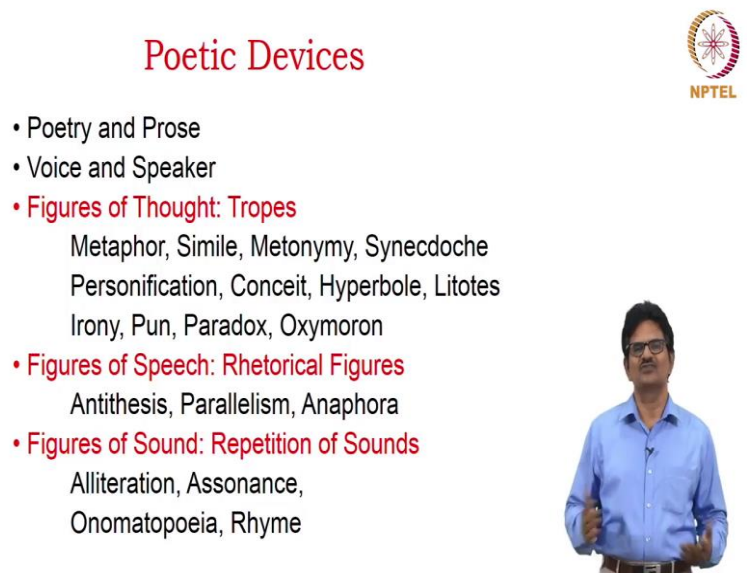
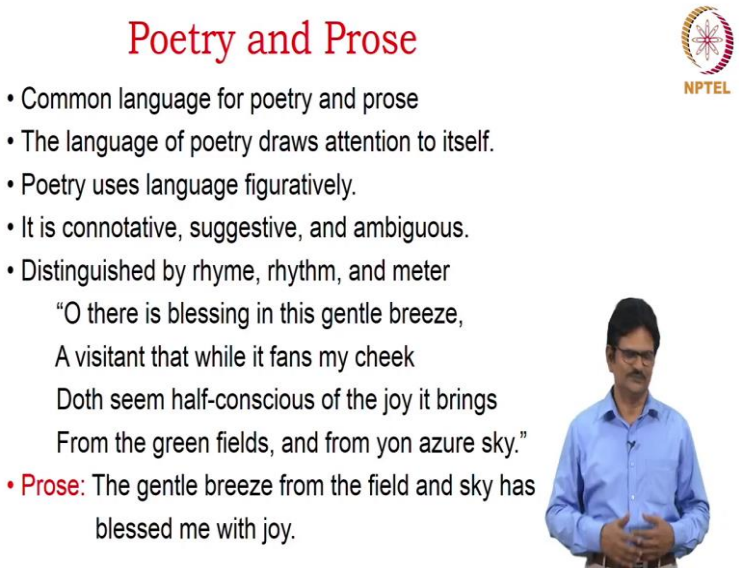
Poetry
Professor S.P. Dhanavel
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture 5
Poetic Devices

(Refer Slide Time: 00:15)



We come to the important topic on Poetic Devices. These may be called rhetorical devices, poetic techniques and the other terms. But these are the technical devices which go into most of the poems and these devices differentiate poetry from prose. Every poem has a voice, and through that voice, a speaker conveys the ideas or feelings. So, we will look at this voice and speaker as well. Now, to come to the technical devices, we have broadly three categories, figures of thought, they are called tropes, turns. And in this category, we have many common figures: Metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, conceit, hyperbole, litotes, irony, pun, paradox, an oxymoron. In the second category, figures of speech, we have commonly known rhetorical figures, antithesis, parallelism and anaphora. In the third category, we have figures of sound, and these are actually repetition of sounds. Some common repetitions of sounds are alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, and rhyme.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:47)



Now, let us look into the difference between poetry and prose. We have a common language for both poetry and prose. But poetry is different from prose and we make this distinction very clearly. One of the ways in which we do is, to see, whether the language draws attention to itself and if it does, then it is more poetic. And it does so that means it draws attention to itself by figurative language. Or when poets use language figuratively through these devices, we find poetry differs from prose. Poetry then becomes connotative, suggestive and ambiguous. That means tends to be interpreted in many ways.

Poetry is also distinguished by rhyme, rhythm and meter. Let us look at one example from William Wordsworth's, 'The Prelude.' These are the opening lines of this autobiographical epic poem.

"O there is blessing in this gentle breeze,

A visitant that while it fans my cheek

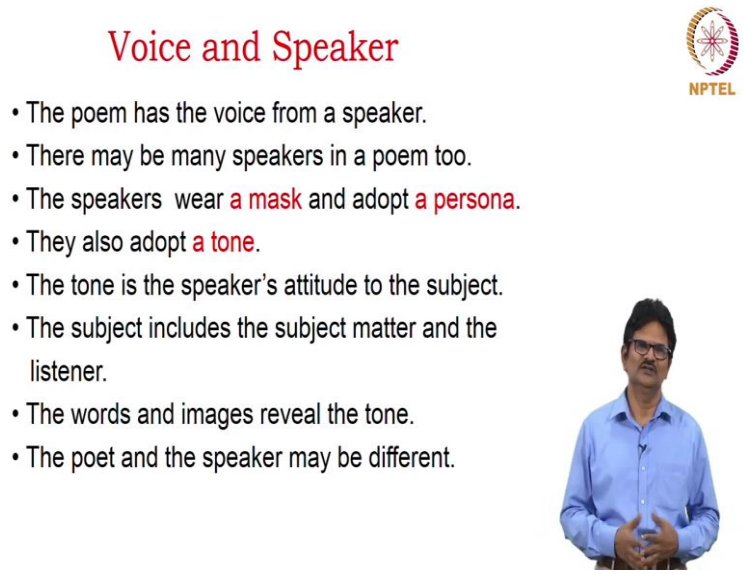
Doth seem half conscious of the joy it brings

From the green fields, and from yon azure sky."

