

Paraprosdokian

Definition of Paraprosdokian

Paraprosdokian is a derivative of a Greek word that means “beyond expectation.” It is a wordplay type of literary device in which the final part of a phrase or sentence is unexpected. Its unexpected or surprised shift in meaning appears at the end of a [stanza](#), series, sentence, or paragraph. Paraprosdokian is a linguistic U-turn that results in [humor](#) or surprise.

This unexpected ending to a phrase or sentence causes readers to reinterpret the opening phrase or sentence of a text. Often, it is used to create comic effect. Some paraprosdokians change the meaning of an initial phrase, and play on double meanings of the words; hence, it creates syllepsis.

Examples of Paraprosdokian from Famous People

There are many one-liner paraprosdokian examples from famous people. Such as:

Dorothy Parker: “If all the girls who attended the Yale prom were laid end to end, **I wouldn’t be a bit surprised.**”

Winston Churchill: “You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing—**after they have tried everything else**“

Albert Einstein: “The difference between stupidity and genius is that **genius has its limits.**”

Mario Andretti: “If everything seems under control, **you’re just not going fast enough.**“

Zsa zsa Gabor: “He taught me housekeeping; when I divorce I keep the house.”

Examples of Paraprosdokian in Literature

Example #1: *My Speech to the Graduates* (By Woody Allen)

“Contemporary man, of course, has no such peace of mind. He finds himself in the midst of a crisis of faith. He is what we fashionably call ‘alienated.’ He has seen the ravages of war, he has known natural catastrophes, he has been to **singles bars.**”

Here, Allen discusses the serious topic of the meaning of human life. The “singles bars” topic is not as significant as the preceding topics, making it an unexpected ending.

Example #2: *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (By Douglas Adams)

“Trin Tragula – for that was his name – was a dreamer, a thinker, a speculative philosopher or, as his wife would have it, **an idiot...**”

In these lines, the author enumerates the great traits (“a dreamer, a thinker, a speculative philosopher”) of a [character](#) named Trin Tragula. However, he ends his litany of the character’s good traits by mentioning how Trin Tragula’s wife perceives him (“as his wife would have it, an idiot”). This ending is a surprise to the readers, and creates comic effect.

Example #3: *The Cottage Maid* (By Patrick Branwell Bronte)

“Religion makes beauty enchanting,
And even where beauty is wanting,
The temper and mind,
Religion-refined,
Will shine through the veil with sweet lustre...”

In this excerpt, the poet is talking about religion throughout the first four lines. However, in the last line there is a sudden shift of sense. “Will shine through the veil with sweet lustre” gives a completely different meaning from the rest of text.

Example #4: *Shelter* (By Charles Stuart Calverley)

“By the wide lake’s margin I mark’d her lie –
The wide, weird lake where the alders sigh –
A young fair thing, with a shy, soft eye;
And I deem’d that her thoughts had flown ...
All motionless, all alone.

Then I heard a noise, as of men and boys,
And a boisterous troop drew nigh.
Whither now will retreat those fairy feet?
Where hide till the storm pass by?
On the lake where the alders sigh ...
For she was a water-rat.”

Shelter is one of the examples of parapsydokian in poetry form. In the first two stanzas, readers are led to believe that the subject is a beautiful woman (“A **young fair thing, with a shy, soft eye**;.../ Whither now will retreat those **fairy feet**?”). However, with the revelation in the last line – that the subject is a “**water-rat**” – the poet makes them stop and want to reread the poem.

Function of Parapsydokian

The unexpected ending is used to create humorous and comic effects. It causes the readers to reinterpret or rethink the opening part of a phrase, sentence, stanza, or paragraph. Sometimes it is used to provide dramatic effect, while at other times, it produces an anti-[climax](#), which it is a very popular use among satirists and comedians. Parapsydokian is employed in poetry, [prose](#), and films, as well as in music.