Synecdoche

DEFINITION

What is synecdoche? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which, most often, a *part* of something is used to refer to its *whole*. For example, "The captain commands one hundred sails" is a synecdoche that uses "sails" to refer to ships—ships being the thing of which a sail is a part. A less common form of synecdoche occurs when a *whole* is used to refer to a *part*. An example of this is when the word "mortals" is used to mean humans—"mortals" technically includes all animals and plants (anything that dies), so using "mortals" to mean humans is a synecdoche that uses a category to stand in for one of its subsets.

Some additional key details about synecdoche:

- Generations of writers have used synecdoche in both poetry and prose.
- Synecdoche is a device used in many idioms, colloquial expressions, and slang terms.
- One common form of synecdoche uses a body part (hand, heart, head, eyes, etc.) to stand in for an entire person.

How to Pronounce Synecdoche

Here's how to pronounce synecdoche: sih-**nek**-duh-kee

Wholes, Parts, and Synecdoche

A synecdoche occurs when a part stands in for a whole, or a whole stands in for a part. To recognize synecdoche it's helpful to understand that there are different sorts of wholes and parts. The most common types of wholes and parts are:

- **A physical structure and its parts:** "All hands on deck!" is a part-to-whole synecdoche of this sort because "hands" stand in for the sailors of which they are physically a part.
- **An object and the material it is made of:** In this sort of synecdoche, the whole can be thought of as the thing's *essence*—what the thing truly is—while the part is its matter, the physical material that makes it up but which doesn't define that full essence. "Are you paying with plastic?" is a synecdoche in which plastic, a material, stands in for a credit card, which, as a monetary device, is much more than its material.
- **A container and what it contains:** "Can I buy you a glass?" refers not to the glass itself; it is a synecdoche in which "glass" refers to the drink inside it.
- **A category and the items in those categories:** "America took home gold" is a whole-to-part synecdoche in which the larger category of "America" is used to stand in only for American olympians. This type of synecdoche can also be part-to-whole. For example, "The citizens were all put to the sword" is a synecdoche in which the term "sword" stands in for the entire category of weapons used to kill.

Synecdoche vs. Metonymy

Synecdoche is related to (and commonly confused with) metonymy. While these two figures of speech are similar, they are not the same. Both metonymy and synecdoche *do* create a relationship in which one thing or idea stands in for another, but the specifics of these relationships are different:

- In **synecdoche**, the relationship is one of either part-to-whole or whole-to-part.
- In **metonymy**, the relationship between the two things is *not* part-to-whole or whole-to-part, but is rather one of being closely *conceptually* related. For example, the phrase "The pen is mightier than the sword" contains two metonymies: one in which "pen" stands in for writing, and another in which "sword" stands in for physical power. A pen is not a *part* of writing, and a sword is not *part* of physical power—each thing is related to the concept it evokes.

Some people actually consider synecdoche to be a subset of metonymy, since to be a part of something is, by definition, to be closely related to that thing. Other people believe that the two terms are completely distinct—that metonymy can *only* occur when it proposes a relationship between two things that are *not* part of one another, and that synecdoche can *never* be simultaneously metonymy. There's no definitive consensus on which of these two ways of seeing metonymy and synecdoche is correct, so you should just know that the debate exists.

Fuzziness Between Synecdoche and Metonymy

In addition, in some cases it can be difficult to distinguish whether two things are related-but-separate or are a part of one another. For example, in the phrase "he asked for her hand in marriage," a woman's hand stands in for her whole person (her suitor wants to marry *her*, not just her *hand,* and her hand is a *part* of her body). Yet, because exchanging rings is a traditional part of marriage, it can be argued that the woman's hand is symbolically *related to* marriage. So is the phrase "he asked for her hand in marriage" a synecdoche, or is it both a synecdoche and a metonymy? To be honest, there's no definitive right answer. But if you know enough to be able to explain why someone might claim it's either synecdoche, or metonymy, or both, you almost certainly know enough about synecdoche.

EXAMPLES

Synecdoche appears often in everyday speech, often as a part of idioms that have become so well known that few people ever stop to think about the fact that these expressions don't mean what they literally say. Synecdoche also commonly appears in all sorts of literature, from prose to poetry.

Synecdoche Examples in Idioms and Everyday Language

Synecdoche is used in many common idioms, and it has become ingrained in the way we use language in our day-to-day lives. The meaning of some of the following examples may seem so obvious or literal that you may be surprised to discover that each one is, in fact, a synecdoche:

- **"Nice wheels!"** A synecdoche in which "wheels" stand in for the car that they are a part of.
- **"Hurry up, gray beard!"** A not very polite synecdoche, in which an old man's "gray beard" stands in for his whole being.
- **"What's the head count?"** The person asking this question is interested not just in the number of heads, but rather in the number of people to whom the heads belong.
- **"Denver won 4-2"** A whole-to-part synecdoche in which the name of the entire city of Denver is used to mean one of its sports teams.
- "The **brains** helped me with my homework." A part-to-whole synecdoche in which smart students are referred to as "brains"—the brain being, of course, only one part of them.
- Many people use brand names to refer to generic-brand products; this is a type of synecdoche because the brand-name product is just one subset of a broader category. So if you call all facial tissues **"Kleenex,"** call all adhesive bandages **"Band-aids,"** or drink **"Coke"** whenever you're having a soft drink, you're using a synecdoche.

