

Adynaton

Definition of Adynaton

Adynaton is from the Greek word *adunaton*, which means “impractical,” or “impossible.” It is a rhetorical device that is a form of [hyperbole](#) in which [exaggeration](#) is taken to a great extreme where it seems impossible. In other words, when hyperbole is magnified to such an extent that it is completely unfeasible, it is called adynaton. Ideas in the use of adynaton are exaggerated in order to emphasize something.

Adynaton and Hyperbole

Adynaton is a kind of hyperbole, though it is an extreme form. When hyperbole goes to an extreme level, that is completely impossible in reality, it is called adynaton. It is presented as an exaggerated [comparison](#) or [contrast](#).

Examples of Adynaton in Literature

Example #1: *To His Coy Mistress* (By Andrew Marvell)

“Had we but world enough, and time
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love’s day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the flood
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.”

Saying that a lady's "coyness" is a crime, in the first bold phrase above, is clearly an adynaton since no lawmaker would be insane enough to pass a law criminalizing coyness.

The bold phrase, "**Till the conversion of the Jews**" refers to predictions about the Jews converting to Christianity, which have been made by many for centuries. Yet, just like predicted dates of the end of the world have come and gone, a conversion of the Jews has not happened, and is showing no sign of happening.

Example #2: *Macbeth* (By William Shakespeare)

"Whence is that knocking?
How is't with me when every noise appals me?
What hands are here? ha! They pluck out mine eyes.
**Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand?** No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red..."

In these lines, an effective use of adynaton is evident. The [tragic hero](#) "Macbeth" feels guilty after having murdered King Duncan. He feels so much regret that even the big oceans cannot wash the king's blood from his hands.

Example #3: *As I Walked Out One Evening* (By W. H. Auden)

"I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,
I'll love you till **the ocean**
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky ..."

Adynaton is very clear in the highlighted lines, as the poet expresses his love by overstating that the continents of China and Africa will meet, a river will jump over a mountain, fish will sing in the street, and the ocean will be folded and hung up to dry. These are extreme exaggerations, which are impossible in real life.

Example #4: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

“Why then, O **brawling love**, O **loving hate**,
anything, of nothing first create!
heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Misshapen 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.
Dost thou not laugh?”

In this excerpt, Romeo compares his love to several things. He intermingles love with hatred, mixes up beautiful things with ugly, hot with cold, dark with bright, and so on. He also labels love as fighting love and loving hate. These too are great exaggerations of love.

Function of Adynaton

Adynaton is used to create exaggeration, in order to emphasize some point. The basic purpose of using adynaton is to draw the attention of the [audience](#) by overstating some thing or idea.

Adynaton examples are found in literary pieces written as early as the Classical and Medieval periods. However, examples of adynaton are seen in [folklore](#), [drama](#), and [fiction](#) of the modern age. In everyday conversations, the function of adynaton is to create amusing effects by highlighting an idea. It is employed both for comic as well as serious purposes. By using extravagant statements, poets and writers make ordinary human feelings extraordinary.