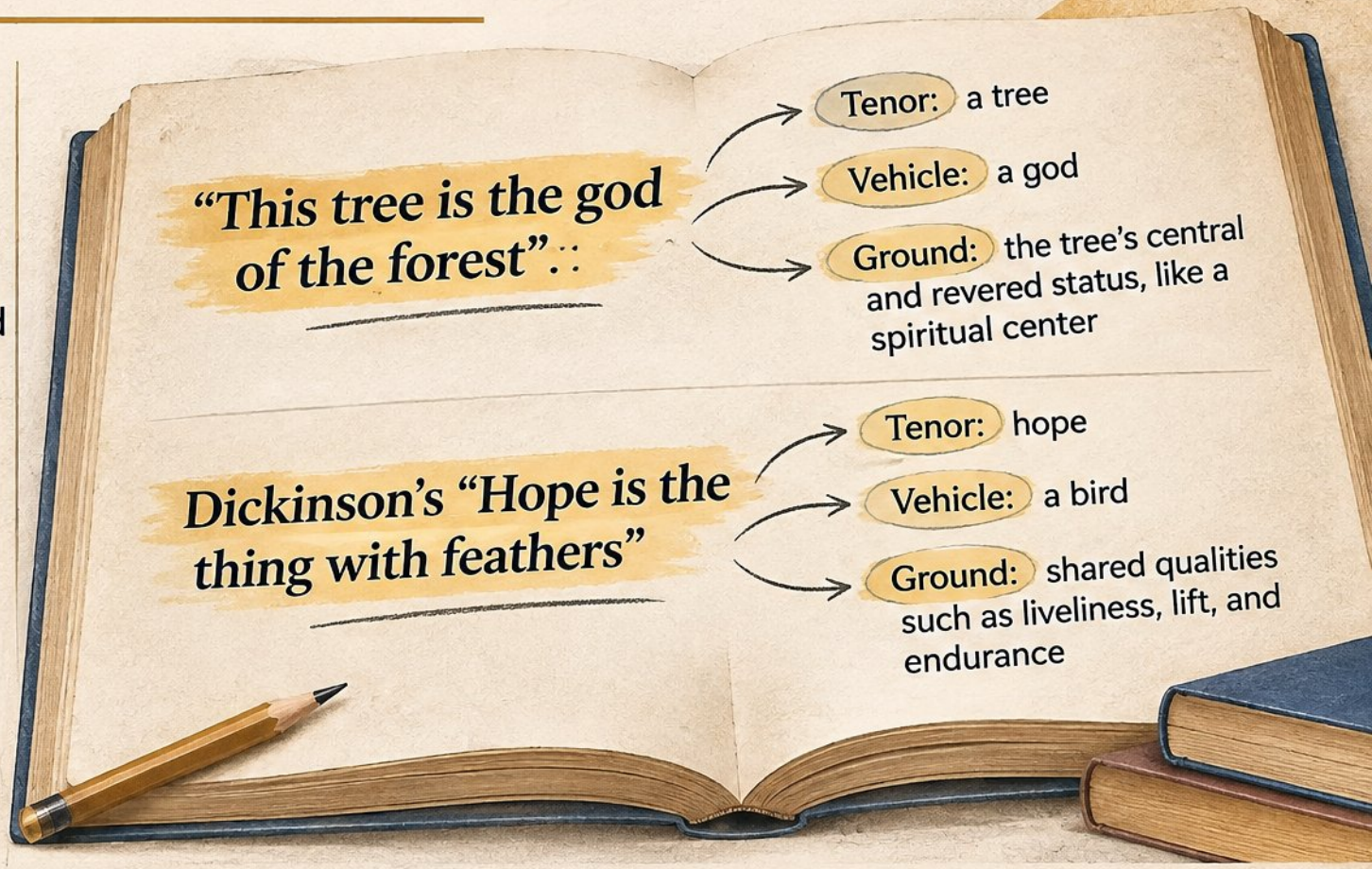
- Metaphor states identity ("society is a hive"); simile uses like or as
- Anatomy: tenor (thing described), vehicle (image), ground (shared feature)
- Conceptual metaphor theory: ARGUMENT IS WAR and IDEAS ARE FOOD shape thought
- Extended metaphors build coherence; mixed metaphors risk confusion
- Drill: identify tenor and vehicle in short literary excerpts





