

Paradox



DEFINITION

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

A paradox is a [figure of speech](#) that seems to contradict itself, but which, upon further examination, contains some kernel of truth or reason. Oscar Wilde's famous declaration that "Life is much too important to be taken seriously" is a paradox. At first it seems contradictory because important things are meant to be taken seriously, but Wilde's paradoxical suggestion is that, the more important something is, the more important it is *not* to take it seriously.

Some additional key details about paradox:

- People often use the word paradox simply to express their astonishment at something unexpected or enigmatic, but this is a misuse of the word.
- In the study of logic, paradoxes have a slightly different meaning than the one we cover in this entry. Logical paradoxes are statements that actually *do* contradict themselves, and are therefore unresolvable.
- The word paradox comes from the Greek "paradoxos," meaning contrary to expectation, or strange.

Paradox Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce paradox: **par-uh-docks**

Literary Paradox in Depth

The special ability of the figure of speech called paradox—which is to simultaneously seem self-contradictory and yet also reveal unexpected meaning—often depends on words that can be interpreted in more than one way. For instance, in Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#), when Hamlet tells his mother "I must be cruel, only to be kind," he's using a paradox to express that his behavior, while it may *appear* to be cruel, is *actually* a form of kindness—but that's only *if* you interpret kindness to include harsh actions that may be better for everyone in the long run (Hamlet also turns out to be wrong since, by the end of the play, pretty much everyone is dead). This type of paradox, also called **verbal paradox** or **literary paradox**, is the type we'll focus on in this entry.

Literary Paradox vs. Logical Paradox

Literary paradox is distinct from logical paradox, in which the meaning of a statement is contradictory in a way that *cannot* be resolved into sense-making. Here are the differences between literary and logical paradox in more detail:

- **Initially:** Literary paradoxes often seem unresolvable, while logical paradoxes often don't immediately seem contradictory.
- **Upon further examination:** While further thought leads to literary paradoxes resolving in a way that reveals a deeper truth, further examination reveals a logical paradox to be so thoroughly self-contradictory that it defeats its own meaning (instead of revealing an unexpected meaning based on how the language is interpreted).

The classic example of logical paradox is the statement "This statement is false." The statement is logically impossible to resolve: if the statement is true, then it is false; and if the statement is false, then it is true.

Put more broadly: rather than using language figuratively to construct a new and unexpected meaning (as in literary paradox), logical paradox actually uses language *nonsensically* to create the appearance of meaning which upon further review is revealed as hopelessly contradictory and therefore lacking.

Paradox vs. Related Terms

Literary paradox is easily confused with two other figures of speech, [antithesis](#) and [oxymoron](#). This section outlines how paradox differs from each of these terms.

- **Antithesis:** An antithesis is a figure of speech in which two contrasting or opposing ideas are [juxtaposed](#) with one another. Neil Armstrong used antithesis when he stepped onto the surface of the moon in 1969, saying, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." The sentence emphasizes the incredible contrast between the individual experience of taking an ordinary step, and the extraordinary progress that Armstrong's step symbolized for the human race.
 - Unlike paradoxes, antitheses are not contradictory, nor do they seem to be. Rather than contradiction, antitheses focus on *opposition* between two things.
 - Further, whereas antithesis generally involves the use of [parallelism](#) (two or more parallel grammatical structures at the sentences level), paradox does not.
- **Oxymoron:** An [oxymoron](#) is a specific type of paradox—one that boils its contradiction down to just a few words. The most recognizable oxymorons are two word pairs, such as "sweet sorrow," but they can extend across a phrase as well.
 - While an oxymoron is usually made up of just two words, a paradox can be expressed in many different ways, as a concept or a description of a situation.
 - So when, in [Romeo and Juliet](#), Juliet tells Romeo that "parting is such sweet sorrow," the oxymoron "sweet sorrow"

suggests a deeper paradox at play: that Juliet's pain at parting with Romeo even for a night is cause for joy, since it testifies to the strength of their love. However, this same paradox could also be expressed without the use of the poetic oxymoron, for instance if Juliet were simply to say something like "my sorrow makes me happy."

The **first paradox** suggests Romeo's seemingly contradictory wish that a love that is "blind" should nevertheless see a path to accomplish its desires. The **second paradox** references a central theme of the play: the idea of love and hatred coinciding (remember that the play is about children from warring families falling in love?). The third paradox expresses Romeo's exasperation that such beautiful things could come together to make such a mess. After a number of **oxymorons**—which express Romeo's sense of confusion in love—the **final paradox** is Romeo's expression of sorrow that his feeling of love is unrequited.



EXAMPLES

Paradox appear in all sorts of writing, from literature, to speeches, to song lyrics. The examples below show some of each.

Paradox Examples in Literature

In literature, paradoxes can create humor, express the confusion or frustration of a seeming impossibility, or make clear the absurdity of an unexpected situation.

Paradox in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

As Hamlet interrogates his mother, Gertrude, in Act 3 Scene 4 of [Hamlet](#), after mistakenly killing Polonius, he uses a paradox to explain why he has committed such violent actions and why he has been berating his mother for remarrying Claudius (the brother of Hamlet's father). With this paradoxical statement, Hamlet is attempting to persuade his frightened mother that although he seems wicked in this moment, his intentions are good.

I must be cruel, only to be kind.

Hamlet's phrase sums up a wider paradox at play in many stories, as characters wrestle with the question: is it alright to commit acts that seem morally wrong, in support of causes that seem morally right?

