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## **A Semantic Study of Wordplay in Some Shakespeare's Plays**

**A paper**

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*by*

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُ أَنِّي مَغْلُوبٌ فَانْتَصِرَ. فَتَحْنَا أَبْوَابَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَاءٍ  
مُنْهَمِرٍ.

صدق الله العلي العظيم

سورة القمر 11-10

*In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful  
so he invoked his Lord, "Indeed, I am overpowered,  
so help." So, We opened the gates of the heaven  
with rain pouring down.*

*Al-Qamar (10-11)*

## **DEDICATION**

For my lovely family.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

A special feeling of gratitude goes to my loving parents, brothers and sisters whose words of encouragement have helped me to go forward with my studies.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is entitled “A Semantic Study of Wordplay in Some Shakespeare’s Plays”. Wordplay or pun is a play on words that are either identical in sound (homonyms) or very similar in sound, but are sharply diverse in meaning. Wordplays have often had serious literary uses. Shakespeare and other writers used puns seriously as well as for comic purposes. This paper aims to examine wordplay in some of Shakespeare’s plays.

## SECTION ONE

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Problem of the Study

Wordplay or pun is a play on words that are either identical in sound (homonyms) or very similar in sound, but are sharply diverse in meaning. Wordplays have often had serious literary uses. Shakespeare and other writers used puns seriously as well as for comic purposes. In *Romeo and Juliet* (III. i. 101) Mercurio, bleeding to death, says grimly, "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man". (Abram, 1999:253).

Wordplay can cause a problem for some audience, readers and translators, who fail to notice the play on the words; hence, do not enjoy the meaning behind the pun.

This paper is trying to answer the following questions:

1. What is wordplay (pun) in English?
2. What are the types of wordplay?
3. What functions are intended by using wordplay and what role the context play to understand pun and what it means?
4. How does Shakespeare use wordplay in his plays?

#### 1.2 Objectives of the study

The study aims at:

1. Defining the concept of wordplay?
2. Identifying the types of wordplay?
3. Investigating wordplay in some of Shakespeare's word play?

### **1.3 Hypotheses**

It is hypothesized that:

1. Wordplay can cause a problem to readers and audience.
2. There is lack of knowledge on the types of wordplay
3. Most of Shakespeare's comedy plays contain wordplay, which gives it a special importance in literature.

### **1.4 Procedures**

1. Presenting theoretical background of wordplay
2. Analyzing a selected play of Shakespeare to examine wordplay in these plays.

### **1.5 Limits of the Study**

This study is limited to examining the concept of wordplay by identifying and understanding wordplay in Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

### **1.5 Value of the Study**

It is hoped that this paper will provide some insights into the understanding wordplay in English . Furthermore, the study is meant to shed more light on how readers should deal with puns where a term or an expression could have two or, even, three meanings, intentionally intended by the author.

## SECTION TWO

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 Definitions

##### 2.1.1 Literary Devices

A literary device is any specific aspect of literature, or a particular work, which we can recognize, identify, interpret and/or analyze. Both literary elements and literary techniques can rightly be called literary devices. ([www.pittsfordschools.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx](http://www.pittsfordschools.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx)).

Literary devices can also be defined as specific techniques that allow a writer to convey a deeper meaning that goes beyond what's on the page. Literary devices work alongside plot and characters to elevate a story and prompt reflection on life, society, and what it means to be human ([www.masterclass.com/articles/22-essential-literary-devices](http://www.masterclass.com/articles/22-essential-literary-devices)). Among the most important literary devices are allegory, allusion, anachronism, dramatic irony, extended metaphor, foreshadowing, humor, irony, and wordplay.

##### 2.1.2 What is wordplay?

It is a literary technique and a form of wit in which words used become the main subject of the work, primarily for the purpose of intended effect or amusement. Examples of word play include puns, phonetic mix-ups such as spoonerism, obscure words and meanings, clever rhetorical excursions, oddly formed sentences, double entendres, and telling character names. ([www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word\\_play](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_play)). The Cambridge Advanced



Learner's Dictionary defines wordplay as says the activity of joking about the meaning of words, especially in a clever way (*Cambridge Advance Dictionary*). A bit more elaborate definition, this time the from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, states that wordplay is: The clever or amusing use of words, esp involving a word that has two meanings or different words that sound the same (*Oxford Dictionary*). Dirk Delabastita provides an important definition to wordplay "wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings. (*Delabastita,1996:128*).