Metaphor in Practice: Recognition and Interpretation

- Move from labeling to analysis: name it, cite the line, explain the effect
- "This tree is the god of the forest": a tree compared to a spiritual center
- Dickinson's "Hope is the thing with feathers": hope compared to a bird
- Dead, conventional, and live metaphors differ in freshness and force
- Avoid confusing metaphor with metonymy or personification; ornament still means



Dead Metaphor
Worn and no longer vivid

Conventional Metaphor
Common and readily understood

Live Metaphor
Fresh, striking, and forceful

Irony: Types, Signals, and Interpretation

- Core definition: a gap between how things seem and how they really are
- Verbal irony: speakers say one thing but mean another ("Well, that was pleasant" after a painful dentist visit)
- Situational irony: expectations reversed by outcomes (a fire station burning down; The Gift of the Magi)
- Dramatic irony: the audience knows what a character does not (Romeo and Juliet, Othello)
- Irony overlaps with sarcasm and satire—but is not identical to either

Verbal Irony



Speakers say one thing but mean another ("Well, that was pleasant" after a painful dentist visit).

Situational Irony



Expectations reversed by outcomes (a fire station burning down; The Gift of the Magi).

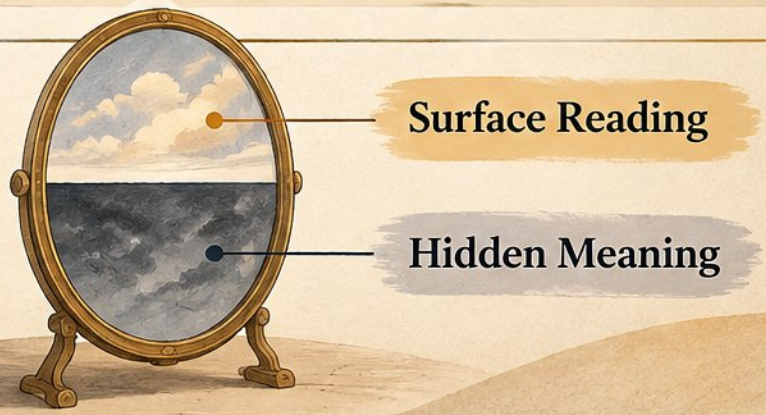
Dramatic Irony



The audience knows what a character does not (Romeo and Juliet, Othello).

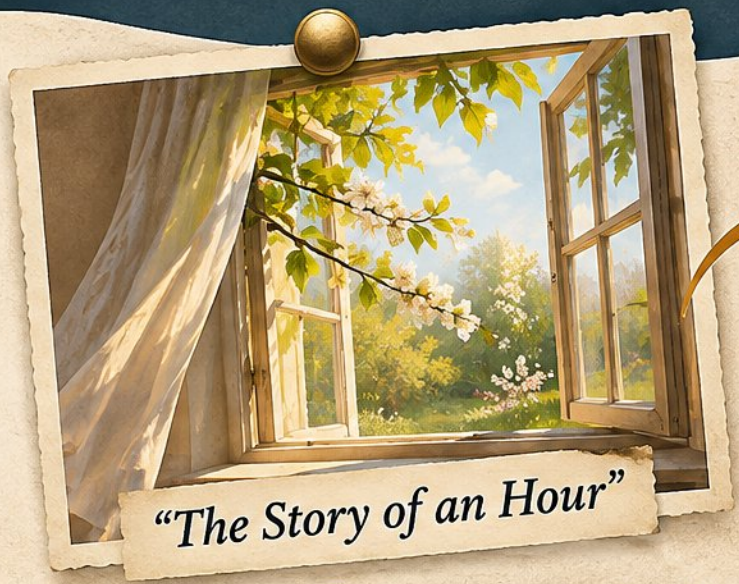
Boundaries and Related Terms

Irony overlaps with sarcasm and satire—but is not identical to either.



