Foreshadowing

ⓘ DEFINITION

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

> Foreshadowing is a literary device in which authors hint at plot developments that don't actually occur until later in the story. Foreshadowing can be achieved directly or indirectly, by making explicit statements or leaving subtle clues about what will happen later in the text. The Russian author Anton Chekhov summarized foreshadowing when he wrote, "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off." The description of the gun on the wall, in other words, should *foreshadow* its later use.

Some additional key details about foreshadowing:

- Foreshadowing can be so subtle that it goes unnoticed, often until *after* the foreshadowed event comes to pass.
- Often foreshadowing serves to *increase* the sense of mystery rather than dispel it, by suggesting that some event might occur but not *how* it will come to pass.
- Foreshadowing is a useful tool for writers because it helps prepare readers for later scenes, builds a sense of suspense, and makes a work seem to have tied up "loose ends."

Foreshadowing Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce foreshadowing: fore-**shad**-owe-ing

Types of Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing can take many different forms. Writers (or characters) may foreshadow later events by explicitly stating what will happen, or by making subtle suggestions about future plot developments. The most common types of foreshadowing are:

- **Subtle foreshadowing:** Oftentimes foreshadowing is so subtle that readers don't even notice that it has happened until later on in the story. For instance, a character might mention in passing that they work at a lab that specializes in making vaccinations, but this might not strike the reader as important until later, when a rare virus breaks out and threatens civilization, and this character suddenly becomes humanity's last hope.
- **Partial or mysterious foreshadowing:** Some forms of foreshadowing reveal only particular details about what will happen, which can then increase suspense or anticipation as the audience wonders how or why what has been foreshadowed will come to pass. For example, imagine a story that begins: "Being able to spit watermelon seeds was, I would one day learn, the

greatest gift I'd ever been given." In such an example, the narrator's bizarre skill is explicitly indicated as relevant to future events, but the reader doesn't come away with a clear sense of *how* that skill will prove important.

- **Direct foreshadowing:** Sometimes a narrator or character makes an explicit declaration about what will happen later in the text. For example, when the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* reveals that two lovers will end up taking their lives, that is an example of very direct foreshadowing. Even though it explicitly reveals what will happen in the story, such foreshadowing can increase suspense as the audience now knows something the characters don't (which also means that this type of foreshadowing can create instances of dramatic irony). In *Romeo and Juliet*, the direct foreshadowing also creates a sense of fate against which the characters must then struggle, whether knowingly or not.
- **Red herrings:** Sometimes, authors use what seems like foreshadowing to deliberately mislead readers about what will happen next. In these cases, what seems like foreshadowing are actually false clues. Such false clues are known as "red-herrings." Red herrings are especially common in mystery novels because they keep the reader guessing. One character might describe another character as highly suspicious, directing the reader's attention to that suspicious character's possible guilt, even if the character will later be shown to have done nothing wrong.

Foreshadowing vs. Flash-forwards

Foreshadowing is similar to, and often confused with, the use of "flash-forward." Also known as prolepsis, flash-forwards are a literary device in which a scene set in the future temporarily interrupts the primary, present-day narrative. Foreshadowing and flash-forwards seem to have a lot in common, since they both offer glimpses into the future, but they differ both structurally and in their purpose.

- **Structure:** Foreshadowing always occurs in the present moment of the narrative. In contrast, a flash-forward interrupts the chronology of the narrative by shifting it forward to a future point in time. Put another away: foreshadowing *hints* at what will come in the future, while flash-forwards *show* what happens in the future.
- **Purpose:** Foreshadowing provides the foundation for events that will occur later in the text, building up both anticipation for those events and helping a reader to interpret and understand those events once they happen. In contrast, flash-forwards, because they explicitly show future events, actually provide a lens for interpreting the events that came *before* them. In other words: foreshadowing helps an audience to get a glimpse of a narrative's future, but flash-forwards actually help the audience to interpret the narrative's present.

✳ EXAMPLES

Though foreshadowing can be found in many art forms, it is most prominent in narrative literature and film.

Foreshadowing Examples in Literature

Writers of fiction (and writers of epic poems that tell a story) use foreshadowing to direct their readers' attention to important details, to heighten suspense, and to bring their tales full circle.

Foreshadowing in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

In Act 1, Scene 2 of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare indirectly foreshadows Macbeth's traitorous rise to power when the King Duncan, the King of Scotland, gives Macbeth the new title of Thane of Cawdor after the previous Thane of Cawdor had conspired against the king (and been defeated by Macbeth). When Duncan decides to give the new title to Macbeth he says:

> No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive
> Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present death,
> And with his former title greet Macbeth.