## **2.2 Wordplay Techniques**

The main wordplay techniques are the following:

### **2.2.1 Acronym**

Acronyms are abbreviations of terms formed by using parts or letters of the original words, like saying "WHO" for Word Health Organization. The use of acronyms is increasingly common in our culture today—both formal and informal—and has risen in popularity over the past decade.

### **2.2.2 Alliteration**

Alliteration is a technique expressed by repeating the same first consonant sound in a series of words. You're probably pretty familiar with this device, as it is a distinguishing feature of many nursery rhymes and tongue twisters. For example, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."  
([www.literaryterms.net/wordplay/](http://www.literaryterms.net/wordplay/))

### **2.2.3 Double Entendre**

Double entendre is the double interpretation of a word or phrase, with the secondary meaning usually being funny or risqué. Naturally, double entendres rely on wordplay for their success, because the words used have a literal and a figurative meaning. For example, if you said "The baker has great buns," it could be understood in two ways! (*Chadwick, 1975: 12*)

### **2.2.4 Idiom**

Idioms are popular, culturally understood phrases that generally have a figurative meaning. The English language alone is said to have more than 25,000 idioms. Common examples are almost endless, but to name a few, "it's raining cats and dogs," "butterflies in my stomach," "catch a cold," "rise and shine," and "chill out" are some idioms that you probably hear every day.  
([www.literaryterms.net/wordplay/](http://www.literaryterms.net/wordplay/))

### **2.2.5 Malapropism**

Malapropism is a confused use of words in which an appropriate word is replaced by one with similar sound but ridiculously inappropriate meaning (Hart, et al.; 2003: 803). Another definition stated by *Mish (2001:702)* is "a humorous misuse or distortion of a word or a phrase, especially, the use of a word sounding somewhat like the one intended but ludicrously wrong in

context ", For example, on *Modern Family*, Gloria says "Don't give me an *old tomato*" instead of "Don't give me an *ultimatum*"

### **2.2.6 Onomatopoeia**

Onomatopoeia is the process of creating a word that phonetically imitates, resembles, or suggests the sound that it describes. Such a word itself is also called an onomatopoeia. Common onomatopoeias include animal noises such as oink, *meow* (or *miaow*), *roar*, and *chirp*. Onomatopoeia can differ between languages: it conforms to some extent to the broader linguistic system (*Bredin, 2013: 12*). Some common examples are *boom*, *achoo*, *pow*, *whoosh*, *bam*, *tick-tock*, *click*, *meow*, *woof*, *tweet*, and *ribbit*.

### **2.2.7 Pun**

A pun is the ultimate form of wordplay and probably the most popular and widely used. Delabastita (1996), a famous name in dealing with pun and its translation, uses the words pun and wordplay interchangeably; therefore, they present a definition of wordplay instead. Wordplay is the general term under which come the "textual phenomena" (*Delabastita, 1996: 129*). Therefore, pun is one way of manifesting wordplay. But, the fact that the former is a rhetorical feature distinguishes it from other types of the latter. It involves a play upon words. One of the earliest types of wordplay, the pun is widespread in many literatures and gives rise to a fairly universal form of humour. Puns are very often intended humorously but not always. (*Cuddon, 2013: 572*).

## **2.2.8 Spelling**

Using spelling for wordplay is a tricky but fun technique that obviously works best when you can see it in written form. One great example is the web-sensation pig “Chris P. Bacon,” whose name sounds like “Crispy Bacon”! ([www.literaryterms.net/wordplay/](http://www.literaryterms.net/wordplay/))

## **2.2.9 Rhyming**

It’s an especially popular form of wordplay for poetry, nursery rhymes, and children’s literature because of its catchy and rhythmic style. There are all different rhyme schemes that writers use, from rhyming every word to just rhyming the first or last word of a line. For example, Roses are red/Violets are blue/ Sugar is sweet/ And so are you! follows the scheme ABCB.

