

Tmesis

Definition of Tmesis

Tmesis is derived from the Greek word *tmesis*, which means “to cut.” It is a rhetorical device that involves the breaking down of a phrase or a word into two parts. In simpler words, tmesis is an insertion of a word between the parts of a word, a compound word, or a phrase (phrasal verbs usually). It is a practice of dividing a phrase or word into its components by inserting another word in the middle of that phrase or word. Tmesis is commonly employed in words that have more than three syllables. Let us examine these two examples of tmesis to have a better understanding of this device:

Eliza Dolittle: “**Fan**-bloody-**tastic**” or “**abso**-blooming-**lutely**”
(*Pygmalion*, by George Bernard Shaw).

Here, the words “fantastic” and “absolutely” are separated by the words “bloody” and “blooming,” respectively.

“**How**-heinous-**ever** it be,” (*Richard II*, by William Shakespeare).

The word, **however**, is separated by the word “heinous.”

Classification of Tmesis

Tmesis examples may be classified according to the device’s two main groups. The first group of tmesis is formed from cutting phrasal verbs. For example, the phrasal verb “turn off” can be cut into two parts by inserting another word, such as “radio,” to form the phrase “**turn** the radio **off**”). The meaning of the phrasal verb in this example is retained. In other instances, however, it may change. Another category of English tmesis is formed by adding an infix in modifiers. A good example for this is, “I got **forty**-bloody-**seven** /and that’s good **e**-bloody-**nough**” (*Tumba Bloody Rumba*, by John O’Grady).

Examples of Tmesis in Literature

Example #1: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

“This is not Romeo, he’s **some** other **where**.”

In this excerpt, “somewhere” is split up by inserting the word “other.” The purpose of splitting up the word is to highlight and draw the focus of readers to the fact that Romeo is not there, but somewhere else.

Example #2: *Hymn to Christ* (By John Donne)

“In **whattorn** ship**soever** I embark,
That ship shall be my emblem
Whatseas**soever** swallow me, that flood
Shall be to me an emblem of thy blood.”

This is a very good example of phrasal verb tmesis. “Whatsoever” is split into two parts by inserting the words, “torn ship.” The same is done in the third line, where the word “sea” is inserted in the middle of the compound word “whatsoever.”

Example #3: *Old Age Sticks* (By E. E. Cummings)

“old age sticks
up Keep
Off
signs) &

youth **yanks** them
down(old
age
cries No

Tres) & (pas)
youth laughs

(sing
old age

scolds Forbid
den Stop
Must
n't Don't

&) youth goes
right on
gr
owing old”

Cumming has used plenty of tmesis in his works. This poem is a good example. The phrasal verb “**yanks down**” is split apart by the word “them.” This split up of words is used for artistic purpose.

Example #4: *Troilus & Cressida* (By William Shakespeare)

“That man—**how** dearly **ever** parted.”

Shakespeare uses tmesis in his literary pieces. Here, the insertion of the word “dearly” into “**however**” emphasizes the fond feeling that the [speaker](#) has towards the dead person.

Example #5: *Take a Girl Like You* (By Kingsley Amis)

“It’s a sort of long cocktail—he got the formula off a barman in Marrakesh or **some**-bloody-**where**.”

The word “**somewhere**” is divided by the word “bloody.” This inserted word makes the readers focus on the speaker’s “I don’t care” [attitude](#) toward the origin of the formula.

Function of Tmesis

Tmesis is mainly used to create [humor](#), and lay emphasis on a particular

literature. In [comedy](#), it works as over-done [exaggeration](#). In poetry, its task is to stress a point, as it forces readers to give more attention to the cut phrase or line. It is regularly used in informal speech, as well. In Australian English, it is called “tumba rumba.”