

One Page Concept Review: Metonymy

What is it?

Metonymy is the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated. In less technical terms, concepts are substituted for other concepts because they share associations. Whereas a metaphor works by saying one concept is the same as another concept, a metonym works by saying that one concept is being substituted for another concept because they have something in common that makes the substitution a logical one.

To give an example to clarify the metaphor/metonym distinction: when minor 19th century English writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton coined the adage, "The pen is mightier than the sword," it functions through the logic of substitution, not comparison. He was not claiming, for instance, that a *pen* is somehow the same thing as *writing*; rather a pen is *associated* with writing (because a pen produces writing and is otherwise associated with the activity). Similarly (and more conceptually) the *sword* is being used as a metonym for *violence* or *force*, since the use of a sword is one obvious way that violence is imposed (not that violence is particularly sword-like-- as would be the implied claim were this phrase working as a metaphor).

Synecdoche is when the parts of something is used to signify the whole (or the reverse). It is a specialized form of metonymy. Like metonymy it can function as either a literary element or a concept.

Why should I care?

In terms of the AP test, I'm not going to lie to you and pretend that metonymy is as crucial a concept to master as metaphor. If you analyze things technically and precisely, you will obviously be rewarded (since knowing what you are talking about is always a good thing). However, if you treat a metonym as a metaphor in the course of writing a forty minute essay, this isn't the sort of mistake that's going to be a game changer in terms of your score.

That said, understanding the distinction does have a lot of very obvious utility. In prose, for example, details of description about a character operate according to the logic of metonymy. To give an obvious and simplistic example, if a character is described as having disheveled hair, it says something about that character's state of mind. If you treat this as metonymy, now you have something clever to write about in addition to analyzing the connotation of the image. Don't overdo this sort of thing, however; reserve it for the important details that you argue are key to understanding something important.

Synecdoche is important as a conceptual idea, since the logic of developing themes in a text works according to the logic of part-for-whole. For instance, literature will typically describe a particular situation and/or a particular group of characters, and from this specific instance, it will ask you to infer some general idea about how the world works (or should work). Thus, the text functions as a microcosm of some larger truth.

Synecdoche, as an isolated literary element (and not a conceptual idea) is the most common form of metonymy. In particular, poets often use this device.

Titles sometimes work according to the logic of synecdoche as well. This would be true if the title is a concept for which the text of the functions as a very particular instance that characterizes that big

idea. Imagine, for example, a poem whose title is “Death,” “Suffering,” or “Love.” Poetry can get away with that sort of thing in a way that prose often cannot. If this is the case, consider using your conclusion to explain how the poem is synecdochic with its title.

How do I do it?

- **Establish the logic of the substitution.** Metonyms will share ideas, contexts, or emotional overtones. In the case of synecdoche, the logic is even more straightforward: the whole can be boiled down to its most important or representative part.
- **Synecdoche establishes something important.** If an idea is a microcosm of some bigger idea, the only way that this would be comprehensible is if the small idea is (on some level) the important detail that best characterizes the big idea. When the captain of a sailing vessel gives the command, “All hands on deck,” the sailors are reduced to that particular body part because, on a sailing vessel, one’s usefulness to the ship is always a function of the work one performs as part of the crew (work that is done with one’s hands). This, then, gives you an insight into the world of the ship: all have to work cooperatively together in order to survive in a hostile environment.
- **Symbols and motifs are usually metonyms.** These tend to work by recurring in different contexts, picking up different associations depending on different contexts. This makes them harder to write about than metaphors (where the context and meaning are fixed), but at the same time, they are richer in terms of complexity (giving you more material to write about).
- **Think conceptually.** I’ve already talked about how descriptive details can be analyzed as metonyms, but one should be attentive to how (for example) a particular episode in a work could function as a microcosm of the whole or how (to give another example) a character functions in a work as a metonym for a specific idea or characteristic.

How do students screw this up?

Not Knowing What You Are Talking About

This is really the only big problem with metonymy. It’s tricky to write about, so the students who are willing to make this effort aren’t typically doing other stupid stuff like not connecting it to an argument.

- **Do not treat a substitution like a comparison.** Your analysis will be imprecise, unpersuasive, and seem forced. The analysis should be about *associations* that the concepts share, not characteristics in common.
- **Shared associations will be in terms of emotional overtones or ideas that both concepts imply.** In other words, you should be writing about connotation when you write about metonyms.
- **The big hurdle with metonymy is to understand it as a conceptual idea.** Make the intellectual effort to do this, or don’t bother trying to write about it.
- That said, **be aware that the metaphor/metonymy distinction is not always a hard and fast one.** Often these categories can blur a bit, or sometimes a recurring symbol can function as a metaphor in one part of the text and a metonym in another. In other words, don’t let the possibility of a little ambiguity scare you into not attempting to write about metonyms.