

Overstatement

Definition of Overstatement

Overstatement is an act of stating something more profoundly than it actually is, in order to make the point more serious or important or beautiful. In literature, writers use overstatement as a literary technique for the sake of [humor](#), and for laying emphasis on a certain point. For instance, when in his poem *I wandered lonely as a cloud*, Wordsworth reports daffodils as, “stretched in never-ending line.” In fact, he is not saying this statement literally; rather he is merely using overstatement to add emphasis on the long line of daffodils.

Examples of Overstatement in Literature

Example #1: *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (By Mark Twain)

In Mark Twain’s short story, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*, there are several instances of overstatement. For instance, when Simon Wheeler narrates his stories concerning Jim Smiley, Wheeler makes [claim](#) that Jim was a gambler and he probably would, “... foller that straddle-bug to Mexico but what he would find out where he was bound for and how long he was on the road.” It further talks about a bull pup of Jim Smiley and Andrew Jackson:

“... his underjaw’d begin to stick out like the fo’castle of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover, and shine savage like the furnaces.”

Example #2: *The Sahara of the Bozart* (By H. L. Mencken)

“It is, indeed, amazing to contemplate so vast a vacuity. One thinks of the interstellar spaces, of the colossal reaches of the now mythical ether. Nearly the whole of Europe could be lost in that stupendous region of fat farms, shoddy cities and paralyzed cerebrums: one could throw in France, Germany and Italy, and still have room for the British Isles. And yet, for all its size and all its wealth and all the ‘progress’ it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert.”

Mencken presents [evidence](#) to show his disdain against the southern region of U.S. He berates it for its paucity of cultural, and artistic and intellectual attainment, and therefore calls it the “Sahara Desert,” which is culturally dead.

Example #3: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

“O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear.”

Romeo is praising Juliet’s beauty by using light [exaggeration](#). Here, the playwright uses [metaphor](#) to get this job done by comparing Juliet to a burning light that gives light to torches, and like a glowing jewel that shines against African cheeks.

Example #4: *Revenge of the Pork Person* (By Dave Barry)

“A man can have a belly you could house commercial aircraft in and a grand total of eight greasy strands of hair, which he grows real long and combs across the top of his head so that he looks, when viewed from above, like an egg in the grasp of a giant spider, plus this man can have B.O. to the point where he interferes with radio transmissions, and he will still be convinced that, in terms of attractiveness, he is borderline Don Johnsons.”

In this instance, the author is making an overstatement by a silly [comparison](#) between a man's belly and various other things.

Example #5: *Parker's Back* (By Flannery O'Connor)

Flannery O'Connor, in one of his short stories, *Parker's Back*, uses overstatement by writing:

“And the skin on her face was thin and drawn tight like the skin on an onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two ice picks.”

Example #6: *I wandered lonely as a cloud* (By William Wordsworth)

“An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part, ...”

In this example, the poet exaggerates the beauty of his beloved, and says if he had enough time, he would keep on complimenting all of her body parts, even for a bazillion years, which is quite impossible.

Function of Overstatement

Writers use this literary technique intentionally to create certain effect. Mostly, it helps to lay emphasis on some point. In [prose](#), its purpose is to create humor and emphasis. When writers want to emphasize a point, they overstate it or exaggerate it. While in poetry, its purpose is to make comparisons and create images. Poets also use it for emphasizing a [contrast](#) between two things, by stating one idea as normal and another with overstatement.