Definition of Metonymy

It is a figure of speech that replaces the name of a thing with the name of something else with which it is closely associated. We can come across examples of metonymy both from literature and in everyday life.

Metonymy, Synecdoche and Metaphor

Metonymy is often confused with another figure of speech called [synecdoche](http://literarydevices.net/synecdoche/). They resemble each other but are not the same. Synecdoche refers to a thing by the name of one of its parts. For example, calling a car “a wheel” is a synecdoche. A part of a car i.e. “a wheel” stands for the whole car. In a metonymy, on the other hand, the word we use to describe another thing is closely linked to that particular thing, but is not a part of it. For example, “Crown” which means power or authority is a metonymy.

Metonymy is different from a [metaphor](http://literarydevices.net/metaphor/). A metaphor draws resemblance between two different things as in “You are sunlight and I moon” – *Sun And Moon* from Miss Saigon. Sunlight (and moon) and human are two different things without any association but it attempts to describe one thing in terms of another based on a supposed similarity. Metonymy, however, develops relation on the grounds of close associations as in “The White House is concerned about terrorism.” The White House here represents the people who work in it.

Examples of Metonymy in Everyday Life

We use metonymy frequently in our everyday life. For a better understanding, let us observe a few metonymy examples:

* England decides to keep check on immigration. (England refers to the government.)
* The suits were at meeting. (The suits stand for business people.)
* The Oval Office was busy in work. (“The Oval Office” is a metonymy as it stands for people at work in the office.)
* Let me give you a hand. (Hand means help.)

Examples of Metonymy from Literature

Example #1

The given lines are from Shakespeare’s “Julies Caesar” Act I.

“Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.”

Mark Anthony uses “ears” to say that he wants the people present there to listen to him attentively. It is a metonymy because the word “ears” replaces the concept of attention.

Example #2

This line is from Margaret Mitchell’s novel “Gone with the Wind”.

“I’m mighty glad Georgia waited till after Christmas before it secedes or it would have ruined the Christmas parties.”

Scarlett uses “Georgia” to point out everything that makes up the state: citizens, politician, government etc. It is a metonymy extremely common in the modern world, where a name of a country or state refers to a whole nation and its government. Thus, it renders brevity to the ideas.

Example #3

These lines are taken from “Out, Out” by Robert Frost.

“As he swung toward them holding up the hand  
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep  
The life from spilling”

In these lines, the expression “The life from spilling” is a metonymy that refers to spilling of blood. It develops a link between life and blood. The loss of too much blood means loss of life.

Example #4

These lines are from the poem “Yet Do I Marvel”.

“The little buried mole continues blind,  
Why flesh that mirror Him must someday die,”

Countee Cullen uses “flesh” to represent human and questions God why we have to die when we are created in His likeness.

Function of Metonymy

Generally, metonymy is used in developing literary [symbolism](http://literarydevices.net/symbolism/) i.e. it gives more profound meanings to otherwise common ideas and objects. By using metonymy, texts exhibit deeper or hidden meanings and thus drawing readers’ attention.  In addition, the use of metonymy helps achieve conciseness. For instance, “Rifles were guarding the gate” is more concise than “The guards with rifles in their hands were guarding the gate.”

Furthermore, metonymy, like other literary devices, is employed to add a poetic color to words to make them come to life. The simple ordinary things are described in a creative way to insert this “life” factor to the literary works.

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| Metonymy Phrase | Metonymy Is… | True Reference is to… |
| **The pen is mightier than the sword (example).** | *Pen* | *The power of words and communication* |
| **We await word from the crown.** |  |  |
| **I'm told he's gone so far as to give her a diamond ring** |  |  |
| **The IRS is auditing me? Great. All I need is a couple of suits arriving at my door.** |  |  |
| **He is a man of the cloth.** |  |  |
| **He writes a fine hand.** |  |  |
| **He loves the bottle.** |  |  |
| **The ham sandwich is waiting for his check.** |  |  |

**Directions:** *Read and review the eight Metonymy phrases. Star your two favorites. Then, find a partner and compare your answers with each other to complete the chart…*

**So what are you understanding about metonymy?**

Directions: *Read and review the poem. Annotate what you notice. Also, can you identify the metonymy and why the poet uses that phrase instead?*

**Nine to Five**

*Roger McGough*

What I wouldn't give for a nine to five.

Biscuits in the right hand drawer,

teabreaks, and typists to mentally undress.

The same faces. Somewhere to hang

your hat and shake your umbrella.

Cosy. Everything in its place

Upgraded every few years. Hobbies.

Glass of beer at lunchtime

Pension to look forward to.

Two kids. Homeloving wife.

Bit on the side when the occasion arises

H.P. Nothing fancy. Neat semi.

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What I wouldn't give for a nine to five.

Glass of beer in the right hand drawer

H.P. on everything at lunchtime.

The same 2 kids. Somewhere to hang

your wife and shake your bit on the side.

Teabreaks and a pension to mentally undress.

The same semifaces upgraded.

Hobbies every few years, neat typists

in wet macs when the umbrella arises.

What I wouldn't give for a cosy biscuit.

*from Collected Poems, Viking 2003*

*http://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/nine-five#sthash.wBiPlEVr.dpuf*