



## **Prose and Poetry: Epigram**

### **Form**

This is a very short, highly polished poem. In English, verse epigrams virtually always use rhyme; they often take the form of a couplet or quatrain (four-line stanza). Epigrams are often collected together into groups or series.

### **Characteristics**

An epigram is marked by conciseness. Every word is chosen for impact. Most epigrams make a single point. They often contain a surprising twist of some kind.

In ancient Greece, the epigram was frequently used for praise or compliment, as in this example:

#### **On a silver relief of a satyr**

Diodorus did not sculpture this satyr, he put him to sleep.  
The silver holds sleeping life: one poke and you'll wake him up.

Plato, translated by Gillian Spraggs

In Roman times the epigram became strongly associated with satire. A popular form of epigram is the brief satirical portrait. Here is a modern example:

#### **To a tourist in the V&A**

From gallery to gallery you pass  
And point your camera into every case,  
Yet look at nothing. Tell me, what satisfactions  
Derive from spurning things for their reflections?

Gillian Spraggs

Another kind of satirical epigram reflects, usually ironically, on wickedness, stupidity or false values. In the epigram that follows, the poet and artist William Blake expresses his contempt for the fashions in art that dominated after the end of the Renaissance (the 'Age of Raphael'):

## **Advice of the Popes who succeeded the Age of Raphael**

Degrade first the Arts if you'd Mankind Degrade.  
Hire Idiots to Paint with cold light & hot shade:  
Give high Price for the worst, leave the best in disgrace,  
And with Labours of Ignorance fill every place.

William Blake (written about 1808)

Blake is using irony: his own beliefs and values are opposite to those recommended in this epigram. This is the unexpected twist in this poem. It is common for the twist in an epigram to have an ironic flavour.

### **Advice**

If a museum object, or a style of art, should prompt you to some crisp reflections, or watching museum visitors inclines you towards satire, consider writing an epigram, or a series of epigrams.