

Conceit



DEFINITION

What is a conceit? Here's a quick and simple definition:

A conceit is a fanciful [metaphor](#), especially a highly elaborate or [extended metaphor](#) in which an unlikely, far-fetched, or strained comparison is made between two things. A famous example comes from John Donne's poem, "[A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning](#)," in which two lovers are compared to opposite points of a compass needle using a long and elaborate metaphor.

Some additional key details about conceits:

- In classical poetry, there are two categories of conceit: Petrarchan conceits and metaphysical conceits. Petrarchan conceits are a fixture of the Petrarchan [sonnet](#), while metaphysical conceits can be found in a school of poetry known as metaphysical poetry.
- Because of overuse and a lack of innovation, conceits over time gained a slightly negative connotation of being forced or strained. However, that doesn't mean *all* conceits are strained. Some are simply fanciful or elaborate, and are "pulled off" by the writer quite well.
- The word "conceit" is also sometimes used to refer to the central premise or guiding concept of a film, novel, or other artwork. This different usage, which comes from the fact that "conceit" comes from the Latin word meaning "concept," is not covered in this entry.

Conceit Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce conceit: kun-**seat**

Conceit and Extended Metaphor

The term conceit is closely related to the term [extended metaphor](#). In fact, today the two terms are often used interchangeably, and that usage is *not* incorrect. At the same time, conceit also has an additional more technical meaning, and so, sometimes, conceit will mean something slightly different from the meaning of extended metaphor.

- **Extended metaphor:** A [metaphor](#) that unfolds across multiple lines or paragraphs in a text, making use of multiple interrelated metaphors within an overarching, broader metaphor.
- Conceit
 - **Broader, modern meaning:** The same thing as an extended metaphor.

- **More technical, traditional meaning:** A particularly fanciful or elaborate extended metaphor in which the comparison that the metaphor is making is far-fetched, or even so far-fetched as to be strained.

Take a look at our entry on [extended metaphor](#) for more information on the broader use of the word conceit. The rest of this entry will focus on the the more technical definition of the term conceit.

The History of Conceit

Conceits first came to prominence in 14th and 15th century Renaissance literature, when poets began using them in Petrarchan [sonnets](#) (14-line love poems). Most often in these poems, conceits were used to compare their lovers to beautiful things in nature. During that time, conceit did not at all carry a negative connotation—it was simply an elaborate and fanciful extended metaphor.

In the 17th century, a school of poets known as the metaphysical poets also often used conceits in their poetry. Some of these poets, including John Donne, used conceits well. In fact, the metaphysical poets greatly popularized the use of the device. However, over time metaphysical poets used conceits so extensively and with such heavy hands that there was a backlash against using conceits. The device fell out of fashion and began to be associated with the use of over-the-top extended metaphors: people saw conceits as being strained rather than fanciful.

Petrarchan vs. Metaphysical Conceit

When scholars discuss the more technical definition of conceits, they usually break up conceits into two main types:

- **Petrarchan conceits** are named after Petrarch, the 14th century Italian renaissance poet who is credited with the invention of the [sonnet](#). Conceits were an important feature of the Petrarchan sonnet—and became even more so when the form was adopted by poets of the English Renaissance in the late 15th century
 - In Petrarchan conceits (which are common in, but not limited to, sonnets), poets use fanciful metaphors to praise their lovers. For instance, a common conceit during the Renaissance was to compare someone's eyes to the sun.
 - Petrarchan conceits are often, though certainly not always, extended metaphors that govern the structure of the entire poem, but they may also be a series of different metaphors that constitute the bulk of a poem. By contrast, a poem that contains only a single, short metaphor in which someone's eyes are compared to the sun would probably *not* be called a conceit.

- By the start of the seventeenth century, Petrarchan conceits were seen by many writers and critics alike as having become a stale poetic convention in which trite and melodramatic comparisons were drawn. Shakespeare even wrote a famous sonnet (Sonnet 130) poking fun at the Petrarchan conceit.
- **Metaphysical conceits**, like those in the poems of John Donne, make long and unlikely comparisons between two things, for instance like comparing a flea to the physical union of two lovers.
 - The metaphor might feel strained because the two things being compared are in fact very different, or because it's extended over such a long stretch of text that the poet exhausts the metaphor.
 - Metaphysical conceits are known to make sense intellectually rather than intuitively. So while "love is like a butterfly" makes a certain amount of intuitive sense, John Donne's famous conceit in which he compares physical intimacy to a flea really only makes sense when you read the poem's complex argumentation.
 - For that reason, metaphysical conceits often came under criticism from their 17th century contemporaries like Samuel Johnson, who wrote of the metaphysical conceit that it often gave the impression that two things were being "yoked by violence together."