## **2.2.10 Slang**

Slang is the use of casual and unique language and expressions, and varies depending on age, location, field of work or study, and many other factors. Localized slang and pop culture lingo often rely on wordplay for meaning, and are often filled with idioms. ([www.literaryterms.net/wordplay/](http://www.literaryterms.net/wordplay/))

## **2.3 Functions of Wordplay**

Wordplay is used in different functions including:

### **2.3.1 Jokes and Humor**

Jokes also contain so many types of wordplay jokes that manipulate the elements of word structure including jokes that focus on the alternative meanings or applications of a word or a phrase , or that result

from sound likeness of some different groups of words. For example:

Teacher: what is an emperor?

Student: I do not know.

Teacher: An emperor is a ruler.

Student: Oh , sure . I used to carry an emperor to school with me (*Hughes, 1978:78*). Another example:


Brother: " You look pretty dirty , Susie. "

Sister : " Thank you . I look pretty when I'm clean , too "

(*ibid* :112)

### **2.3.2 Literature**

Wordplay can be a are a rhetorical or poetic device in English and many other literatures. Wordplay is often intended humorously. Wordplay has been used by many other famous writers, such as Alexander Pope, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Bloch, James Joyce and Shakespeare. A famous wordplay (pun) in dramatic literature is Mercutio's laconic crack as he is dying:

 " Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man" [*Romeo & Juliet, III,i* ]

### **2.3.3 Advertisement**

Since the major goal of advertising is not only to inform but also to persuade, so the use of rhetorical figures plays a pivotal role within the

advertising process (*Thornborrow, 1998:258*).Ming (2005:229) adds that the purpose of advertisements is to stimulate people's desire for shopping.

Therefore, manufacturers try their best to use puns to create new meanings.

The skillful use of puns makes advertising language vivid and humorous, e.g.:

Make your every hello a real good – buy . This is a telephone advertisement

produced by a clever use of the good – buy and good – bye homophonic

pun. It means from the beginning of the call "hello" to the end of the good –

bye can be passed to each other faithfully. (*Chengming , 2004 : 89*)

## CHAPTER THREE

### Semantic Role in Shakespeare's Play *Midsummer Night Dream*

#### 3.1 Shakespeare and Wordplay

Shakespeare was eager to give to the public his discoveries in the world of words. Words of identical sounds and different meanings attracted his attention. He was keenly alive to all the details of the language which was the tool for his great work in the drama. While he was greatly inspired by his contemporaries to these experiments in language, it was largely his own interest and the inquiring spirit of the age which prompted his extravagant use of word-play as an instrument for humor and instruction. He often put his plays on words in the mouths of clowns or jesters. He did so probably because these characters were supposed to provide humor and he considered wordplay or puns a good type of wit.

Sometimes the wordplay was in the mouths of pedants, again a saucy woman and a quick witted man indulged in a bit of punning. The clown in *Twelfth Night* states the real purpose of the clowns in Shakespeare's time. In answer to the question:- "Art thou not the Lady Olivia's fool?" (III,i,140) he says:- "I am not her fool, but her corrupter of wands." (111,1,141).

Shakespeare resorted to playing on words for different factors. Firstly, It was a common procedure in Elizabethan writers. From his very first plays Shakespeare exhibits a close knowledge of rhetorical devices, which were usually included in the textbooks of the period (Mahood, 1988:11). Secondly, 'Shakespeare plays with verbal meanings, not because the rethoricians approve of wordplay, but because his imagination as a poet works through puns, or because his characters are placed in situations where it is natural for them to pun, or because puns help to clarify the particular view of life that he seeks to present in a particular play. Shakespeare quibbles as a poet, as a dramatist, and as a dramatic poet; and these divisions, though in part arbitrary, give us three means of approaching to the functions of his word play' (ibid: 20-21). Thirdly, another psychological function of word play which everyone has witnessed or experienced is its use to gain relief from a state of emotional tension' (Mahood 1988: 32). The same view has been followed by other scholars like Hussey (1982: 140-141), who comments on the momentary relief from tension which is provided by punning in the play scene. In this respect Shakespeare notoriously puns in the gravest circumstances. Thus when Mercutio is bleeding to death and says Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man (Romeo and Juliet: III.i.103-104)