Reading Irony with Evidence

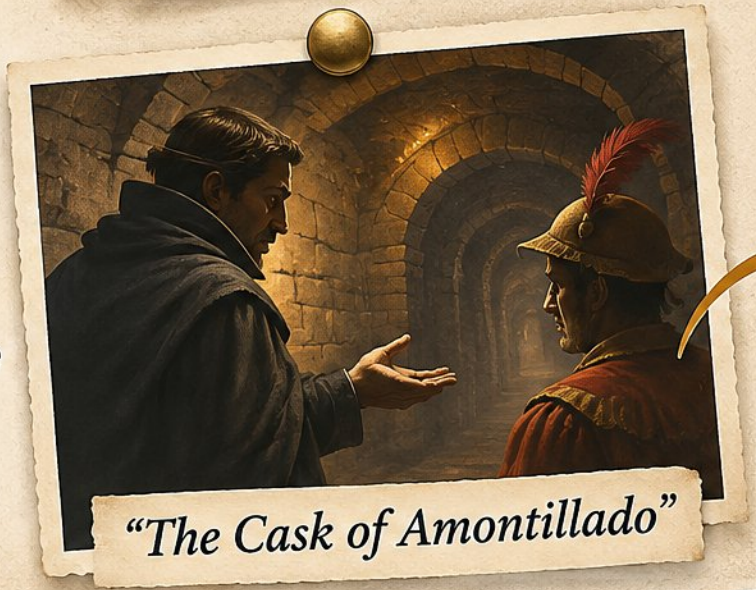
- Signals of irony: tonal cues, context, contradictions, and privileged audience knowledge
- "The Story of an Hour": the open window and spring symbolize freedom; doctors call it "the joy that kills"
- "The Cask of Amontillado": Montresor's false concern and Fortunato's ignorance create verbal and dramatic irony
- Watch for: not every surprise ending is irony — name the expectation, then show how it is reversed



"The Story of an Hour"

"the joy that kills"

Evidence: the open window and spring symbolize freedom.



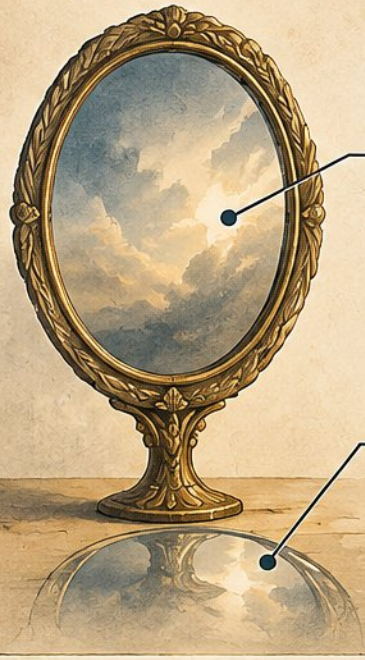
"The Cask of Amontillado"

Evidence: Montresor's false concern and Fortunato's ignorance create verbal and dramatic irony.

Symbolism: Objects, Actions, and Meaning

- – A concrete object or action that carries meaning beyond itself, yet stays literal in the story
- – Symbol vs. sign, motif, allegory: a single detail vs. recurrence vs. extended two-level narrative
- – Public symbols (dove = peace) vs. context-specific symbols (the mockingbird in *To Kill a Mockingbird*)
- – Meaning accrues through repetition, placement, contrast, and cultural knowledge
- – Frost's principle: a symbol is "a little thing that touches a larger thing".

Specimen Card



Literal Detail:
A mirror in the story

Meaning:
Self-knowledge, truth, or a hidden self

Motif / Allegory Boundary Key

Symbol:
a single detail that carries meaning

Motif:
a recurring detail that builds meaning

Allegory:
an extended two-level narrative with a sustained deeper meaning

Surface Reading:
the literal, visible level

Hidden Meaning:
the deeper, underlying level

Symbolism in Practice: Repetition and Restraint

- Yellow washing soap in Sargeson's story: a talisman with social and emotional weight
- The axe in Winton's "My Father's Axe": an ordinary tool carrying love, guilt, and memory
- Look for recurrence, emphasis, and thematic connection before calling an object symbolic
- Evidence rule: point to a line, a scene, and an idea, or it remains a guess
- Common carriers: light and dark, seasons, journeys, and color



Recurrence

Restraint:
let the text earn the symbolism.



