

Meiosis

Definition of Meiosis

The word meiosis originated from the Greek word *meioo*, which means “to diminish,” or “to make smaller.” Meiosis can be defined as a witty [understatement](#) that belittles or dismisses something or somebody; particularly by making use of terms that give an impression that something is less important than it is or it should be. Meiosis examples are sometimes used in the sense of a synonym of [litotes](#).

In literature, however, meiosis describes the use of understatement to highlight a point, or explain a situation, or to understate a response used to enhance the effect of a dramatic moment. For example, when Mercutio is wounded mortally and says, “ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch...” (*Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare) it is a form of meiosis.

Features of Meiosis

- It is intentional understatement.
- It is used to belittle a person or an event.
- It is opposite to [hyperbole](#) or [exaggeration](#).
- It often makes use of litotes as synonyms to give ironic effect.

Examples of Meiosis in Literature

There are several examples of meiosis in literature, where the persons and events are understated, depending on the situations. Here are some of them:

Example #1: *King Lear* (By William Shakespeare)

“I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;

And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind...”

Shakespeare has used meiosis in these lines to create [humor](#). Although it is undoubtedly clear that the king has gone mad, his reaction that “I fear I am not in my perfect mind” is an example of an understatement.

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

“...A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father’s body...

O God, a beast that wants [discourse](#) of reason
Would have mourned longer...

O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not nor **it cannot come to good**:
But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue.”

In this speech, Hamlet uses understatement or meiosis to conclude his [soliloquy](#), where he states that all this cannot come to good. This is a gentle statement compared to the rest of his speech, in which he has lashed out at his mother. The best and the most effective use of meiosis can be seen in tragic plays like this one.

Example #3: *Fire and Ice* (By Robert Frost)

“Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great

The understatement of the entire poem is given in the last word which is *suffice*, which means “adequate.” In this poem, ice symbolizes hatred, and fire passion that could consume relations quickly. Therefore, both would be more than enough to destroy the world.

Example #4: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 1975 (By Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin)

King Arthur: “The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water.”

Peasant: “Listen, strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Power derives from the masses not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.”

King Arthur: “Be quiet!”

Peasant: “You can’t expect to wield supreme power because some watery tart threw a sword at you.”

King Arthur: “Shut up!”

Peasant: “If I went around saying I was an emperor because some *moistened bint* had lobbed a scimitar at me...”

Just check the use of the words *moistened bint* the peasant says to King Arthur. This is the best use of meiosis which belittles the king himself.

Function of Meiosis

Meiosis, in fact, illustrates tone and mannerism, such as quiet and brooding, where protagonists are often understated in tone and action. Meiosis is very common everywhere in our daily lives, old and modern literature, and media. We can distinguish understatement in modesty, in humor, in composed and calm characters, and in personalities, where it gives rhetorical effects to the speech delivered by them.

Since it is a method used to give information that diminishes the response of an overemotional occurrence, the basic function of meiosis is to reduce the significance of someone or something in order to heighten something else simultaneously.