

Catachresis

Definition of Catachresis

Catachresis is a [figure of speech](#) in which writers use mixed metaphors in an inappropriate way, to create rhetorical effect. Often, it is used intentionally to create a unique expression. Catachresis is also known as an exaggerated [comparison](#) between two ideas or objects.

Features of Catachresis

Mixed metaphors are good examples of catachresis, and writers often use them to create rhetorical effect. They are used to express extreme alienation or heightened emotions. Catachresis is considered as a mistake in language, as it may change the meanings of words. It is a combination of different types of figures of speech. It is prominently used in post-structuralist literary works, since those writers were expert in using wordplay, and creating confusion in literary texts, which is an important part of catachresis.

Some Forms of Catachresis

Sometimes a word is used to indicate something completely different from the literal meaning of that word. Such as in this example, “Tis deepest winter in Lord Timon’s purse; that is, one may reach deep enough, and find little” (*Timon of Athens*, by William Shakespeare).

Sometimes a word is used to indicate something whose actual name is not used like, “A chair’s arm.”

Sometimes a paradoxical statement is used to create illogical strained metaphors. Such as, “Take arms against a sea of troubles.”

Abusio is a subtype of catachresis, which results from the combination of two metaphors.

Examples of Catachresis in Literature

Example #1: *On Revenge* (By Francis Bacon)

“A man that studies revenge keeps his own wounds green...”

Bacon uses metaphorical language by comparing revenge with wounds. The writer has made a connection between seemingly unconnected topics. However, catachresis is creating a rhetorical effect in this serious text.

Example #2: *King John* (By William Shakespeare)

“I do not [ask](#) much:
I beg cold comfort ...”

We can find numerous catachresis examples in Shakespeare’s works, as he regularly used mixed metaphors intentionally in his literary writings. Here, he has used catachresis, “cold comfort.”

Example #3: *Poem 640* (By Emily Dickinson)

“With just the Door ajar
That oceans are — and Prayer—
And that **White Sustenance** — Despair—”

In the first and second lines, we can see the [paradox](#) in phrases that are shown in bold. These describe two differing distances that spread hopelessness. In the same way, “white sustenance” means colorless nourishment that actually does not nourish the body.

Example #4: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)

Hamlet:
“... Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep—”

Here, Hamlet is just thinking futilely after facing a sea of problems. In this way, Shakespeare has used a straight [metaphor](#), albeit taken as a catachresis here.

Example #5: *somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond* (By E. E. Cummings)

“The [voice](#) of your eyes is deeper than all roses –
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands ...”

In this extract, the poet is making an illogical comparison between the voice of his beloved’s eyes, and roses and rain with the hands. The poet is trying to express the power of his beloved over him, and her importance to him.

Example #6: *The Tempest* (By William Shakespeare)

“His complexion is perfect gallows ...”

In the given line, the [character](#) Gonzalo is implying that Boatswain looks like a criminal, and must be hanged. Here, “perfect gallows” is used as a mixed metaphor. The two objects are compared, though there is no obvious similarity between them.

Example #7: *Peri Bathous* (By Alexander Pope)

Mow the beard,
Shave the grass,
Pin the plank,
Nail my sleeve ...”

In the above example, the metaphoric words are shown in bold. The literal and metaphorical meanings can be understood in the [context](#), which the poet is describing as: know-how, capacities, dispositions, and skills.

Catachresis can be used both in poetry and [prose](#). In poetry it is used by misusing a phrase or word to deliberately create a mixed metaphor. Poets use catachresis to achieve a stylistic effect, or to exert great compression in both comic as well as serious writing. Also, sometimes it is used to create a reference that did not exist, but the major reason of using this technique is to express the ideas in a unique and creative way.