This particular opening of the epic poem can be summed up in prose in one sentence like this, "the gentle breeze from the field and sky has blessed me with joy." But you

can see the difference between this simple paraphrase and the poetic rendering by Wordsworth.

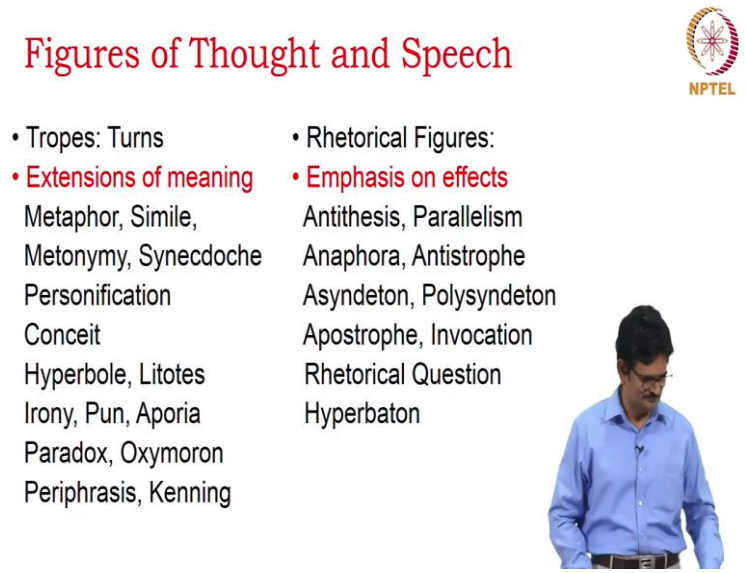
(Refer Slide Time: 03:38)



We said there is a voice in poetry. There is a speaker in poetry. We say this because the poet and the speaker need not be the same. Sometimes they can be similar or the same, but many poems do not have the speaker and the poet in the same vein. So, normally your poem has a voice of a speaker. And there may be several speakers in a poem. These speakers, to distinguish their voices adopt a mask. And this mask is also known as persona, they can change the mask, they can change the persona very often.

And this distinction between one voice and another can be seen through the tone adopted by the speakers or the voices in a poem. The tone of the speaker is the attitude to the subject and it can be sometimes attitude to the reader or listener as well. This subject includes the subject matter and also the listener. That is where the relationship between the poet and the listener becomes crucial. The words and images used in a poem reveal the tone of the whole poem. The poet and the speaker can be different or can be the same as we said earlier.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:12)



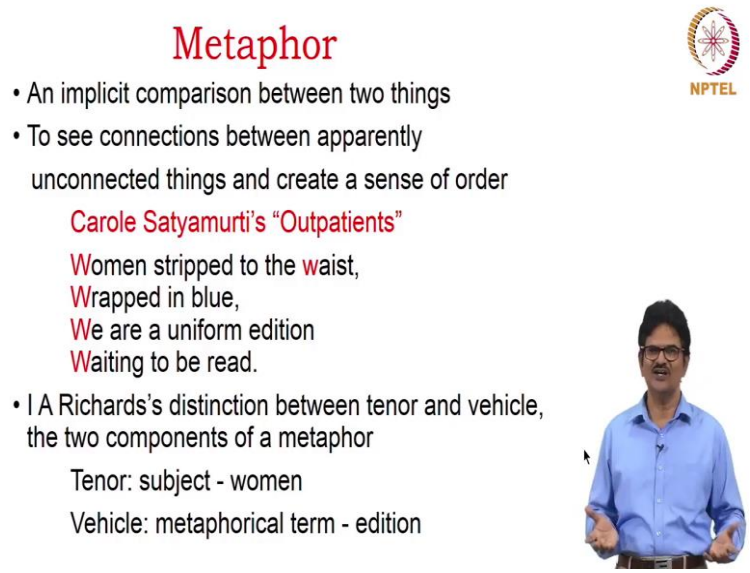
What are those figures of thought and speech? the poetic devices that poets use in their poems. We have identified two groups: figures of thought and figures of speech. The distinction is not sacrosanct. It can be sometimes question, challenge. For the sake of some clarity and understanding, we have this distinction. But generally, all of them are known as figures of speech as well. But nuanced readers of poetry try to distinguish between figures of thought and figures of speech. These figures of thought are known as tropes. Tropes mean turns. And these are extensions of meaning.

In a poem through the words, they extend the meaning of the poem. These are the figures of thought we have. Metaphor, simile, metonymy synecdoche, personification, conceit, hyperbole, litotes irony, pun, aporia, paradox, oxymoron, periphrasis and Kenning.

There are many more, but we have some here. The figures of speech are known as rhetorical figures. They are also known as schemes as supposed to tropes. These figures give emphasis on the effects created by these techniques on the reader. And these effects can be seen through use of language.

Here are some techniques, antithesis, parallelism, anaphora, antistrophe, asyndeton, polysyndeton, apostrophe, invocation, rhetorical question and hyperbaton. As we suggested in the case of figures of thought there are many, more than in fact, 200 figures of thought and speech we have. But we have listed just a few.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:20)



Now, let us examine their figures of thought one after another. We begin with Metaphor. It is one of the most common figures of thought in poetry. By metaphor, we mean an implicit comparison between two things or ideas. When a poet attempts to see connections between apparently unconnected things and create a sense of order in his poem, we say his poetry is metaphorical.

We have a beautiful example from one of the contemporary British poets Carole Satyamurti. She has a poem called "Outpatients." You love it.

