

Epitaph

Definition of Epitaph

When somebody from our family, or a friend dies, we want to commemorate his or her memory. For this, we use an epitaph, which is a brief writing or saying inscribed on a grave. Generally, it is a brief composition, having figurative sense in a [verse](#) or in [prose](#) form, written to pay tribute to a deceased person, or to remember a past event.

Strictly speaking, an epitaph is a short text on a plaque or tombstone, honoring a dead person. It is derived from the Greek word *epitaphios*, which means “funeral oration.” Many poets and authors, such as William Shakespeare, Sylvia Plath, Oscar Wilde, and John Keats have written their own epitaphs prior to their deaths.

Epitaph and Eulogy

An epitaph and a [eulogy](#) have a similar function, which is to pay tribute to the dead. However, they are also different, as an epitaph is a brief and concise commemorative inscription engraved on the tombstone of a dead person; while a eulogy is a spoken or piece written in praise of a dead person, usually given at the funeral. A eulogy may also be used for a living person, as it incorporates stories, anecdotes, and memories of the individual. An epitaph, on the other hand, is just an honoring poem or an inscription written on the tombstone.

Examples of Epitaph in Literature

The use of epitaph flourished during the seventeenth century when writers struggled over the cultural significance of their dead ones. However, later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many ways were adopted to validate its importance and, therefore, renowned writers wrote their epitaphs before their death. Here we have a list of some good epitaphs:

Example #1: *Oscar Wilde's Epitaph*

Wilde's epitaph is inscribed on his gravestone in a very sentimental verse. It reads:

“And alien tears will fill for him,
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.”

This epitaph is from his popular poem *The [Ballad](#) of Reading Gaol*. The poem describes that death is also like a prison sentence. Further, he adds a witty statement that in the grave “the food in here is awful.”

Example #2: *Robert Frost's Epitaph*

Robert Frost wrote his epitaph a few years prior to his death. He took the last lines from the poem *The Lesson for Today*, which read as:

“And were an epitaph to be my story
I'd have a short one ready for my own.
I would have written of me on my stone:
I had a lover's quarrel with the world.”

Unfortunately, most of lovers cannot make up their love. However, Frost was nearly close to being done with his love, when he passed away at the age of 88. This quote gives an apt presentation by the poet.

Example #3: *William Butler Yeats' Epitaph*

Yeats in penned his epitaph, which reads:

“Cast a cold Eye
On Life, on Death.
Horseman, pass by!”

It seems that he is giving advice to his readers to not hang back over his corpse for a very long time, nevertheless the words have rather deep meaning. He had taken these lines from the poem *Under Ben Bulbin*. This is one of the most popular modern epitaphs.

Example #4: *William Shakespeare's Epitaph*

“Good friend for Jesus’ sake forebeare,
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blessed be the man that spares these stones,
And cursed be he that moves my bones.”

Shakespeare had given a prediction that somebody might dig up his grave and, due to this fear, he composed his epitaph in verse form before his death. This poem is chiseled on his gravestone.

Example #5: *Sylvia Plath's Epitaph*

Sylvia Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes, had chosen her epitaph, which is engraved on her gravestone. It reads:

“Even amidst fierce flames, the golden lotus can be planted.”

Function of Epitaph

The major function of writing an epitaph is to praise and pay tribute to a deceased person. It is used to provide an example of virtue and goodness, how a tomb of the good people could serve to provide a sense of their presence. In addition, a veneration of a dead person’s memories could produce similar effects, as we would see in his or her presence. Another function is to let the [audience](#) know and warn them that their lives are also mortal like their predecessors. Finally, it preserves history, as it shows ancestral relationships, dates of birth and death, and accomplishments of the deceased persons.