THE WAYS OF USING PUN AND ZEUGMA IN ENGLISH POETRY

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A zeugma is a figure of speech in which oane "governing" word or phrase modifies two distinct parts of a sentence. Often, the governing word will mean something different when applied to each part, as in the sentence, "He took his coat and his vacation." The verb "to take" makes sense with and governs both "coat" and "vacation," but is appropriate to each in a different way.Some additional key details about zeugma:Zeugma is occasionally called syllepsis, but there's some debate over whether these two terms really mean the same thing.Some zeugma play with a double meaning of the governing word, while others hinge on grammar.Some people believe that in order to be considered a proper zeugma, a sentence must have a comedic or dramatic effect. However, it is generally agreed that no particular effect is required for a given phrase to be considered zeugma.Zeugma PronunciationHere's how to pronounce zeugma: zoog-muh Zeugma in Depth Zeugma can be complicated to understand because it's a flexible term, and many sentence constructions that seem quite different from one another can all qualify as zeugma. Understanding how all the different types and examples of zeugma relate to one another makes it easier to grasp the overall concept.

Zeugma and Syllepsis

The first step to understanding zeugma is addressing its relationship with syllepsis. Some people use zeugma and syllepsis as synonyms for each other, but many others believe there is a slight but real difference between the two.Here is the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of zeugma:A figure of speech in which a word applies to two others in different senses (e.g., John and his license expired last week) or to two others of which it semantically suits only one (e.g., with weeping eyes and hearts)Here is the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of syllepsis:A figure of speech in which a word is applied to two others in different senses (e.g., caught the train and a bad cold) or to two others of which it grammatically suits only one (e.g., neither they nor it is working)You'll notice that the definitions differ in just one place—semantically/grammatically—and many people argue that this is what sets zeugma and syllepsis apart. To put that difference simply:In zeugma: The semantics—the logic or meaning—of the relationship between the governing word and each of the two modified words is different, as in the previous example, "He took his hat and his vacation." In that example, the meaning of "took" is different when it relates to taking a hat as opposed to taking a vacation.In syllepsis: The governing word has two different relationships with the "governed" words, but this difference is specifically grammatical, as in the sentence, "He works nights, and I days." According

to Team Zeugma–Is–Not–Syllepsis, this last sentence is an example of syllepsis, because the verb "to work" has two different grammatical relationships with the other parts of the sentence, only one of which is technically correct. (You wouldn't write "I works.")If this seems like too much hairsplitting, here is some good news: not even grammar experts agree on the definition of zeugma versus syllepsis, and it is much easier to understand the concept of zeugma if we do as Bryan A. Garner suggests in his book Garner's Modern American Usage:Although commentators have historically tried to distinguish between zeugma and syllepsis, the distinctions have been confusing and contradictory...We're better off using zeugma in its broadest sense and not confusing matters by introducing syllepsis, a little-known term whose meaning not even the experts agree on.In other words, he suggests seeing zeugma as covering both semantics and grammatical scenarios.Zeugma that Play with Grammar vs. Zeugma that Play with Meaning Zeugma comes from the ancient greek for "a yoking," because this figure of speech literally "yokes" or joins two separate parts of a sentence. However, just like two yoked oxen, the two animals don't immediately fall into step with one another. This is also the case in language: zeugma's don't work seamlessly, and it's actually that tiny disconnect between the two "yoked" pieces of language that creates the pleasing comedic or dramatic effect of the zeugma.So far, we have looked at two different examples of zeugma with two different types of "yokes": "He took his hat and his vacation," and "He works night, I days." It so happens that these two examples represent the two main types of zeugma.

