

# Bathos

## Definition of Bathos

Bathos is a literary term derived from a Greek word meaning “depth.” Bathos is the act of a writer or a poet falling into inconsequential and absurd metaphors, descriptions, or ideas in an effort to be increasingly emotional or passionate.

Some confuse bathos with “[pathos](#).” The term was used by Alexander Pope to explain the blunders committed inadvertently by unskilled writers or poets. However, later on, comic writers used it intentionally to create humorous effects. The most commonly used bathos involves a sequence of items that descend from worthiness to silliness.

## Examples of Bathos in Literature

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**Example #1: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (By James L. Brooks and Allan Burns)**

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*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* had an episode that involved the death of the clown Chuckles, who was killed very brutally by a stampeding elephant. Everyone on the station keeps making jokes about it that Mary does not approve of. Later on, when she attends the funeral, she starts laughing hysterically while the rest of the people stare at her exasperated.

**Example #2: *The Naked Gun* (By David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, Jerry Zucker, Pat Proft)**

Absurd styles of [humor](#) can use the bathos method. Such is the television series *Police Squad!*, which uses bathos very often. Excerpts from *The Naked Gun* show numerous points where a serious scenario is built up only

to knock it down subsequently with Frank Drebin's silly comments. For example:

FRANK: "A good cop – pointlessly cut down by some spineless hoodlums."

ED: "That's no way for a man to die."

FRANK: "No ... you're right, Ed. A parachute not opening ... that's a way to die, getting caught in the gears of a combine ... having your nuts bit off by a Laplander, that's the way I want to go!"

WILMA NORDBERG: "Oh ... Frank. This is terrible!"

ED: "Don't you worry, Wilma. Your husband is going to be alright. Don't you worry about anything! Just think positive. Never let a doubt enter your mind."

FRANK: "He's right, Wilma. But I wouldn't wait until the last minute to fill out those organ donor cards." (The Naked Gun, 1988)

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### Example #3: *Northanger Abbey* (By Jane Austen)

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Jane Austen is among the few serious writers who used this tool. It helped her give a sense of merriness to her novel *Northanger Abbey*. In this novel, Austen highlights the ingenuous and imaginative nature of the leading [character](#), Catherine Morland. She uses Catherine's increasingly active imagination to work like bathos in order to [parody](#) the plot used in Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novels, and the likes of her.

In Radcliff's *The [Romance](#) of the Forest*, a character finds a human skeleton in the chest. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen uses a mysterious chest in her story as a prop to build on, and to successfully satirize the extremes of the Gothic [fiction](#) of the 18th century.

Catherine became skeptical when she saw the enormous chest in her room during her stay at the Abbey. Certain questions arose in her mind about that chest, and about what it held, and why it was placed in her room.

You can see that the novel at this particular point adopts a very gothic tone. It starts using short clauses that consist of many inauspicious words, for instance “trembling hands,” “alarming violence,” and “fearful curiosity.” The selection of words at this point aids in building up the [suspense](#) in the readers’ and [audience](#)’s minds, only to discover consequently that the chest holds only a folded bed sheet.

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#### **Example #4: *I’m Sorry I’ll Read That Again* (BBC Radio Comedy)**

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The British radio series *I’m Sorry I’ll Read That Again* also provides us with many bathos examples. John Cleese and Jo Kendall appeared in the roles of a couple whose relationship is on the brink of failure.

MARY: “John – once we had something that was pure, and wonderful, and good. What’s happened to it?”

JOHN: “You spent it all.”

When Mary says “something pure and wonderful,” she is actually referring to the deep, sacred, noble form of love. However, the description is vague enough for John to manipulate.

### **Function of Bathos**

Bathos is a device which, if used skillfully, can really build up a nice comic scene. Bathos brings a certain degree of wit to a scene by highlighting the [contrast](#) in tone. Initially, it is used to create a serious and powerful dramatic situation. This might be slightly hard to create for [comedy](#) writers. Thus, comedy writers must be very careful when they insert jokes here and there in the middle of a serious scene. There is a great danger that their jokes will break the tempo of a serious scene in a [prose](#).