Synecdoche Examples in Literature

Synecdoche is frequently used in both poetry and prose.

Synecdoche in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, the character Baby Suggs employs synecdoche in a sermon:

> Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back.

In this context, "your flesh," "your eyes," and "the skin on your back," all stand in for "you." Baby Suggs is speaking of the hostility and violence that her community of freed slaves faces from white people. By describing her people as body parts rather than as whole people, Baby Suggs also emphasizes how the white people she describes dehumanize black people.

Synecdoche in *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

In Act 4, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, an angry Macbeth kicks out a servant by saying:

> Take thy face hence.

Here, "thy face" stands in for "you." Macbeth is simply telling the servant to leave, but his use of synecdoche makes the tone of his command more harsh and insulting, showing the audience how angry he really is.

Synecdoche in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Coleridge

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Samuel Coleridge uses synecdoche in the lines:

> The western wave was all a-flame.
> The day was well nigh done!
> Almost upon the western wave
> Rested the broad bright Sun.

Here, "wave" stands in for the whole ocean (or at least the part of the ocean—larger than a wave—that is relevant to the text). So when the Ancient Mariner says "the western wave," he is referring to the ocean to the west, extending to the western horizon.

Synecdoche in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" by Emily Dickinson

In the second stanza of the poem, Emily Dickinson writes:

> The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
> And Breaths were gathering firm
> For that last Onset—when the King
> Be witnessed—in the Room—

Here, "eyes" stand in for people. Dickinson's use of synecdoche emphasizes that the people in the room are watching the speaker, but it also serves a more technical purpose. In "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" each stanza is four lines long. The first and third lines of each stanza are eight syllables long, and the second and fourth lines are six syllables long (a metrical pattern known as common meter). By using synecdoche, Dickinson is able to maintain the rhythm of the poem while communicating, in just a few words, that the people surrounding the speaker are watching her and have been weeping.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Synecdoche is a versatile literary device, and writers use synecdoche for many reasons. Often synecdoches can elevate language, making a sentence or phrase sound more interesting or more poetic. Synecdoches can also help the writer create a strong voice for a character or for a narrator. In the example from *Macbeth*, for example, Shakespeare uses the synecdoche "Take thy face hence" rather than having Macbeth simply say "You can go now," because the former is far more revealing of Macbeth's haughty, violent character at this point in the play. Since synecdoche often appears in slang, idioms, and colloquialisms, writers also use synecdoche in dialogue to make characters sound more like real people.

The work of poets like Dickinson and Coleridge also shows how writers use synecdoche to exchange one word or phrase for another, making it a useful device for preserving rhythm and rhyme within poetic verse. Similarly, a writer could use synecdoche to enhance the sound of writing. For example, if you wanted to open a dog spa, the alliterative and synecdochic "Pampered Paws" would be a much better name than "Pampered Dogs."

Perhaps most important, synecdoche allows writers to pack a lot of meaning into just a word or two. In "I heard a fly buzz—when I died," Emily Dickson's decision to use "eyes" to represent people draws our attention to the things that their eyes are doing: weeping and watching. We can infer that these people feel powerless because, as the speaker dies, all they can do is weep and watch. The people themselves, feel, in a way, like they are nothing more than eyes. By using synecdoche, Dickinson doesn't need to tell us these details outright, which allows her to maintain the poem's sparse, fragmented style.

In any context, synecdoche is a way to layer multiple meanings onto a single word or phrase. Synecdoche helps writers make their work more complex, nuanced, and meaningful.

OTHER RESOURCES

- The Dictionary Definition of Synecdoche: The editor's note includes information on the etymology of synecdoche (spoiler: the term comes from an ancient Greek word meaning "interpretation").
- This website gives an overview of the Four Master Tropes of rhetoric, Kenneth Burke's famous literary theory of figures of speech. Synecdoche and metonymy are two of the four devices that Burke identifies as "Master Tropes," and the page offers explanations for all four devices.
- For the film buffs out there, read *The Guardian's* review of the 2009 film *Synecdoche, New York*, which uses the idea of synecdoche to explore the part-to-whole relationship between art and reality. The film, whose title puns on the real-life town Schenectady, New York, tells the story of a theatre director whose "huge, mad, pasteboard world stands for the real world, is part of it, is superimposed on to it, and finally melts into it."

HOW TO CITE

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