

ZESTY ZEUGMAS

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The zeugma has wordplay potential that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been previously explored in **Word Ways**. A grammatically correct zeugma has a certain charm that has inspired me to collect these literary constructions. And, in the same vein, the beauty of a well-constructed zeugma has inspired me to create my own.

You don't know what a zeugma is? Neither did I, until recently. I discovered it in Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (W9), and it seems only fitting that I quote W9 for a definition. A zeugma is "the use of a word to modify or govern two or more words usually in such a manner that it applies to each in a different sense or makes sense with only one." The accompanying example clarifies this meaning: "[She] opened the door and her heart to the homeless boy." The second example is taken from the Random House Unabridged (RH): "On his fishing trip, he caught three trout and a cold."

If you're up on your literary wordplay, you've probably noticed that a zeugma sounds remarkably similar to a syllepsis. According to Carl Beckson and Arthur Ganz in Literary Terms: A Dictionary (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), the syllepsis is grammatically correct but the zeugma is not. This view is supported by Webster's Third New International Dictionary (W3), which says the zeugma is inappropriate, but the syllepsis is appropriate when it applies to one word in a literal sense and the other in a metaphorical sense. But RH says the exact opposite: a syllepsis is ungrammatical; a zeugma is appropriate if it applies to each modified word "in a different way". The OED says both are ungrammatical, but implies that the zeugma is acceptable when it applies in "different senses". Confused? So am I. The best I can make of all this is that syllepsis and zeugma are interchangeable. Because I find the word zeugma more aesthetically appealing, I use that term in the rest of this article (in the connotation originally quoted above from W9).

As I mentioned before, the zeugma has excellent potential as a form of wordplay. As a case in point, a friend of mine and I were up to 2 AM recently creating our own. To my mind, an essential test of wordplay is whether or not the subject is addictive; i.e., once you get started, is it hard to stop? The zeugma passed this test with flying colors; we kept postponing sleep because we were having too much fun amusing each other with our creations.

It would seem, though, that the zeugma as wordplay should meet some basic criteria. Consider the following: "She picked her red shoes and her nose." This is a zeugma by definition (the word pick is used in two different connotations), but it doesn't satisfy. To my mind, the zeugma as wordplay should require a little more artistry. I thus humbly propose the following criteria:

- * By definition, the key word must be used in two (or more) different connotations
- * These different connotations should be internally consistent

Though unstated in either W9 or RH, this criterion is present in their respective examples. In other words, an open door can imply an open heart, and a fishing trip is a likely place to catch a cold. But picking out a pair of shoes and picking one's nose are unrelated activities, leading to a lack of satisfaction.

- * Finally, the ideal zeugma should be humorous

In order to further illustrate these criteria, here are a dozen zeugmas I have created (with a little help from my friend):

He took the doctor's advice and two aspirin
 The accident sank our yacht and our dreams
 The soldier kicked a land mine and the bucket
 Wearing a negligee, she turned on the lights and her husband
 He swallowed his pride and two goldfish
 Snow White bit a poisoned apple and the dust
 The Boy Scout hiked up his trousers and a mountain
 She bore an illegitimate child and a grudge
 The TV forecaster projected the weather and her voice
 The pilot-turned-hijacker landed the plane and a jail term
 The prospector struck gold and his camp
 The Internal Revenue Service taxes my income and my patience

The above list, though short, should be sufficient to convey the potential zeugmas have as wordplay. If the possibilities intrigue you, then you might enjoy creating your own.