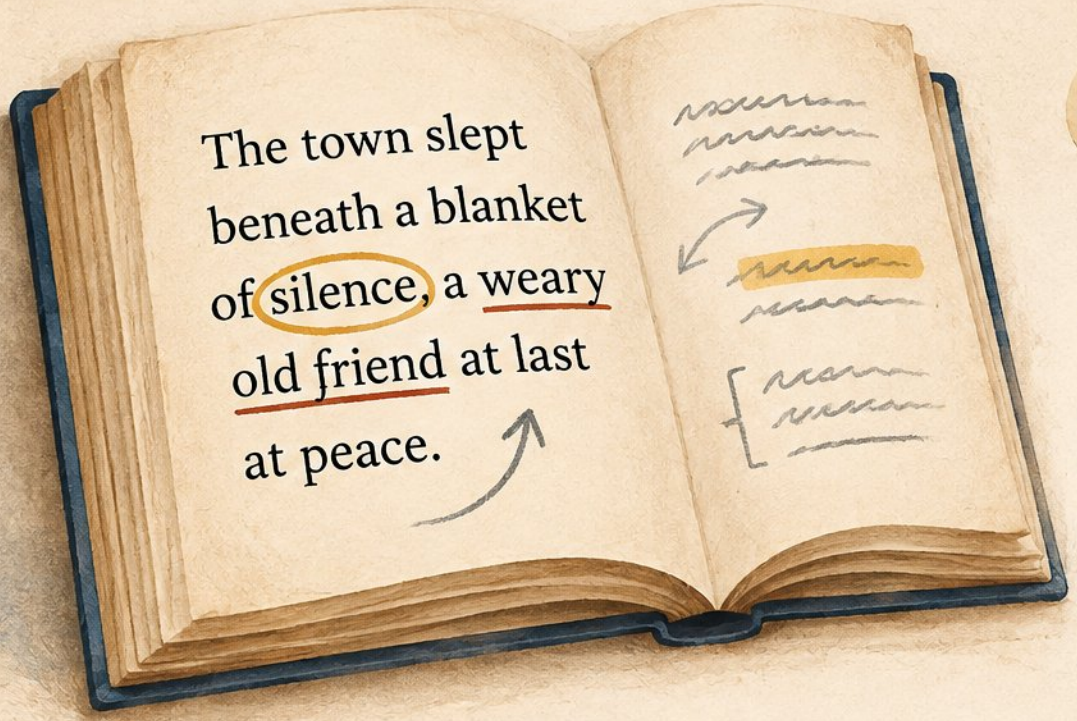
Recurrence

Restraint:
let the text earn the symbolism.

Comparison → **Expectation Gap** → **Charged Object**

Recognizing Devices in Context: A Close-Reading Workflow

Locate: find the device in the passage → **Identify:** name and define it precisely → **Interpret:** explain how it shapes tone or theme



What is compared?

What expectation breaks?

What object carries weight?

- Ask: What is compared? What expectation breaks? What object carries weight?
- Cite the exact line, then link it to character, conflict, or theme
- Avoid intentional fallacy: separate the device's work from author's biography

Practice: annotate one short excerpt for all three devices

Common Pitfalls and Misinterpretations

- Over-reading symbols: repetition alone isn't proof; an object needs an attached idea
- Flattening irony: sarcasm and mere bad luck are not situational irony
- Confusing simile and metaphor, or metonymy with metaphor
- Ignoring historical and cultural context: flags, religious imagery, period norms
- Disciplined checklist: recurrence, emphasis, evidence, context, thematic payoff



Classroom Activities: Recognition to Interpretation



Device Swap



- Device Swap: rewrite a plain sentence as metaphor, simile, or personification; compare effects

Effect Evidence Court



- Effect Evidence Court: teams argue what a metaphor suggests, then challenge weak readings with textual evidence

Irony Lab



- Irony Lab: classify scenarios as verbal, dramatic, or situational; justify each label

Symbol or Detail?