These lines, spoken by Duncan, the King of Scotland, are highly ironic. Duncan has just rewarded Macbeth's loyalty by giving him a noble title that formerly belonged to the treasonous Cawdor. But Macbeth himself is about to successfully execute a plot to murder Duncan and steal his title as King of Scotland. So Duncan's words are an example of subtle foreshadowing in the sense that they cast Macbeth as the new Cawdor, who also had traitorous intentions toward the King.

Foreshadowing in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

In this example from the start of Book One of *Paradise Lost*, Milton directly foreshadows man's fall from a state of innocence while invoking his poetic muse:

> 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 loss of Eden, till one greater Man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
> Sing, Heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top
> Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
> That Shepherd who first taught the chosen seed
> In the beginning how the heavens and earth
> Rose out of Chaos: or, if Sion hill
> Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
> Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
> Invoke thy aid to my adventrous song,
> That with no middle flight intends to soar
> Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
> Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

Here, Milton leaves little doubt about the fate of man. Man's relationship to God, formerly characterized by innocent obedience, is about to be altered for ever: Adam will be banished from the Garden of Eden for eating "the fruit of that forbidden tree." Because Milton's poem expands on the widely-known Biblical story of Adam and Eve, it is not important that he keep his poem's ending secret or only vaguely defined—since most people reading the poem likely already know how the story goes. Rather, Milton foreshadows man's fall from grace in order to establish the poem's solemn tone, signal his seriousness of purpose, and set the focus on *how* he tells the narrative in his poem (as opposed to *what* narrative he tells).

Foreshadowing in *Of Mice and Men*

In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, a character named Candy has a sheepdog that has grown old and sick. In the middle of the novella, another character named Carlson convinces Candy that the dog is suffering and should be put out of its misery. Candy allows Carlson to shoot the dog, but soon after expresses remorse. Candy's remorse isn't that he now thinks it was wrong to shoot the dog, but rather that he should have shot the dog himself.

This moment foreshadows the climax of the book, in which a character named George faces a difficult decision when he finds his friend Lennie's life in his hands: George can allow his friend to be brutally lynched by an angry mob for a murder Lennie committed by accident, or he can quickly kill Lennie himself—and save his friend from greater suffering. When the reader reaches this moment, suddenly the weight of that initial foreshadowing comes into play, and when George comforts and then shoots Lennie, the reader understands exactly why he does it because of the earlier moment with Candy's dog. In this case, the foreshadowing not only hints at what will happen, but also carries forward the emotion, themes, and character motivations at work in that previous scene so that they come crashing down in this later scene.

Foreshadowing Examples in Movies

Filmmakers use foreshadowing to prepare viewers for even the most surprising plot twists, and to redirect viewers' focus to important details of the plot.

Foreshadowing in Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead*

Edgar Wright's 2004 zombie comedy begins with two friends (Shaun and Ed) fantasizing about the perfect night out while they dine together. By pure coincidence, everything that Ed mentions in his daydream corresponds to an obstacle the pair will face the next day, after the zombie apocalypse has broken out. For example, Ed imagines himself ordering a Bloody Mary, and the next day the two friends find themselves being chased by a zombie wearing a name tag that reads "Mary." Although Ed's ideas for a perfect night foreshadow the entire day, his references to future events are actually indirect. The image below shows Ed's various plans, and the events they indirectly foreshadow:

Foreshadowing in Wes Craven's *Scream*

Horror movies are notorious for their overuse of red herrings to maintain moviegoers' interest. In Wes Craven's *Scream*, the 1996 slasher classic that revitalized the American horror film genre, the police chief wears the same shoes as the killer. Although it turns out that the officer was not involved in the crime, this red herring diverts both characters' and viewers' attention from the true identity of the killer, heightening the suspense and sustaining the audience's interest.

🔧 WHY WRITERS USE IT

On the most basic level, writers use foreshadowing to prepare their readers to understand the plot as it unfolds. But it can also:

- Encourage readers to focus on certain key details.
- Create a sense of surprise when subtle foreshadowing becomes clear after an event occurs.
- Create a sense of mystery or tension.

- Mislead readers, heightening their surprise at a work's end.
- Give scenes a special or subtle significance that not everyone will notice.
- Unite a work's beginning with its end.
- Create thematic connection between different parts of the text.
- Create a sense of fate within a story by revealing its ending, thus putting the focus on the character's struggles against that fate.

🌐 OTHER RESOURCES

- **Wikipedia Page on Foreshadowing:** A somewhat short discussion of foreshadowing. Nonetheless, there is an interesting bit on "sideshadowing," which is like a red-herring without the intent to deceive.
- **Wikipedia Page on Red Herring:** A bit heavy on the history of the idiom itself, but a good review of the device's defining features.
- **Study.com's *What is Foreshadowing* Video:** An excellent animated video on the device's history and function.
- **Elements of Cinema Page on Foreshadowing:** Despite its cinematic focus, this page discusses forms of foreshadowing that can be employed by writers as well. Features plenty of good examples from film.

HOW TO CITE

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