Paradox in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

In the first scene of Shakespeare's famous tragedy, [Romeo and Juliet](#), Romeo has not yet met Juliet and is still heartbroken over his first crush, Rosalind. Shakespeare expresses the whirling confusion of his emotions in this moment with a series of **oxymorons** and paradoxes.

Alas, that love, whose view is muffled still,
Should, without eyes, see pathways to his will!
Where shall we dine?—O me! What fray was here?
Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all.
Here's much to do with hate but more with love.
Why, then, O **brawling love!** O **loving hate!**
O any thing, of nothing first create!
O heavy lightness! **serious vanity!**
Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms!
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health!
Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!
This love feel I, that feel no love in this...

Paradox in George Orwell's *1984*

In his dystopian novel [1984](#), George Orwell imagines a totalitarian government designed on purpose to have contradictory claims at its very core. These contradictions are examples of paradox:

War is peace.
Freedom is slavery.
Ignorance is strength.

The general population of this dystopian future seems numb to the contradiction inherent in this phrase, and this is part of why Orwell sees this society as so dangerous. In it, language no longer has meaning on its own—rather, the ruling party has gained and maintained power to wage constant war, enforce absolute obedience, and nurture general ignorance precisely by annihilating meaning in language so that there is nothing left for any citizen to hold on to or to trust.

Paradox in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

In this poem, Walt Whitman famously welcomes the idea that he might be indulging himself in paradoxes, writing "Do I contradict myself?/Very well then, I contradict myself/I am large, I contain multitudes." Paradox is, in fact, a major feature of the poem, as you'll see in this excerpt:

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul...
And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of
the earth,
And to glance with an eye or show a bean in its pod
confounds the learning of all times...

Whitman's writing proposes values that are at odds with those of his culture, and the paradoxes here help to highlight the radical nature of his ideas. Whitman believes that all people, however poor (or "pocketless of a dime"), are capable of 'buying' whatever they please ("the pick of the earth"). He states that the sight of something as insignificant as a bean can reveal more knowledge than a lifetime of schooling. Whitman's paradoxes invite the reader to reconsider what he or she believes to be important.

Paradox in George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*

In his play *Man and Superman*, Shaw uses his protagonist Jack Tanner to express many of his own unconventional ideas about society. One of the tenets in a book carried by Tanner comes in the form of a witty paradox:

The golden rule is that there are no golden rules.

This statement undermines the sanctity of the traditional "golden rule" (i.e., "do unto others as you'd have them do unto you"), suggesting a more flexible worldview. It creates a paradox, however, since a golden rule against golden rules would seem to defeat its own authority! This makes it similar to the classic "liar's paradox" from logic: "this sentence is a lie."

Paradox in Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man*

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison's protagonist grapples with what it means to be black in predominantly white, racist America. He is haunted by the paradoxical advice of his grandfather, who tells him to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction..." In other words, the grandfather suggests that the best way to break the power of the white majority is precisely *to submit to it*. Another paradox arises when the protagonist is promoted to chief spokesman of the Brotherhood in Harlem, and Master Jack describes the position:

"You will have freedom of action—and you will be under strict discipline to the committee."

This restrained freedom creates a paradox, which ultimately leads the protagonist to decide to leave behind all institutions, as he comes to realize that *all* groups will require him to sacrifice his freedom and identity to their cause.

Paradox in Speeches

Paradox also appears in great political speeches, whose key phrases have survived the test of time in the public imagination.

Paradox in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933

In his first inaugural address, Roosevelt spoke about the challenges facing the United States as a result of the Great Depression. One of the most famous lines from his speech is so memorable in part because it creates a paradox:

So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself...

With this optimistic message, Roosevelt hoped to unite the struggling nation against a common enemy (fear), all the while asserting the invincibility of the American nation. Every challenge facing the nation

could be defeated, Roosevelt argued, as long as its citizens could believe in themselves and vanquish fear.

Paradox in Song

A well-placed paradox can make song lyrics memorable and give them a greater depth of meaning, asking listeners to think twice as they sing along to a catchy tune.

Paradox in Elvis Costello's "Cruel to Be Kind"

Elvis Costello borrows a turn of phrase from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, cited above, in his song "Cruel to Be Kind." Like Hamlet, the singer here is trying to argue that a little cruelty can be a sign of love, a sentiment that also echoes the paradoxical blending of love and hate in *Romeo and Juliet*.

You've gotta be
Cruel to be kind in the right measure,
Cruel to be kind it's a very good sign,
Cruel to be kind means that I love you,
Baby, you've gotta be cruel to be kind...



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Paradoxes are helpful for capturing the sometimes bewildering duality of life. A writer might choose to employ paradox for various reasons, including:

- To highlight the complexity of a certain situation, or point out the fallacy of a widely-held, preconceived notion.
- To allude to an apparent contradiction and suggest that it might reveal a greater truth if it can be resolved.
- To point out, challenge, or satirize contradictions in the world.
- To craft a word puzzle that draws the reader in and demands their attention.
- To add humor to a work by making a witty observation.



OTHER RESOURCES

- **Paradox Wikipedia Page:** [this entry](#) is specific to paradox as a literary term, but you can also find the link to a general entry on paradox.
- **American Rhetoric:** this site catalogues [examples](#) of literary devices like paradox in famous speeches from history, and even provides free audio clips of the speakers in action.
- **Youtube explanation:** [this video](#) offers a thorough and clear definition of paradox, with helpful literary examples.

HOW TO CITE

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