"Women stripped to the waist,

Wrapped in blue,

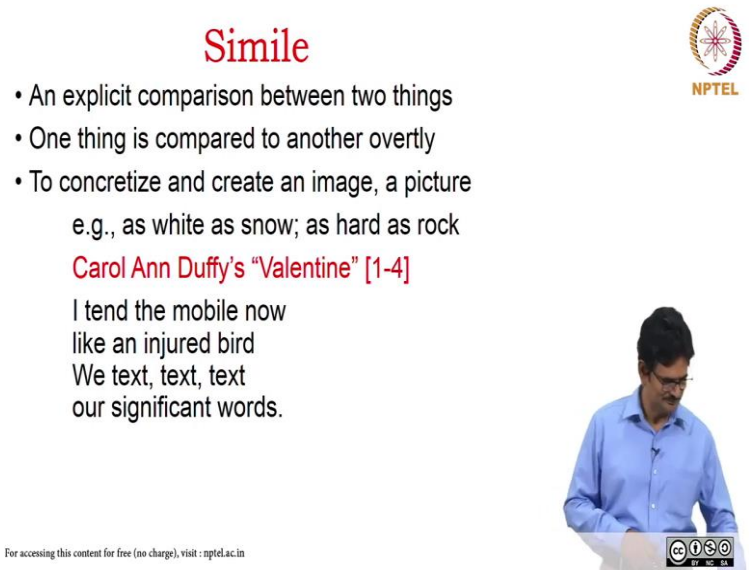
We are a uniform edition

Waiting to be read."

The poet presents a persona who is a patient, rather outpatient and she is examined by the doctor. She is examined as a uniform edition. I A Richards, a critic distinguishes between Tenor and Vehicle, the two components of a metaphor. Tenor refers to the subject that is, in this case women. Vehicle refers to the metaphorical term that is used in the poem that is addition. This addition, if you apply your general knowledge, you will see that this is something called limited edition: Edition of a book or Edition of a Machine, Car. There is an element of this mechanical attitude from this doctor that is what you can see in this poem. The poet feels how mechanically the patients are

treated by doctors. They are not just outpatients. They are patients who are not really cared for by the medical fraternity. That is what the poet feels.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:31)



Very close to a metaphor, we have the next figure of thought that is Simile. A simile is an explicit comparison between two things. One thing is compared to another very clearly, explicitly. To concretize and to create an image or a picture, a poet uses similes.

In common parlance, we have some expressions like as white as snow, as hard as rock. Another contemporary British poet we have here Carol Ann Duffy. Her poem valentine reads like this,

"I tend the mobile now

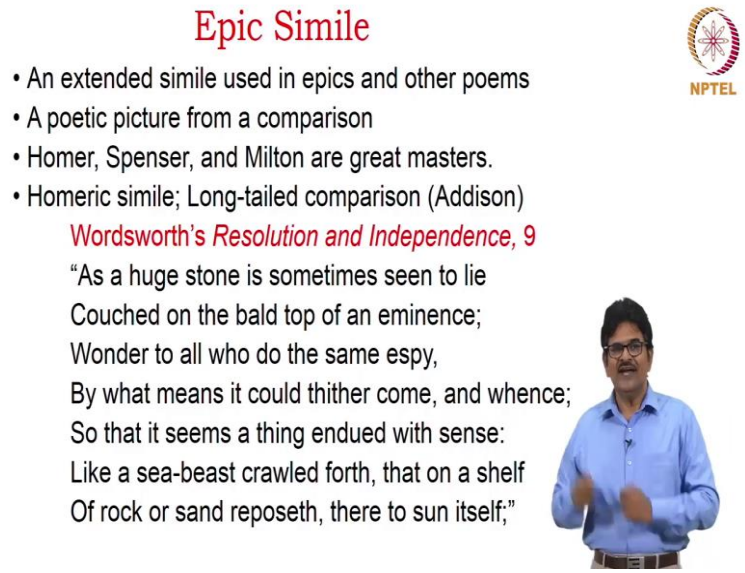
like an injured bird

We text, text, text

our significant words."

Mobile, a machine is treated like a bird, an injured bird by the poet. So, we have this explicit comparison between the mobile and the bird.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:35)



From metaphor and simile, we go on to Epic Simile. Epic- Huge; Yes, it is an extended simile used Epics and other poems, not necessarily in epics alone. It is a poetic picture from a comparison, for a longer period or in many numbers of lines. Homer, Spenser and Milton are great masters of epic similes. It so happened that Homer used it first and so it is also called Homeric simile. Addison calls it long tailed comparison. Because the comparison extends for a long time like a tail, it extends.

We have a wonderful example in William Wordsworth's poem "Resolution and Independence" in stanza 9. There is an old man and this old man is compared in this way:

"As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie

Couched on the bald top of an eminence;

Wonder to all who do the same espy,

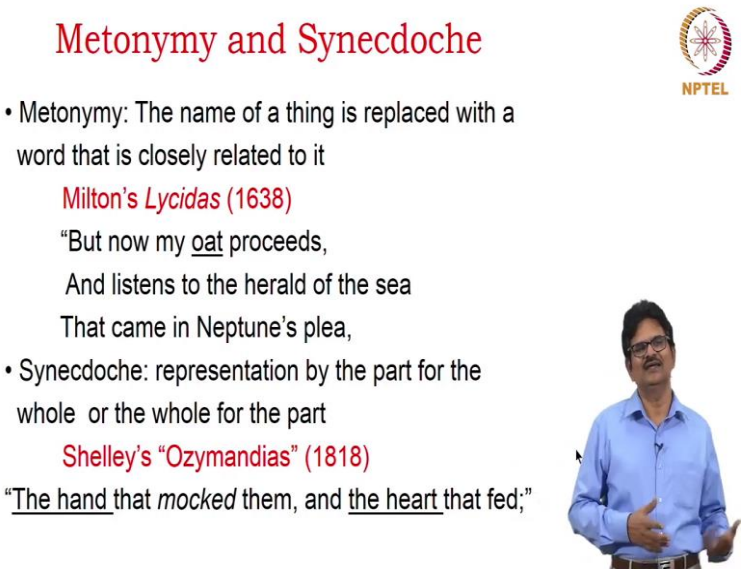
By what means it could thither come, and whence;

So that it seems a thing endued with sense:

Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf

Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself."

