Allusion, Imagery & Irony

If you don't understand these literary terms, you are missing half of what you read.

Allusion - Allusion is a brief and indirect reference to a person, place, thing or idea of historical, cultural, literary or political significance. It does not describe in detail the person or thing to which it refers. It is just a passing comment and the writer expects the reader to possess enough knowledge to spot the allusion and grasp its importance in a text.

For instance, you make a literary allusion the moment you say, “I do not approve of this *quixotic* idea.” Quixotic means stupid and impractical derived from Cervantes’s “Don Quixote”, a story of a foolish knight and his misadventures.

Examples of Allusion in Everyday Speech

Allusions are not confined to literature alone. Their occurrence is fairly common in our daily speech. Look at some common examples of allusions in everyday life:

- “Don’t act like a Romeo in front of her.”
  - “Romeo” is a reference to Shakespeare’s Romeo, a passionate lover of Juliet, in “Romeo and Juliet”.
- The rise in poverty will unlock the Pandora’s box of crimes.
  - This is an allusion to one of Greek Mythology’s origin myth, “Pandora’s box”.
- “This place is like a Garden of Eden.”
  - This is a biblical allusion to the “garden of God” in the Book of Genesis.
- “Hey! Guess who the new Newton of our school is?”
  - “Newton”, means a genius student, alludes to a famous scientist Isaac Newton.
- “Stop acting like my ex-husband please.”
  - Apart from scholarly allusions we refer to common people and places in our speech.

Imagery - Imagery means to use figurative language to represent objects, actions and ideas in such a way that it appeals to our physical senses.

Usually it is thought that imagery makes use of particular words that create visual representation of ideas in our minds. The word imagery is associated with mental pictures. However, this idea is but partially correct. Imagery, to be realistic, turns out to be more complex than just a picture. Read the following examples of imagery carefully:

- *It was dark and dim in the forest.* – The words “dark” and “dim” are visual images.
- *The children were screaming and shouting in the fields.* - “Screaming” and “shouting” appeal to our sense of hearing or auditory sense.
- *He whipped the aroma of brewed coffee.* – “whiff” and “aroma” evoke our sense of smell or olfactory sense.
- *The girl ran her hands on a soft satin fabric.* – The idea of “soft” in this example appeals to our sense of touch or tactile sense.
- The fresh and juicy orange are very cold and sweet. – “juicy” and “sweet” when associated with oranges have an effect on our sense of taste or gustatory sense.

Imagery needs the aid of figures of speech like, metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia etc. in order to appeal to the bodily senses. Let us analyze how famous poets and writers use imagery in literature.
**Irony** - Irony is a figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words. It may also be a situation that may end up in quite a different way than what is generally anticipated. In simple words, it is a difference between the appearance and the reality.

**Types of Irony**

On the grounds of the above definition, we distinguish two basic kinds of irony i.e. verbal irony and situational irony. A verbal irony involves what one does not mean. When in response to a foolish idea, we say, “what a great idea!” it is a verbal irony. A situational irony occurs when, for instance, a man is chuckling at the misfortune of the other even when the same misfortune, in complete unawareness, is befalling him.

**Difference between Dramatic Irony and Situational Irony**

Dramatic irony is a kind of irony in a situation, which the writers frequently employ in their works. In situational irony, both the characters and the audience are fully unaware of the implications of the real situation. In dramatic irony, the characters are oblivious of the situation but the audience is not. For example, in “Romeo and Juliet”, we know much before the characters that they are going to die. In real life circumstances, irony may be comical, bitter or sometimes unbearably offensive.

**Common Examples of Irony**

Let us analyze some interesting examples of irony from our daily life:

- I posted a video on YouTube about how boring and useless YouTube is.
- The name of Britain’s biggest dog was “Tiny”.
- You laugh at a person who slipped stepping on a banana peel and the next thing you know, you slipped too.
- The butter is as soft as a marble piece.
- “Oh great! Now you have broken my new camera.”

**Directions:** Answer the following questions about allusion, imagery and irony.

1. “He fished a sky blue burqa from the bag. The yards of pleated cloth spilled over his knees when he lifted it.” (pg. 70)

Read pages 69, 70 and 71. This is an example of what sort of irony? Why is it ironic?

2. “It told the story of an old fisherman named Santiago who catches and enormous fish. But by the time he sails his boat to safety, there is nothing left of his prize fish; the sharks have torn it to pieces.” (pg. 152)

Read page 152. In this excerpt, to what is Khaled Hosseini alluding? You may look this up on the Internet if you wish.
3. "But her mind was far away free and fleet hurdling like a speeding missile beyond Kabul, over craggy brown hills, and over deserts ragged with clumps of sage, past canyons of jagged red rock. And over snowcapped mountains." (pg. 208)

Read pages 207 and 208 and then identify the use of imagery in this excerpt. Why is this imagery effective here?

4. "She was stunned that he'd used that word, in the face of all that the Mujahideen factions had done – the murders, the lootings, the rapes, the tortures, the executions, the bombings, the tens of thousands of rockets they had fired at each other, needless of all the innocent people who would die in the cross fire. Order. But she bit her tongue." (pg. 266)

Read pages 265 and 266. This is an example of what sort of irony? Why is it ironic?

5. "That summer, Titanic fever gripped Kabul." (pg. 303)

Read page 303. In this excerpt, to what is Khaled Hosseini alluding? You may look this up on the Internet if you wish.

6. "He asked about Aziza’s father, and Laila had the strange experience of telling a lie that was really the truth." (pg. 317)

Read pages 317 and 318. This is an example of what sort of irony? Why is it ironic?

7. "In silence, Laila looked at their reflection, at faces that had aged beyond their years, at the pouches and lines and sags that now marked their once scrubbed, youthful faces." (pg. 376)

Read page 376 and then identify the use of imagery in this excerpt. Why is this imagery effective here?
8. "Laila likes Muree’s cool, foggy mornings and its dazzling twilights, the dark brilliance of the sky at night; the green of the pines and the soft brown of the squirrels darting up and down the sturdy tree trunks; the sudden downpours that send shoppers in the Mall scrambling for awning cover." (pg. 377)

Read page 377 and then identify the use of imagery in this excerpt. Why is this imagery effective here?

9. "May God grant you a long a prosperous life, my daughter." (pg. 407)

Read page 407. This is an example of what sort of irony? Why is it ironic?