Literary Devices in 1 John

A Guide to the Author's Stylistic Techniques

Exploring the structural beauty of the epistle.

Lexical Cohesion

Definition:

This is the practice of repeating key words and their variations throughout a text to create a strong thematic link. John uses this technique masterfully, weaving a tight fabric of related ideas by returning to the same core vocabulary (e.g., know, love, light, abide, world) again and again, reinforcing his main points.

Example: The word "abide" (meno)

Notice how John uses "abide" or "remain" to connect the believer's relationship with God, Christ, truth, and love, creating a web of interconnectedness.

> *"Let what you heard from the beginning **abide** in you. If what you heard from the beginning **abides** in you, then you too will **abide** in the Son and in the Father." (1 John 2:24)*
>
> *"Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God **abides** in him, and he in God." (1 John 4:15)*

Janus Phrases

Definition:

Named after the two-faced Roman god Janus, this is a word or phrase that simultaneously looks backward to the preceding thought and forward to the next one. It acts as a clever and seamless transition, linking two related but distinct ideas together.

Example: "And by this we know..."

This common phrase in 1 John serves as a hinge. It concludes a statement about a theological truth and immediately introduces the practical evidence for that truth in a believer's life.

> *"...God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.* ***(Concludes previous thought)***
>
> *...If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie...* ***(Transition)***
>
> *...but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another..." (1 John 1:5-7)*
>
> *In 2:3, "And by this we know that we have come to know him" looks back at the discussion of Christ our advocate and forward to the test of "if we keep his commandments."*

Chiasmus

Definition:

A literary device where words, ideas, or grammatical structures are repeated in reverse order, in the pattern of A-B-B-A. This creates a balanced, often poetic structure that emphasizes the central point (the "B-B" section).

Example: 1 John 3:9

This verse contains a classic chiastic structure that highlights the connection between being born of God and God's "seed" remaining in the believer.

> ***A.*** *No one born of God makes a practice of sinning,*
> ***B.*** *for God's seed abides in him;*
> ***B′.*** *and he cannot keep on sinning,*
> ***A′.*** *because he has been born of God.*

Inclusio

Definition:

Also known as "bookending," this is a technique where a section of text begins and ends with the same or a very similar word, phrase, or idea. This frames the entire section, signaling to the reader that everything in between is related to the "bookended" theme.

Example: The Prologue (1 John 1:1-4)

The introduction to the letter is framed by the theme of the apostles' eyewitness testimony and their purpose in proclaiming it.

> ***Beginning (1:1-2):*** *"That which was from the beginning, which we have **heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes...the life was made **manifest**, and we have **seen** it, and **testify** and **proclaim** to you..."*
>
> *--- [Content of the prologue] ---*
>
> ***End (1:3-4):*** *"...that which we have **seen** and **heard** we **proclaim** also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us... And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete."*