(Refer Slide Time: 12:00)



Now, we come to another pair of figures of thought. They are commonly grouped together: Metonymy and Synecdoche. These figures are used to refer to something by association, by referring to part for whole or whole for part. However, we make a distinction. Metonymy is the name of a thing that is replaced with a word, which is closely related to it. For example, in Milton's "Lycidas," we have these lines:

"But now my oat proceeds,

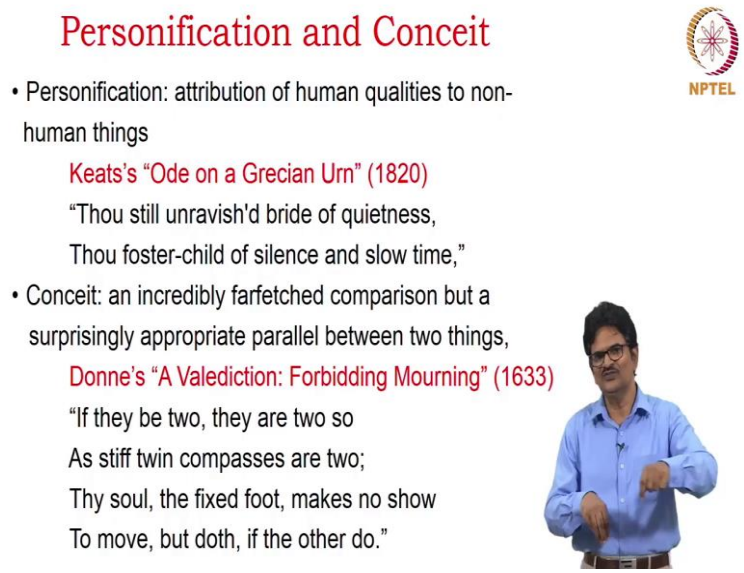
And listens to the Herald of the Sea

That came in Neptune's plea,"

The word 'oat' here is used metonymically. The word oat refers to the tree from which an instrument is made for singing, for music. And so, metonymically the word oat stands for the poem or the song that the poet sings. Synecdoche is a representation by the part for the whole or the whole for the part.

In Shelley's Sonnet "Ozymandias," we have this example, "The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed." The hand belongs to the person and similarly, the heart belongs to the person, the person who mocked and the person who fed, the person, whole person is referred to by the hand or the heart.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:40)



Now, we come to a common figure of thought Personification. And we will also look at conceit, which can be used in the context of poetry, in the context of metaphor, simile and everything else. Personification is an attribution of human qualities to non-human things. In Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," We find the poet attributing the human qualities to the urn. So, he says,

"thou still unravished bride of quietness,

Thou foster child of silence and slow time."

Let us examine conceit in this context now. It is also a kind of comparison but it is an incredibly farfetched comparison. It is surprisingly appropriate and shows parallel between two things. One of the masters of conceits is John Donne. His poem, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" has this typical conceit. There is a compass with two legs. The poet compares himself and his beloved with these two legs. One leg standing not moving, another leg moving around.

"If they be two, they are two so

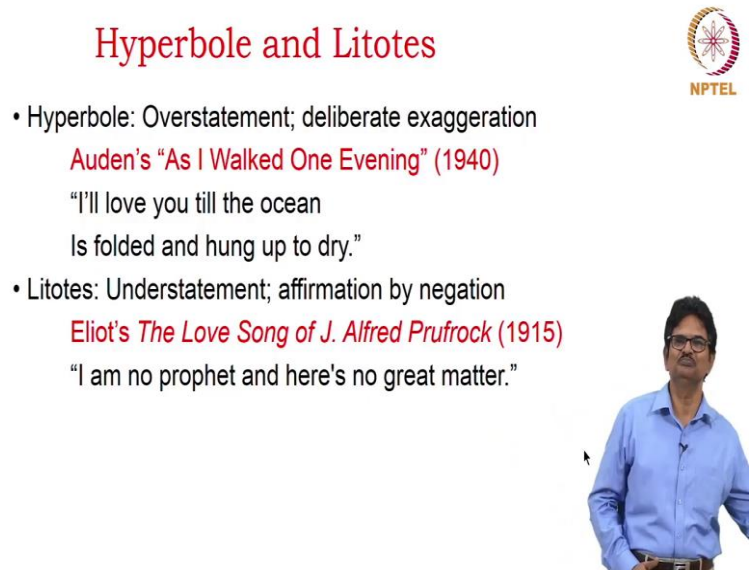
As stiff twin compasses are too;

Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show

To move, but doth, if the other do."

One leg may remain in place. But when the other moves their fixed foot also moves along with that.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:33)



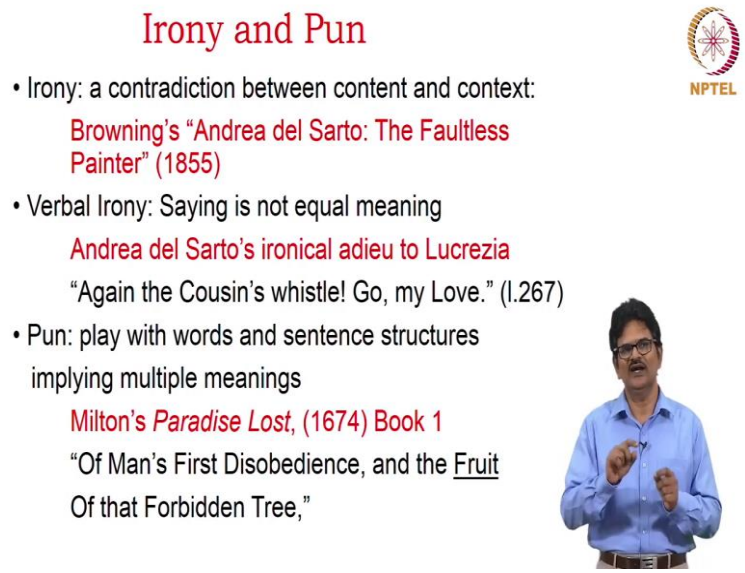
Hyperbole and Litotes is a pair of figures of thought we discuss now. Hyperbole refers to overstatement or deliberate exaggeration. For example, Auden's poem "As I Walked One Evening" has these two lines,

