

Conceit

Conceit Definition

Conceit is a [figure of speech](#) in which two vastly different objects are likened together with the help of similes or metaphors.

Conceit develops a [comparison](#) which is exceedingly unlikely but is, nonetheless, intellectually imaginative. A comparison turns into a conceit when the writer tries to make us admit a similarity between two things of whose unlikeness we are strongly conscious. For this reason, conceits are often surprising.

For example, it will not surprise us to hear someone saying, “You are a snail,” or “You are as slow as a snail,” as we understand that the similarity is drawn on a common quality of slowness. However, we will definitely be surprised to hear someone comparing “two lovers with the legs of a draftsman’s compass.” Thus, conceit examples have a surprising or shocking effect on the readers because they are novel comparisons, unlike the conventional comparisons made in similes and metaphors.

Conceits in Everyday Life

In everyday life, we can surprise and amuse others by using conceits like “Love is like an oil change,” or “The broken heart is a damaged china pot.” In these examples, the attempt to compare two noticeably unrelated objects makes the comparisons conceits. Conceits in real life may give complex ideas and emotions an air of simplicity, by comparing them to simple day-to-day objects, as in “My life is like a free online game, people seem to be playing with it.”

Examples of Conceit in Literature

Let us analyze a few examples of conceit in literature:

Example #1: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

William Shakespeare makes use of a conceit in Act 3, Scene 5 of his play *Romeo and Juliet*. Here, Capulet comes to Juliet's room after Romeo has left. He finds her weeping and says:

“Thou counterfeit'st a bark, a sea, a wind;
For still thy eyes, which I may call the sea,
Do ebb and flow with tears; the bark thy body is,
Sailing in this salt flood; the winds, thy sighs;
Who, raging with thy tears, and they with them,
Without a sudden calm, will overset
Thy tempest-tossed body.”

He compares Juliet to a boat in a storm. The comparison is an extended [metaphor](#) in which he compares her eyes to a sea, her tears to a storm, her sighs to the stormy winds, and her body to a boat in a storm.

Example #2: *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* (By John Donne)

The term conceit usually brings to mind certain examples from metaphysical poets of the 17th century. Of these, John Donne stands out as the best exponent of the use of metaphysical conceits. John Donne, in his poem *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, says:

“If they be two, they are two so As stiff
Twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.”

This is one of Donne's most ingenious conceits. He compares his and his

soul to the *fixed foot*, and his to the other foot. He says the bodies of lovers may be separate like the two legs of a compass, but are always joined at the top that reminds us of the spiritual union of the two lovers.

Example #3: *The Flea* (By John Donne)

We find another striking example of conceit in John Donne's poem, *The Flea*:

“Oh stay! three lives in one flea spare
Where we almost, yea more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage-bed and marriage-temple is...”

In the above lines, the poet tells his darling that she has no reason to deny him sexually, as the flea has sucked blood from both of them, and their blood has mingled in its gut, so the flea has become their “marriage bed,” though they are not married yet.

Function of Conceit

Because conceits make unusual and unlikely comparisons between two things, they allow readers to look at things in a new way. Similes and metaphors may explain things vibrantly, but they tend to become boring at times because of their predictable nature. Conceits, on the other hand, surprise and shock readers by making farfetched comparisons. Hence, conceit is used as a tool in literature to develop interest in readers.