

# Epigram

## Definition of Epigram

Epigram is a rhetorical device that is a memorable, brief, interesting, and surprising satirical statement. It originated from the Greek word *epigramma*, which means “*inscription*,” or “*to inscribe*.” Often ingenious or witty statements are considered as epigrams, such as this quote by Eleanor Roosevelt:

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

Oscar Wilde used an epigram in this quote:

“As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination. When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular.”

Both of these epigrams are not only interesting and brief, but also satirical. The first one is about the sense of inferiority, while the second one is about war.

This literary device is commonly used in poetry, where it appears as a short satirical poem with a single subject, ending in an ingenious or witty thought. Poets like Alexander Pope, John Donne, William Shakespeare, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge popularized epigram as a literary device during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Jane Wilde, an Irish poet, believed that epigrams were much better than an argumentative speech.

## Common Use of Epigram

Below are some popular examples of epigram used in common speech:

“Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.” – *John F. Kennedy*

“If we don’t end war, war will end us.” – *G. Wells*

“It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness.” – *Eleanor Roosevelt*

“A word to the wise ain’t necessary; it’s the stupid ones who need all the advice.” – *Bill Cosby*

“Live simply, so that others may simply live.” – *Mother Teresa*

“I’m starting with the man in the mirror.” – *Michael Jackson*

“This is the moment when we must come together to save this planet. Let us resolve that we will not leave our children a world where the oceans rise and famine spreads and terrible storms devastate our lands.” – *Barack Obama*

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” – *Jesus Christ*

## Examples of Epigram in Literature

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### Example #1: *Auguries of Innocence* (By William Blake)

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“To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.”

Blake wrote poetry about his existential and religious concepts during his times. The above quotation, from *Auguries of Innocence*, became very popular. The poem is packed with punch lines, and the poet has laid great emphasis on the concept.

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### Example #2: *Sonnet 76* (By William Shakespeare)

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“So all my best is dressing old words new,  
Spending again what is already spent:  
For as the sun is daily new and old,  
So is my love still telling what is told.”

These four lines of a [sonnet](#) by Shakespeare are a good example of an epigram. The poet refers to ideas and items simultaneously as both new and old. He tries to say that he has spent something, which he already has done. He is doing this to express perplexity with a lover, and also shows his feelings of desire for sexuality.

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### Example #3: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (By Oscar Wilde)

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“There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”

“Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly.”

“There is no such thing as a [moral](#) or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.”

Oscar Wilde was one of the most popular and skilled writers for using epigrams. This novel is filled with a number of epigrams, and here we have three prominent examples.

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### Example #4: *Hero and Leander* (By John Donne)

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“Both robb’d of air, we both lie in one ground  
Both whom one fire had burnt, one water drown’d.”

This is a good example of epigram. While we cannot see any apparent [humor](#), the contradiction is clearly visible in how two people could die with water and fire both. Therefore, the poem has some satirical purposes wrapped up in just two witty lines.

## Function of Epigram

Epigram is a clever and witty statement expressed in just a few lines, pointing out foibles and truths of mankind. This is very common in poetry, but we also find it in [prose](#), film, [fiction](#) writing, politics, and everyday speech. Epigrams serve the same purpose as do maxims and proverbs. However, the main purpose of using such statements is to leave a positive impression on the [audience](#), as they demonstrate pure humor coupled with wisdom. Besides, writers use this literary device to cause listeners and readers to think deeply about their statements.