"I will love you till the ocean

Is folded and hung up to dry. "

Can we imagine an ocean drying up? Now, but the poet imagines through this exaggeration. Next, we have this litotes which means an understatement, just opposite hyperbole. It is also a kind of affirmation by negation. In T.S. Eliot poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," we have this famous line, "I am no prophet and here's no great matter."

(Refer Slide Time: 16:35)



Irony and Pun, we have now to discuss. Irony is a contradiction between content and context. Whenever there is a difference between two ideas presented, which are attracting the attention of readers, we have this irony. Brownings "Andrea Del Sarto," a dramatic monologue has this irony within the title itself. Andrea Del Sarto is a painter who expresses his inability to draw like other great painters. But Browning adds this subtitle 'Faultless Painter.'

We also have something called Verbal Irony. This is what we are normally very often familiar with. We say one thing but we do not mean what we say. So, saying is not exactly equal to meaning. Andrea Del Sarto says ironically to his beloved Lucrezia: "Again the cousin's whistle! Go, my love." But he does not actually want her to go. He wants her to stay with him so that he can paint more, for her of course. But she cannot wait, she has to go. He understands this and then gives this adieu or bids this adieu.

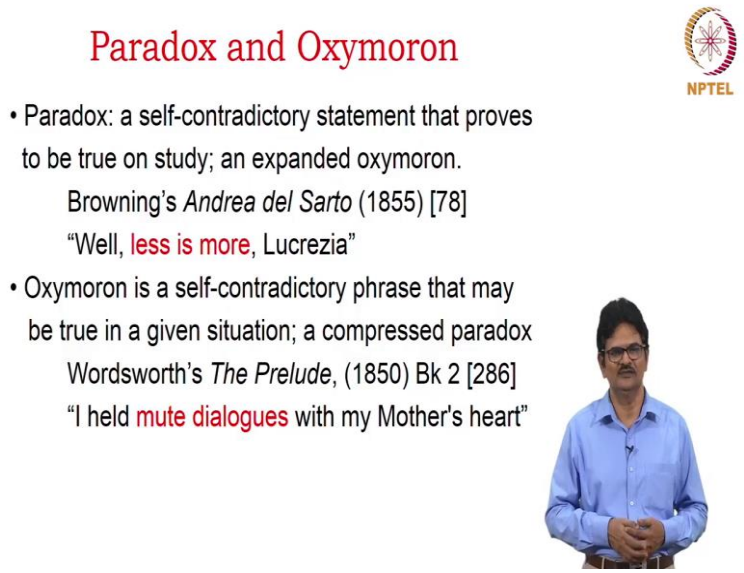
Another closely related figure of thought is Pun. It is actually play with words and sentence structures to imply multiple meanings. In Milton's "Paradise Lost" in Book one, we have these opening lines,

"Of man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit

Of that forbidden Tree."

This is a poem that deals with the man's first disobedience and fall from this paradise. The reason is, man that is Adman Eve ate this fruit. Apple is a fruit that is referred to. At the same time, we will understand that the fruit is the result of the labor, the result of eating the fruit. So, both meanings eating the fruit and the result of eating, the consequence of eating that fruit we have within this same word. That is why it has two meaning simultaneously.

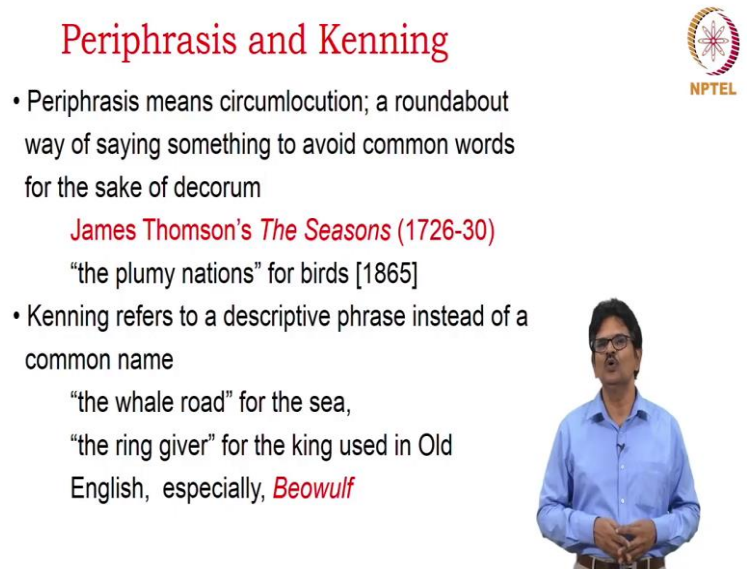
(Refer Slide Time: 19:16)



Along with this irony, we also have Paradox and Oxymoron. Paradox, is a self-contradictory statement that proves to be true on study or examination. It can be something like an expanded oxymoron. Again, in Browning's "Andrea del sarto," we have this paradoxical statement, "Well, less is more, Lucrezia." Less is more. How can that be? That is Paradox.

In the case of oxymoron, we can say that it is a self-contradictory phrase that may be true in a given situation. In other words, we can call it a compressed paradox. In Wordsworth's epic "The Prelude," we have this line in book two, "I held the mute dialogues with my mother's heart." Dialogue means speech; mute is silent. How can you have a silent conversation? That is possible for the poet and it happens in our real-life situation as well.

