

Anaphora in Literature: Definition, Effect & Examples

Definition

Anaphora is the repetition of a certain word or phrase at the beginning of successive lines of writing or speech. It can be used in novels and short stories, but it's most commonly seen in poetry, essays, and formal speeches.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches and sermons are full of instances of anaphora. In the following example from his famous 'I Have a Dream' address at the March on Washington, the words in bold indicate the repeated element:

*Now is **the time** to make real the promises of democracy. Now is **the time** to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is **the time** to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is **the time** to make justice a reality for all of God's children.*

As a **rhetorical device**, anaphora is used for the purpose of generating a particular effect in your audience. As you can see in the example above, the phrase *now is the time* is repeated for a particular effect. Keep in mind that anaphora can be the repetition of a whole phrase, as in the example above, or of just a single word.

The opposite of anaphora, **epiphora**, in which the repeated word or phrase appears at *the end* of successive lines, was used by Abraham Lincoln in his 'Gettysburg Address': *It is ? for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us ? that government of **the people**, by **the people**, for **the people**, shall not perish from the earth.*

Effect of Anaphora

Anaphora appeals to the feelings or **pathos** of your audience. By repeating a word or phrase, your readers or listeners start to anticipate the next line. They are drawn into your words through a sense of participation. Because they know what's coming next, they are more receptive to the emotional resonance you are trying to get across.

You can evoke any number of feelings when using anaphora, including but not limited to anger, fear, solidarity, or even nostalgia. In the example above, Martin Luther King Jr. appeals to the growing solidarity among blacks and white allies during the heyday of the American civil rights movement. Those in attendance in front of the Lincoln Memorial on that fateful day in 1963 felt a sense of unity and accord built on the participatory nature of anaphora.

Charles Dickens, in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, made brilliant use of anaphora to convey a feeling of uncertainty about the past in arguably the most famous opening lines in the history of literature:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way ?

It's hard *not* to get drawn into this excerpt, particularly if you were a contemporary reader of Dickens. The repetition of 'it was' draws you in because it makes you a participant in the novel. Dickens knew this well. That's why he followed it with another repetition: 'we had ? we were ? we were.'

This sense of participation that happens with anaphora comes from your audience's anticipation of the next line. Have you ever been to a public event or religious service where the speaker repeats a phrase over and over, and the moment the audience picks up on it, they start shouting the phrase in unison with the speaker? That's anaphora at work. It shows how anticipation and participation work together to bring about a common emotional experience.

Examples

Poetry

Some of the most enduring poetry makes use of anaphora. One of the great protest poems of the Cold War era, 'America' by Allen Ginsberg, addresses his native country in the most direct way possible:

America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood? ?

America I will sell you strophes \$2500 apiece \$500 down on your old strophe

America free Tom Mooney

America save the Spanish Loyalists

America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die

America I am the Scottsboro boys.

America when I was seven momma took me to Communist Cell meetings they

sold us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket costs a nickel and the

speeches were free everybody was angelic and sentimental about the

workers it was all so sincere you have no idea what a good thing the party

was in 1835 Scott Nearing was a grand old man a real mensch Mother ?

America you don't really want to go to war.

America it's them bad Russians. ?

America this is quite serious.

<http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/anaphora-in-literature-definition-effect-examples.html>

Timothy Inman

