

Wit

Definition of Wit

Wit has originated from an old English term *wit*, which means “to know.” It is a literary device used to make the readers laugh. Over the years, its meanings have kept changing. Today, it is associated with laughter and [comedy](#). It is, in fact, a clever expression of thought; whether harmless or aggressive, with or without any disparaging intent toward something or someone.

Wit has paradoxical and mocking quality, and evokes laughter through apt phrasing. It is a cleverly woven expression and idea that evokes pleasure and amusement when used appropriately. Wit has historically been a specific sign of a cultivated intellect and mind. It was often found in poetry, but stage plays were also full of wit, specifically during the Restoration Period. In modern times, wit is a hallmark of political and social writings.

Examples of Wit in Literature

Example #1: *The Good Morrow* (by John Donne)

“My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.”

John Donne has used plenty of wit and [conceit](#) in this poem. He has presented a [comparison](#) between his beloved and two hemispheres which form the earth. This unusual comparison between the [speaker](#) and his

beloved makes the reader feel pleased, making it a good example of the use of wit in a poem.

Example #2: Canto-I, *The Rape of the Lock* (by Alexander Pope)

“The Rape of the Lock” has an abundance of scintillating and sparkling wit. In fact, through his wit, Alexander Pope has made a comic assault on a society preoccupied with superficialities. It is a witty [satire](#) that ridicules idleness, laziness, follies, frivolities, shallowness, hypocrisy, and vanities of aristocratic ladies of the eighteenth century. He gives his readers an amusing picture of the ladies of his time.

“Say what strange motive, goddess! could compel
A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?
O say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,
Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?
In tasks so bold, can little men engage?
And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage?”

In this example, Pope brings into question whether “little men” can engage the boldness of women – in whose bosoms is found great anger. Only Pope could have coined this wit.

Example #3: *The Importance of Being Earnest* (by Oscar Wilde)

The dialogues in Oscar Wilde’s play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are full of wit, paradoxical twists, epigrams, and [humor](#). For instance, the [character](#) Algernon Moncrieff delivers a witty statement that “Divorces are made in heaven,” which is an amendment of another statement, “Marriages are made in heaven.” A saying that “Two is company and three is none” flows into another naughty implication, “In married life three is company and two is none.” The character, John “Jack” Worthing, also uses witty statements in speaking to Algernon, saying that “Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt.”

A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift is another good example of sharp wit and biting [sarcasm](#). His proposal is brief, in that the government of Ireland can resolve its economic problems by allowing poor families to sell their children as a source of food for the wealthy. By doing this, Swift suggests, the impoverished families could be useful to society.

Swift delivers sarcastic and witty statements against landlords by saying, “I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for the landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.”

Function

Wit is frequently used in literature, public speeches, media, politics, everyday conversation, and many other fields of life. An inferior form of wit lies in the use of word play, oxymorons, puns, and paradoxes, whereas higher wit appears in the use of conceits, metaphors, and arguments. By intelligent wit, writers mock the social foibles and follies of society; often using paradoxical expressions, which appear to appreciate those foibles, but, in fact, they are disparaging.

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