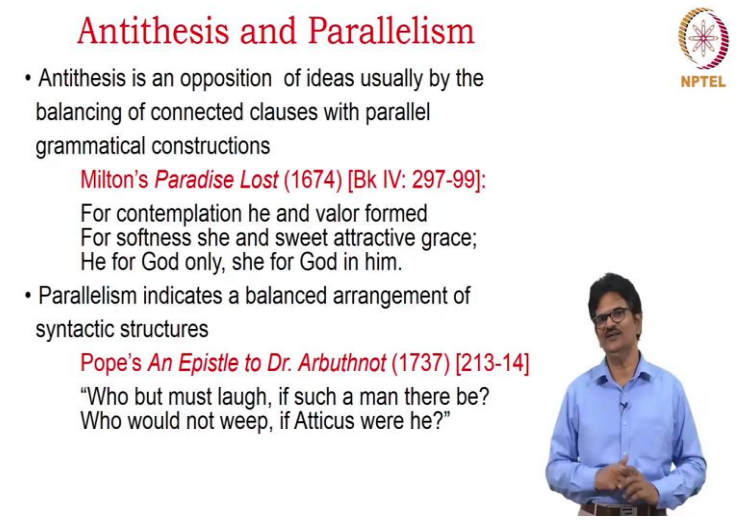
(Refer Slide Time: 20:34)



Periphrasis and Kenning are two more figures of thought. Periphrasis means circumlocution, it is a roundabout way of saying something to avoid common words for the sake of decorum. We do not want to say things openly. Here we have this poet James Thomson, in his poem "The Seasons" he says, "the plumy nations" for birds. In those days' birds, the word birds was not be used in great poetry. So, he uses 'the plumy nations.' That is Periphrasis.

Kenning refers to a descriptive phrase instead of a common name. This was very popular in Old English Literature, Middle English Literature. "The whale road" for the sea, "the ring giver" for the King, used in old English. Particularly we have this in Beowulf.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:41)



Antithesis and Parallelism are two figures of speech. Antithesis is an opposition of ideas, usually by the balancing of connected clauses with parallel grammatical constructions. In Milton's "Paradise Lost" in book 4, we have these wonderful antithetical words,

"For contemplation he and valor formed

For softness she and sweet attractive grace;

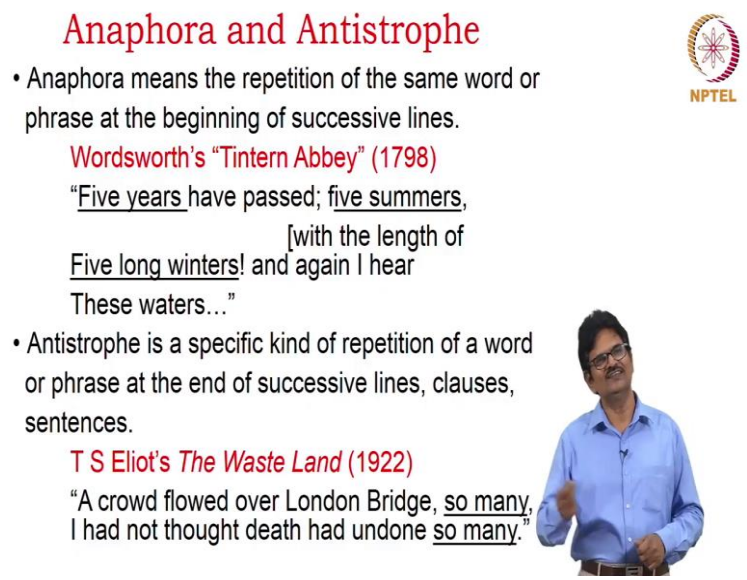
He for God only, she for God in him."

Parallelism indicates a balanced arrangement of syntactic structures. Two things are put in a sentence properly with good balance. Alexander Pope is a master of this. In his verse epistle "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," he has these two lines,

"Who but must laugh, if such a man there be?

Who would not weep, if Atticus were he?"

(Refer Slide Time: 22:47)



Anaphora and Antistrophe are two other figures of speech. Anaphora means the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive lines. In Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey" we have these lines. The expression 'five years' is repeated at the beginning. It is also repeated in the middle.

"Five years have passed; five summers, with the length of

Five long winters! and again I hear

These waters...”

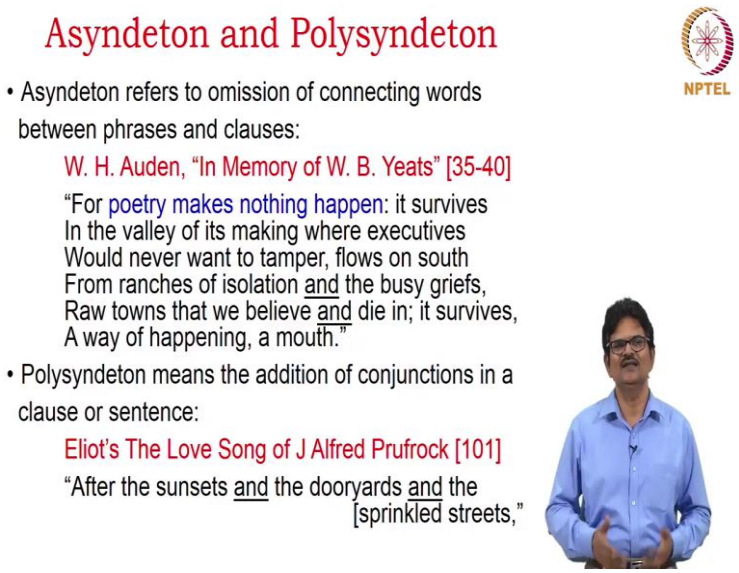
Antistrophe is a different kind of technical term that is used in poetry. But it is also used as a figure of speech. It is a specific kind of repetition of a word or phrase at the end of successive lines, clauses or sentences. We have a good example in T S Eliot's “The Waste land,”

“A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.”

