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# **Pun in Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

A Graduation Paper

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بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

((وَلَا تَسْتَوِي الْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا السَّيِّئَةُ ادْفَعْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا

الَّذِي بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُ عَدَاوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِيٌّ حَمِيمٌ))

(فصلت: 34)

# **Dedication**

**To**

**My Family and Friends**

**With Love and Respect**

## **Acknowledgements**

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# Section One

## Introduction

### 1.1 The Problem

The term 'pun' is a common literary device that can be defined as "a play on words" (Gray, 1984: 168). This definition is to be understood as "using words in an amusing and tricky manner, make a pun". However, the use of "pun" in the literary texts has been a brain storm that attracts the researcher's attention. The pun is a complex use of a word or phrase which has very different meanings that are closely interrelated or of words with the same sound but different meanings. The pun is a term with a dual meaning 'close' using obvious reference, and 'far' using obscure reference.

Pun has been studied by different scholars. Each scholar views pun from his/her own perspective. Thus, there are contradicting assumptions about the nature and the use of pun in literature, particularly in *Hamlet*. This study is oriented toward characterizing this issue.

The present study deals with the use of pun in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It tries to investigate Shakespeare's use of such kind of pun in his play. Because of the absence of any specific investigation concerned with this topic, there is an obvious need to study this topic.

There are many different studies concerning puns in English, but according to the researcher's knowledge, there is no one dealing with puns in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. So, this study is conducted to fill this gap. The researcher considers it important that he conducts this research decide on the problem to be analyzed in

order to explain it clear and easier to be understood. In reference to answer this, the following questions:

1. What is the most common type of pun that used in *Hamlet* by Shakespeare?
2. What are the functions of pun that Shakespeare utilizes in *Hamlet*?

## **1.2 Aims**

This study aims at:

1. Investigating the most common type of pun that is used in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
2. Pointing out the functions the words of pun are used for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

## **1.3 Hypotheses**

It is hypothesized that:

1. Punning Repetition is the most common type that is used in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
2. Puns in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be used for comic relief, as a way to conceal an in-joke or insult, or as part of a wider strategy of creative language use.

## **1.4 Procedures**

To achieve the aims of the study, the following procedures will be followed:

1. Presenting a brief theoretical survey of English Puns,
2. Presenting a simple introduction to dramatic texts including the relation between such texts and puns,

3. Going through Shakespeare's play to pinpoint the types of puns that are widely used,
4. Discussing the results by referring to the semantic purposes behind the use of puns.

### **1.5 Limits**

This study is restricted to investigating the types and functions of puns in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

### **1.6 Value of the Study**

It is hoped that the current study would be of some value to learners of English, teachers of English literature, textbook designers and all those who interested in semantics.



## **Section Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Definitions of Pun**

One makes a pun by using a word, or two words with the same sound ('piece'/'peace'), or a group of words with the same sound (personne alitee/ personnalite) in their two possible senses, usually for the purpose of arousing laughter or amusement, and sometimes also to concentrate meaning" (Newmark, 1988: 217).

Also, Culler (1988:14) notes that "puns present a model of language as phonemes or letters combining in various ways to evoke prior meaning and to produce effects of meaning". To put another way, similarity of sound passes into or gives rise to semantic relationships.

Nida (1993: 87) describes pun as follows: "Playing on the meaning and formal resemblance of words (punning) is a universal phenomenon, and in some languages this rhetorical device is extensively encouraged and practiced".

According to Delabastita (1996: 128): wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the languages 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. In this definition, it is stated "the pun is based on the confrontation of linguistic forms that are formally similar, but have different meanings" (Ibid: 58).

According to Sanderson (2009: 123), the formal similarity is manifested in terms of spelling and pronunciation. It is therefore the confrontation of similar forms and dissimilar meanings between linguistic structures that gives rise to ambiguity. This means that ambiguity arises because words that look and/or sound the same but have different meanings exploited in such a manner that an additional semantic layer added to the otherwise stable relationship between signifier and signified.

Crystal (2004: 87) defines pun as "plying with the various meanings of words ". It is considered as a main source of "ambiguity". Webster's dictionary defines pun as " the humorous use of a word or words , which are formed or sounded alike but have different meanings , in such a way as to play on two or more of the possible applications".

It has been suggested that pun is an occurrence of one word mentioned once carries either more than one meaning or a recurrence of a word in different meanings. This includes to have either one word with two or more meanings, or two words (identical in spelling and pronunciation) each one has a meaning that differs from the other (Gray, 1984: 132).