Zeugma that play with meaning: In "He took his hat and his vacation," the comedic effect comes from the surprising and clever sentence construction. On the first read, the sentence doesn't seem correct. When we read "he took his hat," we decide to run with the literal meaning of the verb "to take," but when we hear, "and his vacation," we're asked to switch to the more figurative meaning of "to take," as in "to take a vacation." While the grammar and logic of the sentence are completely correct, we're not used to reading sentences that switch so nimbly between double meanings of a word, and it's actually quite fun to read. Because they are pleasing and clever, zeugmas stick in the mind and are common in proverbs, such as, "Eggs and oaths are soon broken."Zeugma that play with grammar: In the other example from earlier, "He works nights, I days," the verb "to work" has no double-meaning, but it is doing double duty. While this zeugma seems pretty routine and uncreative, it is actually radically transformative to the sentence. "He works nights and I work days" is a bit repetitive and boring. "He works nights, I days" has a nice rhythm to it, and also brings the two people described—"He" and "I"—closer together, not only in the sentence, but also in the reader's imagination.The first type of zeugma, which play with meaning, is both more "fun" and appear more commonly used than the second type.Prozeugma, Mesozeugma, and Hypozeugma Zeugma is also sometimes classified in yet another

way. Above, we discussed the difference between grammar-driven and meaning-driven zeugma. True zeugma-enthusiasts also like to categorize zeugma based on where the governing word or "yoke" appears in the sentence. Luckily, we already have examples for the first two categories:Prozeugma: A zeugma in which the yoke or governing word is at the beginning of the sentence, before the governed parts. "He took his hat, and his vacation."Mesozeugma: A zeugma in which the yoke or governing word is in the middle of the sentence, between the governed parts. "He works nights, I days."Hypozeugma: A zeugma in which the yoke or governing word is at the end of the sentence, after the governed parts. "His clothes, his books, and his dignity were lost ."Diazeugma One final type of zeugma to know is diazeugma: this is a zeugma in which a single subject governs multiple subsequent verbs. For example, "Müller receives the ball, dribbles, dodges the defender, shoots, and scores!"Because of how often diazeugma appears in sportscasting, you can think of this as the "play-by-play" zeugma.

Zeugma Examples

In all of the examples below, we highlight the governing word or phrase in green, and the parts of the sentence being governed in red.

Zeugma in Literature

Zeugma are versatile. They can be humorous, they can create a sense of drama, and they can make an idea or phrase stick in the mind. For all of these reasons, Zeugma are very common in both poetry and prose.

Zeugma in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice

In this example from Chapter 43 of Pride and Prejudice, Eliza Bennet and Mr. Darcy awkwardly attempt to talk.

She wanted to talk, but there seemed to be an embargo on every subject. At last she recollected that she had been traveling, and they talked of Matlock and Dove Dale with great perseverance. Yet time and her aunt moved slowly—and her patience and her ideas were nearly worn our before the tete-a-tete was over.

Austen's use of zeugma here is not only clever and comic, but also brings up a recurring theme in Darcy and Eliza's relationship: her lack of "connections" and lower social status in comparison to him. Even as the two walk and talk, on their way towards a better understanding of one another, her relatives hold the pair back both literally and figuratively.

Zeugma in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

This memorable zeugma from Chapter 1 of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer sets the tone for the rest of the novel, in that it yokes (or ties together) misbehavior and the experience of "glory":

The new boy took two broad coppers out of his pocket and held them out with derision. Tom struck them to the ground. In an instant both boys were rolling and

tumbling in the dirt, gripped together like cats; and for the space of a minute they tugged and tore at each other's hair and clothes, punched and scratched each other's nose, and covered themselves with dust and glory.

You'll notice that "dust" comes before "glory," just as in the previous example, the man "takes his hat" before he "takes his vacation." In the type of zeugma that hinges on meaning (rather than grammar), the more literal or concrete meaning of the verb usually comes before the more abstract meaning.

Zeugma in Tim O'Brien's The Things they Carried

In this example from Chapter 1 of The Things They Carried, O'Brien uses zeugma to describe the combined load—both physical and emotional—that soldiers in the Vietnam war carried:

But Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried 34 rounds when he was shot and killed outside Than Khe, and he went down under an exceptional burden, more than 20 pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and hemet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers and all the rest, plus the unweighed fear.

By listing such seemingly different things as the jacket, the rations, and the fear as part of the "burden" Lavender carried (burden is also the governing word of the zeugma), O'Brien implies that all these weights, both material and immaterial, are equally important to understanding the soldier's experience.

Zeugma in Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses"

Tennyson includes a grammatical zeugma at the end of the second stanza of his poem "Ulysses."

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