

The Rhetoric of Chiasmus #3

Just Crazy

Chiasmus is a rhetorical tool for text, generally. It's also used in movie scripts, often to great comedic effect or in heavy drama, as in war. From another perspective, however, chiasmus can be used to capture an essential or thematic aspect of what's on the screen. Here are some examples....

I enjoy good movies, as I'm sure many do. At my age (now in my seventies), however, I tend to favour what are called 'classic movies'. One such is *Catch-22* which not too many people would remember these days, perhaps. It's a story that explores the absurdity of war – a topical subject, given the ongoing agony in Afghanistan, Iraq etc – and showed how one man attempted to deal himself out of the Second World War

That movie contained a beautifully crafted chiastic exchange between two of the characters. The first character (played by Art Garfunkel, of *Bridge Over Troubled Waters* fame), surveys the ruins of war around him and questions why anybody would want to live in those conditions. He says to an old Italian man: **"It's better to die on your feet than to live on your knees."** The wise Italian responds: **"No! It's better to live on your feet than to die on your knees."** Again, you can see how the word "live" is used in two ways, one negative, the other affirmative.

With sayings such as those, chiasmus assumes a philosophical perspective, one that is designed to challenge the way we think about certain things, whatever they are. But, it's not always so. Sometimes the chiasmus is quite funny, while still retaining an introspective touch.

Mae West, that grand lady of early cinema, was well known for her caustic one-liners. Who has not seen this before: **"It's not the men in my life that count, it's the life in my men."**? And, consider the juicy implications of this zinger: **"I always say, keep a diary and someday it'll keep you."** Both of those lines, by the way, were featured in two of her movies.

Chiasmus, as a rhetorical device, relies very much on the use of homonyms. To a lesser degree, homophones can be used with great effect also. So, if you want to try your hand at constructing a piece of witty chiasmus, it does help if you know the difference between a homonym and a homophone. You can visit my website [here](#) and [here](#) for more information, or just pull out your dictionary and look up those words.

Be warned though – not all dictionaries define those words in the same way. And that, in itself, is a bit of puzzle that I hope the guardians of our language resolve some day (I won't hold my breath, though).

However, as an example of how I've used **homophones** to construct a comment about another topical subject – the effects of alcoholism – I started with the title of another classic movie I much admire: *Days of Wine and Roses*. It was produced in 1962, directed by Blake Edwards (arguably better known for his work in comedy) and starred the great Jack Lemmon and the ineffable Lee Remick, both of whom gave Oscar-nominated performances.

Anyway, I wanted to use the title to express the essence of what I saw in the story, particularly from Jack Lemmon, playing Joe Clay, a salesman. So, as is my practice, I first read the title in reverse; naturally three words stood out – Roses, Wine, Days. Chuckling softly, I rewrote those words thus: Rose, Whine, Daze. A few moments later, I had the comment I wanted...

In the movie *Days of Wine and Roses*, Joe Clay often rose, with a whine, in a daze.

See the movie, if you can; and maybe make it *required* viewing, also, for your growing young adults.

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