## **2.2 The Types of Puns**

Based on their formal identity, puns are divided into different categories, some of which are as follows:

- 1- Homography: This kind of pun refers to the words (i.e. lexemes) which are of the same spelling but of different meaning (Crystala, 2003). Homography is illustrated from such pairs as 'wind' (blowing) and 'wind' (a clock).

- 2- Homonymy: This kind of pun refers to lexical items which are of the same form but of different meaning. 'Bear' (animal, carry) is an example of homonyms (Crystala, 2003).
- 3- Homophony: This kind of pun refers to lexemes which are of the same pronunciation but of different spelling and meaning. The words 'threw' and 'through' are the examples (Crystala, 2003).
- 4- Paronymy: Phonological similarity of the words and the morphological structure is the characteristic of paronymic puns. To take one example, the words 'faith' and 'face' are differ only with regard to their last phoneme (Marjamaki, 2001).
- 5- Palindrome: Palindromes are spelled the same, backwards or forwards, such as 'mom', 'race car', or 'defied' (Jamshidian, 2011: 130).

Accordingly and from a linguistic point of view, pun falls into two broad categories: the implicit and the explicit varieties:

- a. Implicit pun: when a word is mentioned only once but carries two or more meanings that the reader has to decipher for himself.
- b. Explicit pun: repeating the same word in a different meaning.

### **2.3 Functions of Puns**

1. Puns may be used to teach pronunciation since they contain words that sound alike.
2. Puns also serve as a form of entertainment. The different meanings of the puns bring out the humour and thus provide entertainment by making people laugh.

3. Puns are used to enhance creativity in language use. To create a pun requires wit and creativity.

4. Puns create humour. Since puns are often on a light note, they often end in laughter.

## **Section Three**

### **Data and Methodology**

#### **3.1 Data Analysis**

To achieve the purpose of the study a descriptive approach is employed. This study focuses on Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet' as the source text, from which extracts are gathered from *Hamlet*.

It is very important to mention to the model that has been adopted to analyze the following selected texts that was developed on the basis of pun words, which is Crystal (2003), who highlights that there are five types of pun: Homography, Homonymy, Homophony, Paronymy and Palindrome.

#### **3.2 The Literary Text to be Analyzed**

Before conducting the analysis of pun in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, it seems that it is necessary to provide the reader with some details about this play. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is considered as one of the most important tragic plays in English Literature. It is generally regarded as the most exciting, absorbing, and profound drama ever written". The hero of the play is, actually, the well-known of all Shakespeare's characters. He has "exerted a greater fascination, and certainly has been the subject of more discussion, than any other in the whole literature of the world".

This play talks about the ghost of the King of Denmark who tells his son Hamlet to avenge his murder by killing the new king, Hamlet's uncle. Hamlet feigns madness, contemplates life and death, and seeks revenge. His uncle, fearing

for his life, also devises plots to kill Hamlet. The play ends with a duel, during which the King, Queen, Hamlet's opponent and Hamlet himself are all killed.

### 3.3 Analysis

In the play *Hamlet*, by playwright William Shakespeare, witty lines were included to reveal different elements throughout the play. Hamlet uses puns to reveal different elements throughout the play. In the graveyard, Hamlet speculates that a skull might have been that of a lawyer, and we hear this volley of puns:

*Hum! This fellow might be*

*in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes,*

*his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers,*

*his recoveries: is this the fine of his fines, and*

*the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine*

*pate full of fine dirt? will his vouchers vouch him*

*no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than*

*the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The*

*very conveyances of his lands will hardly lie in*

*this box; and must the inheritor himself have no more, ha? (5.1.103-112).*

The second part of Hamlet's quadruple pun on "fine," "fine pate full of fine dirt," is easy enough, but "fine of fines" needs a little explanation. "Fine" can also mean "outcome," and it can mean "legal action," so Hamlet is asking if the outcome of all of the lawyer's legal actions is only to have his skull full of dirt.

Hamlet seems to reach a long way for his next pun. "A pair of indentures" are two legal documents that belong together, and are written on the same piece of paper, which is then separated with a serrated cut, so that they can be fitted back together, to prove that they belong together. The Latin root word in "indenture" is "dent," meaning "tooth." Apparently someone, sometime, thought that the serrated cut in an indenture looked like tooth marks. Hamlet's joke is that now the lawyer's only indentures are his own teeth. The last joke in this passage is easy, but a bit puzzling. "Conveyances" are legal documents relating to the transfer of real estate. Lawyers are famous for creating many documents, so it makes sarcastic sense to say that "the very conveyances of his lands will hardly lie in this box," that is, the conveyances will hardly fit into the lawyer's coffin. The puzzling part is that there doesn't seem to be a coffin in this grave, only skulls.

