Polyptoton

ⓘ DEFINITION

What is polyptoton? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> Polyptoton is a figure of speech that involves the repetition of words derived from the same root (such as "blood" and "bleed"). For instance, the question, "Who shall watch the watchmen?" is an example of polyptoton because it includes both "watch" and "watchmen."

Some additional key details about polyptoton:

- Polyptoton is common in both Latin and Old English poetry. It is less common today, but still appears in poetry, prose, and in speeches.
- The comic book character Dr. Strange's secret lair, the Sanctum Sanctorum ("holy of holies"), is an example of polyptoton.

How to Pronounce Polyptoton

Here's how to pronounce polyptoton: puh-**lip**-toe-tahn

Polyptoton Across Longer Texts

Polyptoton most often appears within a single sentence, as in the example given earlier: "Who shall watch the watchmen?" In fact, some rhetoricians would argue that polyptoton can only occur if the repeated words are in close proximity to each other.

However, some literary critics treat polyptoton as something that can occur over longer stretches of text, whether a paragraph, an essay, or even a book. The example given most often for this sort of polyptoton is the novel *Frankenstein*. In the book, Mary Shelley describes the monster that Frankenstein creates as a wretch, and then carefully uses words with the same root (wretched, wretchedly, wretchedness) throughout the book.

✳ EXAMPLES

Polyptoton is found in literature of all sorts, from Shakespeare's plays to 20th century poetry, from speeches to witty remarks.

Polyptoton in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*

In Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida*, the character Troilus uses polyptoton three times in two lines. In all three cases, the repetition emphasizes the might of the Greeks:

> The Greeks are strong and skillful to their strength,
> Fierce to their skill and to their fierceness valiant;

Polyptoton in Shakespeare's *Richard II*

Shakespeare also uses polyptoton in Richard II. In the line below, he uses three different versions of words with the same root as "food."

> With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder.

In this case, the presence of all of these different versions of "food" connects to the idea of "eager feeding" in the sentence. Just reading all the different versions of "food" so close together feels a bit like choking.

Polyptoton in a Famous Quote from Lord Action

Lord Acton was an English politician, writer, and historian. While he lived a remarkable life, he is best known today for his famous and insightful quote about the nature of power. The quote also happens to be an excellent example of polyptoton:

> Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Note that the statement also uses other forms of repetition (repeating both "power" and "corrupt"), but only the repetition of "absolute" and "absolutely" is polyptoton.

Polyptoton in John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address

Though there is much debate about JFK's quality as a president, he was generally admired as an orator. In this line from his inaugural address, he uses polypton to acknowledge that the United States was in a cold war with the USSR while also calling on American citizens to act for reasons beyond that battle:

> Not as a call to battle, though embattled we are.

Polyptoton in T.S. Eliot's *The Dry Salvages*

T.S. Eliot's "The Dry Salvages" is a long poem written during World War II. At one point, in just six lines of the poem he uses four different examples of polyptoton. Through the repetition the poem emphasizes the meaninglessness and emptiness that Eliot saw in British and Western culture as well as the destruction of the war.

> There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing,
> No end to the withering of withered flowers,
> To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,
> To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage,
> The bone's prayer to Death its God. Only the hardly, barely prayable
> Prayer of the one Annunciation.

⚒ WHY WRITERS USE IT

Depending on the context of how it's used, polyptoton can offer writers a variety of different effects:

- **Emphasis:** As with all repetition, the repetition of polyptoton emphasizes and puts the focus on the repeated words.
- **Contrast:** Because it offers repetition even as the repeated words are subtly changed, polyptoton can give writers the ability to contrast the different words.
- **Change:** The different forms of the repeated word can also suggest something more subtle than contrast; it can suggest *change* from one state to another, just as the repeated word changes from one form to another.
- **Connection:** By flexibly repeating a word, polyptoton can also provide a connection between different parts of a sentence, different ideas in a paragraph, or different scenes in a book.

More broadly, then, polyptoton offers a writer a way to imply both connection and difference simultaneously.

🌐 OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia entry on Polyptoton:** A simple entry with some good examples.
- **Repetition and Polyptoton:** A blog entry on repetition figures of speech, including polyptoton.
- **Polyptoton on Youtube:** A video that sets a basic and mildly humorous explanation of polyptoton to music.

HOW TO CITE

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