Antistrophe, Strophe- these two words are used in the context of Ode. We will see them in another context.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:12)



One more pair of figures of speech we have here Asyndeton and Polysyndeton. Asyndeton means omitting the connective words between phrases and clauses. In W.H. Auden’s poem, “In memory of W.B. Yeats,” we have these lines. Arden moums the death of W.B. Yeats. And he also talks about poetry.

“For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives

In the valley of its making where executives

Would never want to temper, flows on south

From ranches of isolation, and the busy griefs,

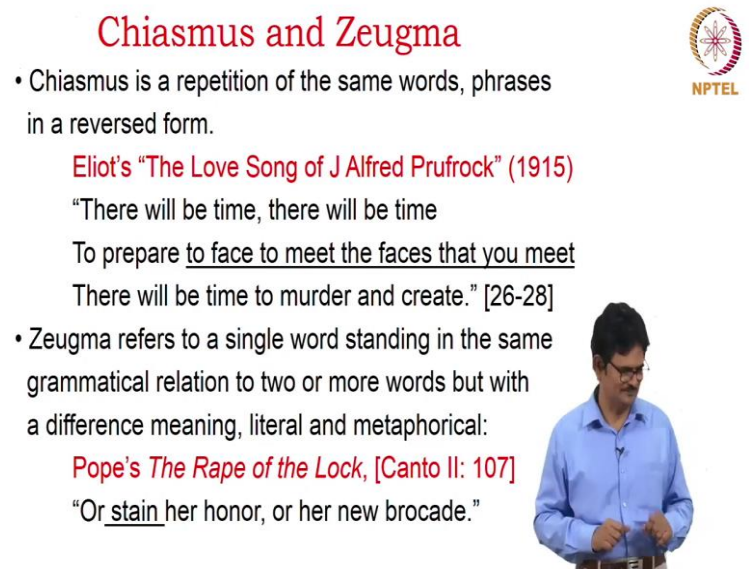
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth."

In the last two lines he has used 'and' that is an example of polysyndeton. We will see what it is now.

Polysyndeton means the addition of conjunctions in a clause or sentence. Auden did not use many connectives in the first three lines. He did that in the last but two lines. Now, we have another example, a specific example for polysyndeton from T S Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "After the sun sets and the dooryards and the sprinkle streets." Within one line, we have two conjunctions. When too many conjunctions are used like this that is an example of polysyndeton.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:04)



Here we have Chiasmus and Zeugma. The names themselves are attractive. Chiasmus is a repetition of the same words or phrases in a reversed form. Not in the normal order. The same thing is repeated but in opposite form. T S Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" has this example,

"There will be time, there will be time

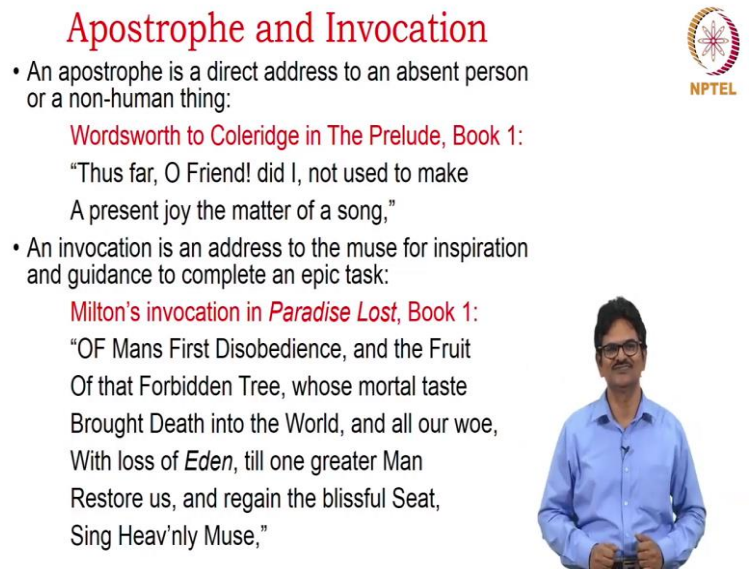
To prepare to face to meet the faces that you meet"

The example of Chiasmus is underlined in this case to face to meet the faces that you meet. And it goes,

"There will be time to murder and create."

When it comes to Zeugma, we see that it refers to a single word standing in the same grammatical relation to two or more words, but with a difference in meaning. One may have literal meaning; another may have metaphorical meaning. In Pope's mock epic poem "The Rape of the Lock" in canto 2, we have this example, "Or strain her honor or her new brocade." Strain is a single verb. It refers to honor to spoil it. And it also refers to spoiling this new brocade. But they have two different meanings.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:40)



Apostrophe and Invocation are two figures of speech that we look into now. An apostrophe is a direct address to an absent person or a non-human thing. Wordsworth Addresses his friend Coleridge in "The Prelude" in Book one. 'Thus far, O Friend! that is Coleridge.

"Thus for, O Friend! did I, not used to make

A present joy the matter of a song."

Coleridge was not there, but he was addressing him. It can happen, so happen that the poet addresses a non-human object.