After all of this, Hamlet seems to make his major point with a comment on parchment, which would be used for legal documents that were intended to last forever. He asks Horatio if it isn't true that parchment is made of sheep-skin. Horatio says, yes it is, and of calf-skin, too. Hamlet then says, "They are sheep and calves which seek out assurance in that" (5.1.116-117). Of course, he means what we already know, that no legal document can assure us of anything after death. More interestingly, his punning way of putting it shows he thinks that the whole situation is not tragic, but humorous. If we act as if our lives will never end, it's not tragic; it only shows that we are silly sheep.

"I think it be thine, indeed; for thou liest in't" (5.1.122), says Hamlet to the gravedigger, after he has asked whose grave it is and gotten the answer "Mine, sir." The other meaning of "lie" is simply to stay somewhere, as in the phrase, "the ship lies in harbor." In the exchange of wit that follows this there's a surprise: Hamlet loses, and it's the gravedigger who gets the last word.

Hamlet asks Yorick's skull where his "flashes of merriment" are, then answers the question himself: "Not one now, to mock your own grinning--quite chop-fallen" (5.1.191-192). Your chops are your lower cheeks, your jaw, and if you are "chop-fallen," you have a long face because you're sad. Yorick the jester isn't jesting now. He's chop-fallen. In fact, his chops have fallen completely off. In short, Hamlet has just made a terrible pun at Yorick's expense.

Speaking to Horatio, Hamlet describes Osric: "'tis a chough; but, as I say, spacious in the possession of dirt" (5.2.87-88). A "chough" is a bird that has been taught to speak, and Hamlet regards Osric as a kind of talking birdbrain. Osric has come to invite Hamlet to the fencing match with Laertes, and throughout his visit, Hamlet makes relentless fun of Osric's excessive use and misuse of words.

Hamlet uses puns to insult and confuse Polonius and Ophelia, so they continue to believe he is not mentally stable. Hamlet also used puns to reveal his anger towards multiple characters throughout the play, while trying to fulfill the Ghost's instructions, which were to kill Claudius without causing unnecessary pain on Gertrude. Hamlet antagonized Polonius by telling him, "...You are a fishmonger," to confuse and insult Polonius. This is humorous because Hamlet is trying to compare Polonius to a fisherman, on account of Polonius trying to fish answers from Hamlet. Fishmonger is also an alternate word for a pimp, which insulted Polonius because he believed Hamlet was referring to Ophelia as the whore. Which is proven during the conversation when Polonius starts talking to himself about how Hamlet being in love with his daughter and how Hamlet is far too gone. Though this line is meant to confuse Polonius, which is proven when Polonius agrees with almost everything Hamlet says, it leaves Polonius bitter and Hamlet satisfied with himself. Before the play within the play, Hamlet talks to



Ophelia and tells her, “Get thee to a nunnery.” Hamlet uses the word nunnery on the account of it having two meanings, which are convent and brothel.

## 2.4 Results and Discussion

**Table (1): Shows the frequency of pun used in *Hamlet***

Type of Grammatical Cohesion	Freq.	Percentage
Homography	5	50%
Homonymy	2	20%
Homophony	1	10%
Paronymy	1	10%
Palindrome	1	10%

Table (2) shows that the most frequent pun that has been used in Hamlet is ‘Homography’ 5 cases are found, which may means that ‘Homography’ is the most preferred by this writer. It also means that this type of pun is the most important in this literary text.

## Conclusion

A pun is a form of word play that exploits multiple meanings of a term, or of similar-sounding words, for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect. A pun is a figure of speech that includes a play of words that have more than one meaning or those that sound alike. Among the figures of speech, pun can be said to be the most intriguing and amusing. All that one requires is a creative intellect and some wit to create humorous puns.

It is concluded that the pun of 'Homography' is the most type used in *Hamlet* (5), which may mean that this type of pun is the most important in this literary texts. This type of pun is used by the writer to refer to the words (i.e. lexemes) which are of the same spelling but of different meaning.

The pun of 'Homonymy' has been used (2), which are considered as the second frequent types that have been used in *Hamlet*, which used to refers to lexical items which are of the same form but of different meaning.

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