

Jeeves' and Wooster's Juggling with Words: Wordplay in P.G. Wodehouse's Comic Novels

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This poster analyses the specific use of wordplay in P.G. Wodehouse's 'Jeeves and Wooster' novels within a theoretical framework that stresses the dialogue between author/narrator, text and reader and puts emphases on the readers' (affective/cognitive/mnemonic) responses. Wodehouse has often been praised for his style and language is used very consciously in the novels. Interestingly, the use of wordplay is not a sign of the autodiegetic narrator's wit, as he seems to play unintentionally with words. Wooster's use of language characterises him as an 'innocent, school-boyish', slightly stupid, but good-hearted young man, whereas his personal gentleman's gentleman, Jeeves, says little, but impresses Wooster with his intellectual, sophisticated use of language and his quotations from 'high literature' and philosophers. In taking proverbs, idioms and intertexts literally, Wooster, apparently inadvertently, creates comic visual images and revisualises the words'/phrases' (dead) metaphoricity:

- (1) "his habit of poking his nose into people's garages and potting sheds" (*Thank You, Jeeves* 132)
- (2) "The poet Tennyson speaks of the little rift within the lute, that by and by will make the music mute and ever widening slowly silence all." "Then lute it is. And we know what's going to happen if this particular lute goes phut." (*Stiff Upper Lip* 27)

Thus the novels rewrite phrases that are part of Anglo-American cultural memory comically and the literally/culturally literate reader bisociates them with their source texts. The former example also reminds the reader of two preceding slapstick scenes. This further heightens the visuality and works as a 'visual running gag'. Whereas Wooster's misuse of words creates comic visual images, Jeeves' deferential valet idiom in fact subverts other characters' emotional language ironically:

- (3) "[...] Jeeves," he went on emotionally, "you must have that brain of yours pickled and presented to some national museum." "Very good, m'lord." (*Joy in the Morning* 260)

References

- Wodehouse, P.G. (1947; 1999). *Joy in the Morning*. London, Penguin Books.
Wodehouse, P.G. (1963; 1966). *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*. London, Penguin Books.
Wodehouse, P.G. (1934; 1999). *Thank You, Jeeves*. London, Penguin Books.