- Symbol or Detail? Evidence Detective: argue which recurring details support symbolic reading; "insufficient evidence" is allowed

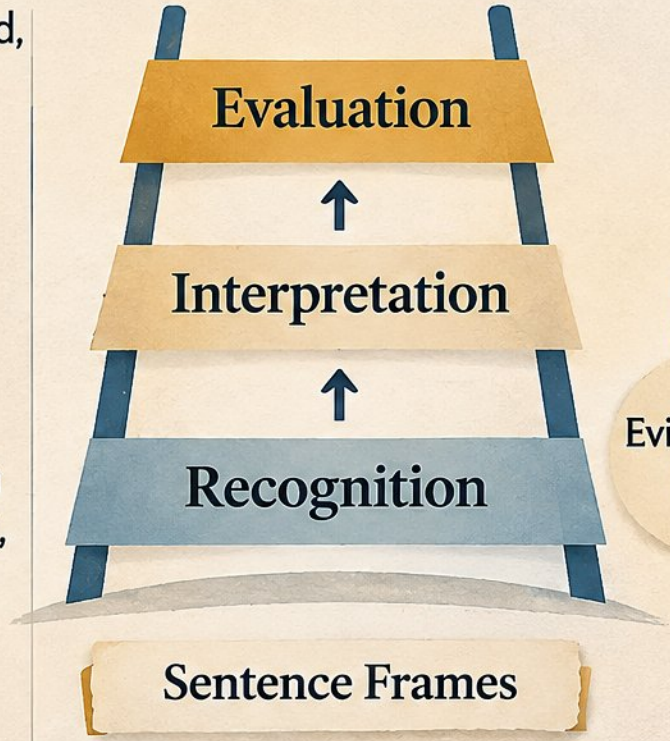
Wrong Answer Clinic



- Wrong Answer Clinic: repair deliberately flawed explanations to separate naming a device from interpreting it

Designing Discussion Prompts and Assessments

- **Question stems:** "What is compared, and why this vehicle?" "What expectation is broken?" "What does this object carry?"
- **Scaffold** recognition → interpretation → evaluation, with sentence frames early on
- **Book-club protocols:** round-robin annotation, evidence-first sharing, peer challenge rounds
- **Assess** formatively and summatively: annotations, two-sentence responses, short comparative essays
- **Adapt by level:** shorter texts and models for beginners; ambiguity and multiple devices for advanced readers

