

# THE DICTIONARY OF WORDPLAY

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*This book, authored by Dave Morice and published by Teachers & Writers Collaborative of New York (ISBN 0-915924-97-8), contains approximately 1500 words and terms used by logologists, together with definitions and examples. This essay has been adapted from the Afterword in the book.*

I wouldn't be a rich letterer if I didn't tell you that the acronimble Peter Pangram who put together this dictionary is an alphabet male, paronamazing pun gent, alliterary anagrammarians, morpheme addict, onomatopoetic onomasticator, his Lexcellency who lives in a Camel lot of palindromedaries, Uncle Rebus, and Charader of the Lost Art.

Now that you've sharpened your pun cells as Dave Morice came calling on the homophone, now that you've recited his paradoxology, now that you've interpreted his rhopalic symbols, now that you've climbed his word ladders and plucked and eaten the fruits on his poet-tree, now that he's gagged you with a spoonerism and you've read his lipograms, you understand that Dave is not a palindroning one-dimensional word square. He is the Wonderful Wizard of Words, who invests in the universe of wordplay with a Newtonian elegance and dazzle.

And what a universe it is. Abraham Abulafia, a thirteenth-century cabalist, taught that the key to transcendence is language itself. Abulafia believed that, by concentrating on letters, the mind could loose itself from its shackles to commune with a presence greater than itself. Wordplay is one way we have of extending our reach beyond our grasp and touching something that transcends our coil of mortality.

Beyond our day-to-day use of language—"Please pass the butter"; "How much does that cost"?—gleams the realm of wordplay—"I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy"; "What's the longest word in the English language? *Smiles*, because there's a mile between its first and last letter."

Wordplay appears to be programmed into our DNA and hardwired into our nervous system, one indication being that we have been messing around with words for a very long time.

In the ninth book of Homer's *Odyssey*, composed around 800 D.C., the wily Odysseus is trapped in the cave of Polyphemus, the one-eyed giant with 20/ vision. To fool the Cyclops, Odysseus gives his name as Outis, Greek for "no man." When Odysseus attacks the giant in order to escape from the cave, Polyphemus calls out to his fellow monsters for help, crying "No man is killing me!" Naturally, his fellow big guys take him literally and make no attempt to aid him.

Remember Oedipus? He was a complex king who married a woman just like the girl that married dear old dad. He was a prince of a guy who married a woman old enough to be his mother—and that's what she turned out to be. Before he did that, Oedipus was challenged by a piece of wordplay put to him by the Sphinx: "What goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and on three at night?" Oedipus, one of the first game-show contestants in history, gave as his final

answer “Man. In infancy he crawls, in his prime he walks, and in old age he leans on a staff.” His prize was that he became Rex, which turned out to be very bad for his eyesight.

The Catholic Church is founded on another Greek pun, this one in Matthew 16:18, where Jesus says “Thou art Peter (*petros*) and upon this rock (*petra*) I will build my church.”

And we are getting even better at this stuff. In 1892 William Walsh stated in his *Hand-Book of Literary Curiosities* “After centuries of endeavor, so few really good anagrams have been rolled down to us. One may assert that all the really superb anagrams now extant might be contained in a pillbox.” Look at the field of logology since 1965, the year that Dmitri Borgmann’s *Language on Vacation* was published, shortly before the birth of *Word Ways*, and compare this work with what came before. You’ll see that we have an ineluctable rendezvous with logological destiny.

Wordplay unites us as an American culture. It is a great part of the folklore of a nation that was founded long after the invention of the printing press. Americans born generations apart and thousands of miles apart will still collectively recognize the likes of “Fuzzy wuzzy was a bear...,” “How much wood would a woodchuck chuck?...” and “A sailor went to C-C-C to see what he could C-C-C...”

As Peter Farb points out in *Word Play*, “The majority of American children are strikingly punctual in acquiring a repertoire of riddles at about age six or seven.” One of those riddles has been and still is “What’s black and white and red [read] all over?” Through that question and its answer—“a newspaper”—many of us first experienced the epiphany that two meanings can occupy the same space at the same time.

This concision is one of the elements that wordaholics, logolepts, and verbivores so love about wordplay. Have you heard about the successful perfume manufacturer? His business made a lot of sense [scents, cents]. Within the brief compass of a single syllable repose three different spellings and relevant meanings. Have you heard about the man who gave his male offspring a cattle ranch and named it Focus? Because it was the place where the sun’s rays meet [sons raise meat]. Here six meanings inhabit the space ordinarily lived in by three.

In matters logological we also enjoy cramming the large into the small. We find it satisfying that within the word *rambunctious* lurks the synonymous *raucous*, with all its letters in perfect order. In a palindrome such as ELK CITY, KANSAS, IS A SNAKY TICKLE—just the kind of loopy, wiggly content emerged into a syntactically perfect statement that I love—we find the same meaning running twice through the space ordinarily reserved for a single meaning.

There is yet one more satisfaction that comes with an elbow book like *The Dictionary of Wordplay*. It thrums with the human passion to name. Take another look at the book of Genesis, and you’ll find that God doesn’t just snap His fingers to make everything happen. He names them: “And God said: Let there be light...And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.” And what is one of the first things that Adam does, after introducing himself to Eve by saying (in English; how convenient) MADAM, I’M ADAM, thus creating the world’s first palindrome? He names all the creatures that run and crawl and fly and swim over the face of the earth. This may be what is meant by our being made in God’s image—like Him, we are the speakers, and we are the namers. *The Dictionary of Wordplay* is an act of naming the creatures in a beautiful universe. This lexicon is a testament to the greatest miracle of language: its ability to name itself.