Next, we look at Invocation. An invocation is also an address, but this address is to the muse for inspiration and guidance to complete an epic task or any task even it may be a small task. But when you do a huge task, you need help from somebody else. We need some inspiration, particularly for writing poems. Milton has this invocation in "Paradise Lost" in book one,

"Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit

Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste

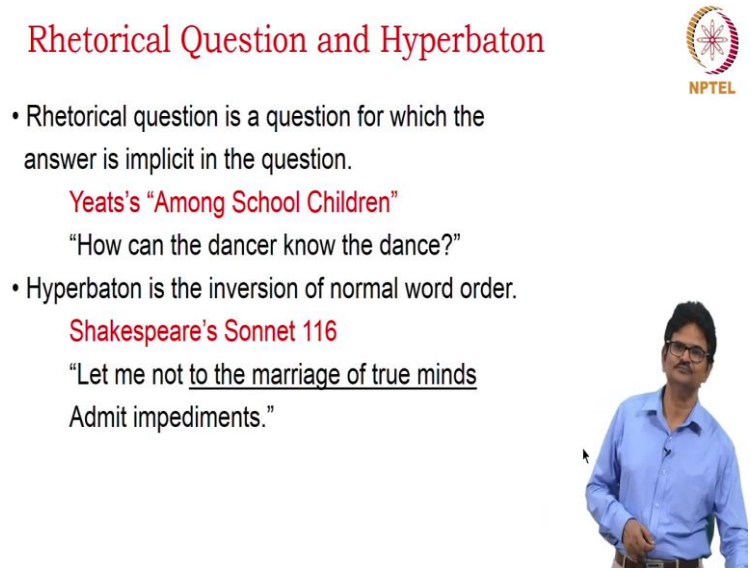
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,

With the loss of Eden, till one greater man

Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,

Sing Heav'nly muse."

(Refer Slide Time: 29:13)



We also have a Rhetorical Question and Hyperbaton. Rhetorical Question is a question for which the answer is already there in the question itself. W B Yeats asks such a question at the end of his poem among school children. "How can the dancer know the dance? it is impossible. When the dancer dances, how can we differentiate between the two?

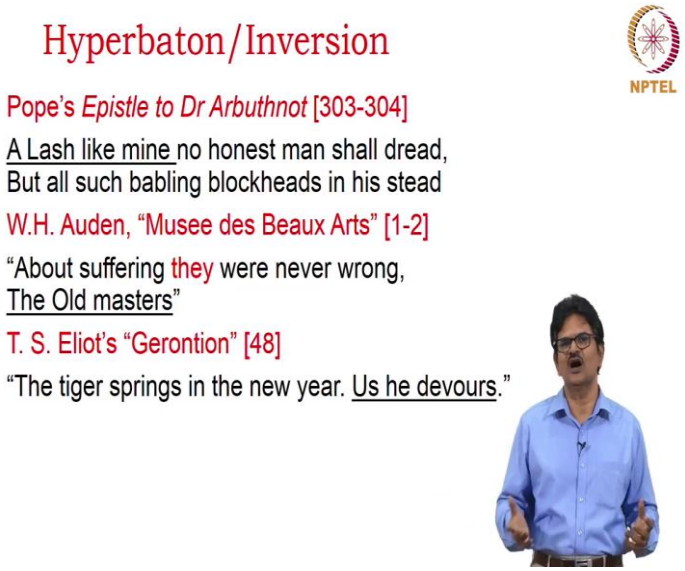
Hyperbaton is a common technique that is used in poetry. It refers to the inversion of normal word order. In Shakespeare's famous sonnet 116, we have this example:

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds,

Admit impediments."

That is how the poem is written. The normal word order is, let me not admit impediments to the marriage of true minds.

(Refer Slide Time: 30:13)



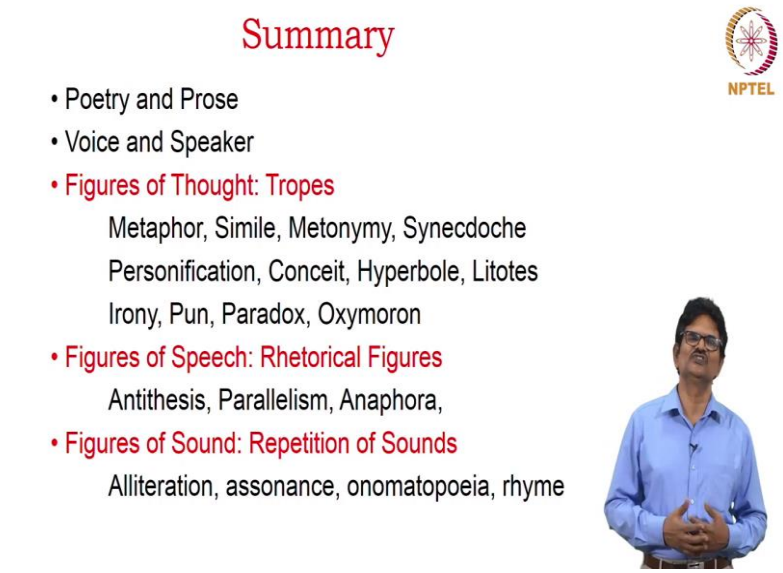
We have more examples for Hyperbaton. That is Inversion. In Pope's "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" we have this line,

"A lash like mine no honest man shall dread,

But all such babbling blockheads in his stead"

In W.H Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts," we have "About suffering they were never wrong, The old masters." They were never wrong about suffering. That is a normal word order. Similarly, we have one more example from T S Eliot's poem "Gerontion," "The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours." Normal word order would be he devours us.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:01)



Thus, we see a number of figures of thought, figures of speech which are used by poets in many ways to create some impact on the reader. By using these rhetorical devices, poets use language figuratively and create poetry and thus differentiate poetry from prose. They also use voice in their poems to differentiate one speaker from another. This speaker may be different from the poet himself or herself.

The common figures of thought known as tropes or turns that we have looked at are metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personifications, conceit, hyperbole, litotes, irony, pun, paradox, and oxymoron. The figures of speech also known as rhetorical figures or schemes that we have looked at or antithesis, parallelism, anaphora. We have figures of sound as well; these are repetition of sounds. We will see them in another video. Thank you.

(Refer Slide Time: 32:32)

As usual, we have some references. Please do check them. Thank you.