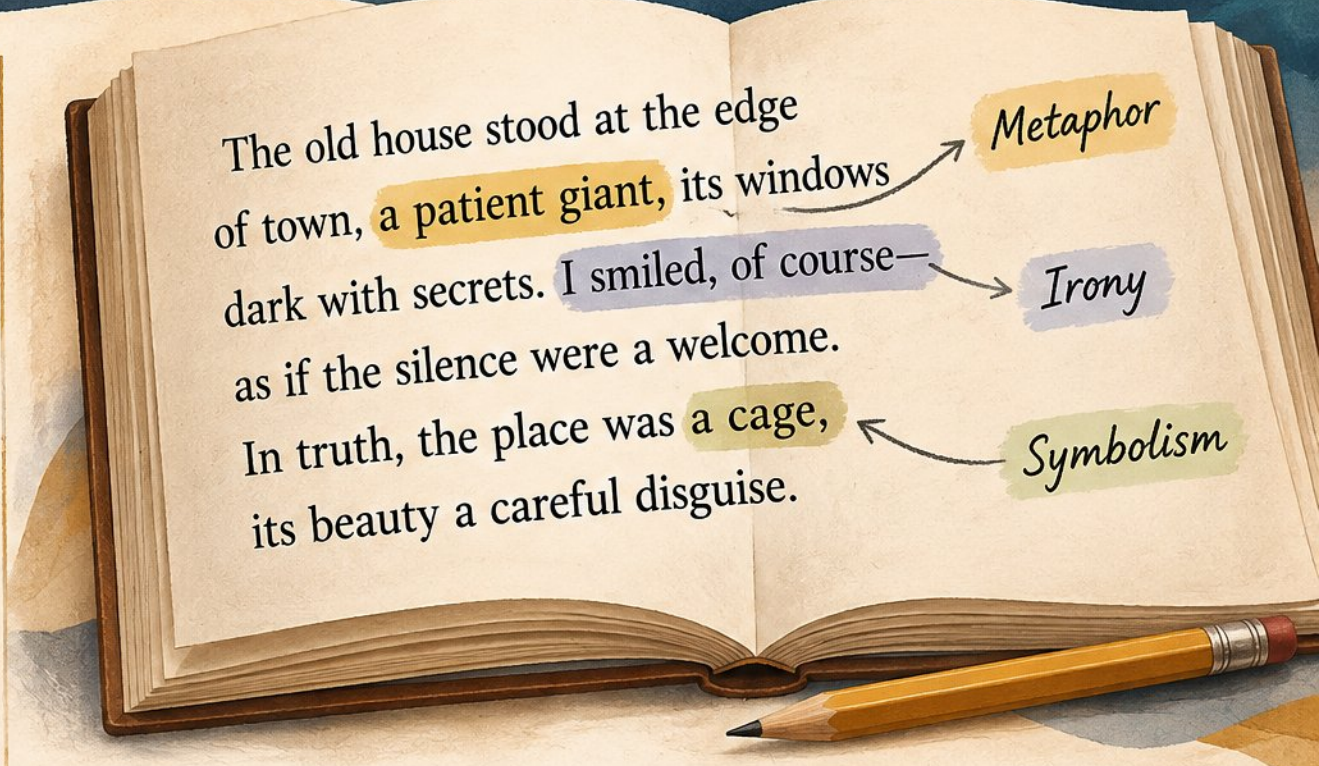






Guided Practice: Reading a Short Text Together

- Analyze a short excerpt rich in metaphor, irony, and symbolism
- Find one of each; cite the exact line as evidence
- Frame: "The writer uses ___ to suggest ___ because ___"
- Exchange interpretations with a peer; refine claims with evidence
- Rubric: accuracy, textual evidence, clarity of link to meaning

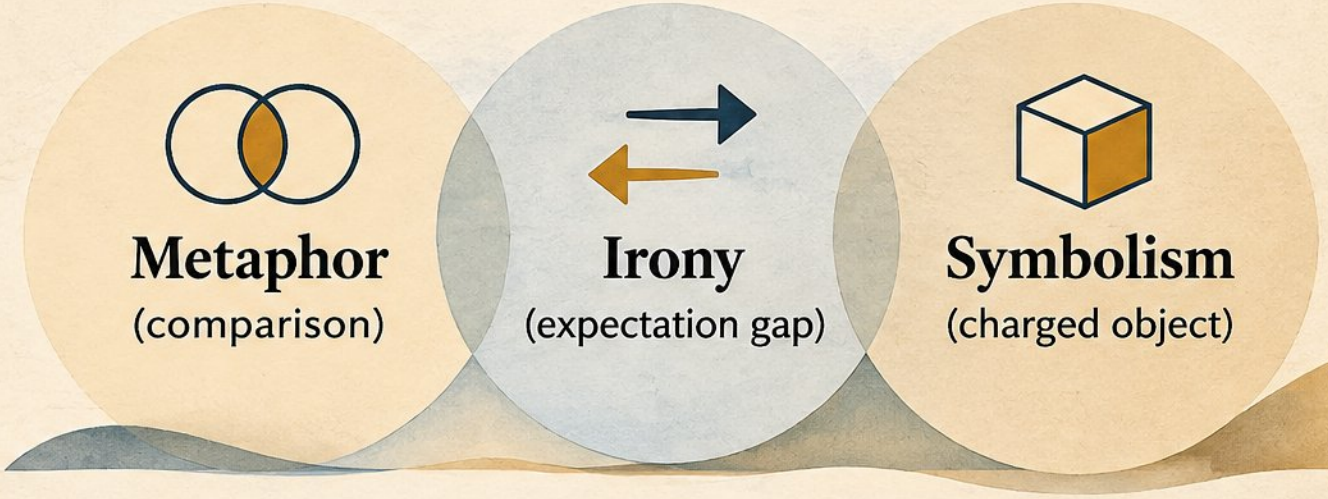


"The writer uses ___ to suggest ___ because ___"

Rubric: accuracy | textual evidence | clarity of link to meaning

Synthesis, Take-Home Practice, and Next Steps

- **Recap:** metaphor maps meaning; irony exposes the gap between surface and truth; symbolism makes concrete details carry abstract weight
- **Integrated checklist:** locate, identify, interpret, evidence, contextualize
- **Closing discussion:** which device is hardest for you to spot or teach, and why?



Integrated Checklist

Locate → Identify → Interpret → Evidence → Contextualize



Take-home: annotate a short story for all three devices; write a 150-word analysis



Resources: Purdue OWL, LitCharts, Oregon State guides, Lakoff & Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*

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