While these two types of conceits are certainly the most common, there *are* conceits that fit into neither of these categories. Emily Dickinson, for instance, is a poet who sometimes used conceits that were neither Petrarchan nor metaphysical. Further, her conceits would not be described by nearly anyone as being strained, even if they are elaborate.



EXAMPLES

The examples below are of Petrarchan conceits and metaphysical conceits. To see examples of conceits that are just plain extended metaphors, check out the LitCharts entry on [extended metaphors](#).

Example of Conceit in Spenser's "Epithalamion"

This long poem by Edmund Spenser makes use of Petrarchan conceit throughout. Here, the lover is compared to an elegant building (so it's fair to say this is also an example of a slightly forced or absurd comparison).

Her snowie necke lyke to a marble towre,
 And all her body like a pallace fayre,
 Ascending uppe with many a stately stayre,
 To honors seat and chastities sweet bowre.

Example of Conceit in Sidney's "Song from Arcadia"

Sir Philip Sidney uses the familiar figurative language of "giving someone your heart" as the basis of the conceit of this poem. He extends the metaphor throughout the poem, *almost* to the point of absurdity, getting about as much mileage out of such a simple metaphor as seems possible. This is a Petrarchan conceit—a fact which is hinted at not just by the romantic nature of the comparison being made, but by the poem's form, which is a [sonnet](#).

My true-love hath my heart and I have his,
 By just exchange one for the other given:
 I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss;
 There never was a bargain better driven.
 His heart in me keeps me and him in one;
 My heart in him his thoughts and senses guides:
 He loves my heart, for once it was his own;
 I cherish his because in me it bides.
 His heart his wound received from my sight;
 My heart was wounded with his wounded heart;
 For as from me on him his hurt did light,
 So still, methought, in me his hurt did smart:
 Both equal hurt, in this change sought our bliss,
 My true love hath my heart and I have his.

Example of Conceit Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130"

By the 17th century, poetic conceits were seen as being so over-the-top that Shakespeare even wrote a sonnet that pointedly *mocked* the convention of using overblown or fanciful conceits. The poem itself has no overarching conceit of its own. Instead, throughout the poem Shakespeare pokes fun at the sorts of ridiculous comparisons made by Petrarchan sonnets that do contain conceits.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;
 My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.

Example of Conceit in Donne's "The Flea"

In this poem, John Donne speaks at length to his beloved about a flea, first pointing out that the flea has sucked both their blood, and then arguing that, therefore, there is no excuse for her to be coy about physical intimacy—since their very blood has already been mingled

inside the flea. Although the subject of the poem is ostensibly a flea, Donne is using the flea as a highly unlikely metaphor to proposition his beloved. This is an example of a metaphysical conceit.

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two;
And this, alas! is more than we would do.

Example of Conceit in Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"

The conceit of this poem by John Donne is that two lovers are described as the two points of a compass. This is another example of a metaphysical conceit.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two,
Thy soul the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the 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.

Example of Conceit in Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for death"

The conceit in this poem by Emily Dickinson is neither strained nor absurd, Petrarchan nor metaphysical. It's simply an unlikely [extended metaphor](#) that governs the structure of the entire poem (in which the poet goes for a carriage ride with Death). But it's a more modern (and therefore rarer) example of the use of conceit. This example is also a case in which the terms extended metaphor and conceit could easily and correctly be used interchangeably.

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use conceits for many of the same reasons they use metaphors and extended metaphors:

- To explain or describe an abstract concept in vivid, memorable, and unique terms.
- To help the reader make a new, insightful connection between two different entities that might not have seemed related.
- To help communicate personal or imaginary experiences in terms to which readers can relate.
- To show off a bit. Conceits—particularly metaphysical conceits—gave poets a chance to show off their smarts by comparing two very unlike things.
- To lead the reader to surprising and important discoveries by connecting different spheres of experience and language. The [figurative](#) meaning that metaphors create can help a reader to see the world or a concept in a new way.

A poet would generally use a Petrarchan conceit to lavish praise on their beloved, while they might use a metaphysical conceit to describe something (or explain an idea) using a novel comparison—one that might take some mental gymnastics to make sense of, but that would ultimately serve to both demonstrate the poet's ingenuity and give readers a new way of seeing the subject.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Conceit](#): A general overview of conceits and the different types.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Conceit](#): A basic definition. As you can see, there are many definitions of conceit. This entry focuses solely on the fifth definition listed in this dictionary.
- [The Encyclopedia Britannica entry on Metaphysical Poets](#): An overview of the metaphysical poetry movement, with some helpful information on how they used conceits.

HOW TO CITE

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