### **3.2 Wordplay in *Midsummer Night's Dream***

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare is a comedic play about love set in Ancient Greece. During this play, several characters fall in



and out of love due to tricks that fairies play on them. By the end of the play, the fairy's magic has been reversed, and the characters only remember the events that occurred while they were under the spell as if it had all been dreamed. There are several different forms of wordplay Shakespeare uses in this comedic play. Some of these techniques include puns, malapropisms, double entendre, etc.

### **Puns**

The first pun example from the play comes in Act 3, Scene 1. During this scene, Bottom, one of the comic group, states, "I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me; \ to fright me, if they could." The word "ass" is a pun because it means fool and is another word for a donkey. Through fairy magic, Bottom's head has been changed to the shape of a donkey's head without his knowledge. So without him knowing it, he said they want to make him into a donkey through trickery, which a character really did!

Later in Act 5, Demetrius says of Bottom, "No die, but an ace, for him." The word "ace" refers to the number one. However, back in Shakespeare's time this would have sounded like "ass." In this way, Demetrius also uses a pun to joke about Bottom being a donkey.

### **Malapropism**

A malapropism is the misuse or confusion of two words that sound similar but have different meanings.

*"We will meet; and there we may rehearse most obscenely and courageously."* (1.2. 108) Bottom had misused the word "obscenely" because he meant to say seemly.

### Double entendre

A double entendre is a word, phrase, or statement that has a double meaning. One of the meanings is clear and straightforward. The other meaning is somewhat hidden, and is also racy or inappropriate.

"Then know that I am Snug the joiner in

A lion-fell, or else a lion's skin."

Here Shakespeare intends a quibble between fell 'skin' and fell 'fierce'.

Another double entendre word play can be found in: "But I might see Cupid's fiery shaft quenched in the chaste beams of the watery moon."

### **Onomatopoeia**

Onomatopoeia is the process of creating a word that phonetically imitates, resembles, or suggests the sound that it describes.

"Oberon's cackle seeped through the woods. Snakes hissed and slithered as Puck whizzed through the trees."

'cackle', 'hiss', and 'whizz' are words that phonetically imitates and suggest the sounds of the laugh, snake's sound and whizzing.

"The trees swayed around as rain drops pitter pattered on the leaves. pitter patter imitates the sound of drops of rain drops.

When Lysander and Hermia ran away, the rain splashing on the trees, the twigs cracked under their feet.

'splash' and 'crack' are words imitating rain water and twigs, respectively.

## **Alliteration**

Alliteration is a technique expressed by repeating the same first consonant sound in a series of words.

In Act 1, Scene 1, Lysander tells Theseus "And, which is more than all these boasts can be, \ I am beloved of beauteous Hermia." The "b" sound is repeated in the words "boasts," "be," "beloved," and "beauteous."

Shakespeare parodies alliteration in Peter Quince's Prologue in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade."

Here, Shakespeare repeats the same consonant sounds (w) and (b) whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade.

## CONCLUSIONS

A literary device is any specific aspect of literature, or a particular work, which we can recognize, identify, interpret and/or analyze. Wordplay is a literary technique and a form of wit in which words used become the main subject of the work, primarily for the purpose of intended effect or amusement. Examples of word play include puns, phonetic mix-ups such as spoonerism, obscure words and meanings, clever rhetorical excursions, oddly formed sentences, double entendres, and telling character names.

Shakespeare was eager to give to the public his discoveries in the world of words. Words of identical sounds and different meanings attracted his attention. He was keenly alive to all the details of the language which was the tool for his great work in the drama. Shakespeare often put his plays on words in the mouths of clowns or jesters. He did so probably because these characters were supposed to provide humor and he considered wordplay or puns a good type of wit.

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