

**Dr. Nabarun Ghosh**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Department of English**  
**Jaggiwan College, Ara**

## **Topic: Joseph Addison's Concept of Wit**

Joseph Addison (1672-1719) was popularly known as a journalistic critic because he was the co-editor, along with Richard Steele, of one of the most popular daily periodicals of 18<sup>th</sup> century named *The Spectator* which was published between 1711 and 1712. Being a critic, his purpose was to bring “philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee-houses.” He wanted to create a good taste for literature among the 18<sup>th</sup> century readers. His concept of wit is to be found in his essays published in *The Spectator*.

In his essay no 62 Addison discusses the concept of true wit and false wit. At the very outset of his essay Addison appreciates Locke's concept of wit as the resemblance and congruity of ideas, that is, similitude and harmony. But Addison adds one more thing with resemblance and congruity which he calls the element of surprise. “Thus when a poet tells us, the bosom of his mistress is as white as snow, there is no wit in the comparison; but when he adds, with a sigh, that it is as cold too, it then grows into wit.” This type of wit is called true wit. The second type of wit, according to Addison, is false wit which consists in resemblance of words instead of resemblance of ideas. Puns and quibbles are examples of false wit. Among the ancient writers, except Longinus and Quintilian no other writer has made any distinction between true wit and pun. The third type of wit that Addison categorizes is mixed wit which consists in both the resemblance of ideas and the resemblance of words. He finds Abraham Cowley to be the best practitioner of

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mixed wit. Cowley's identification of the passion of love as a resemblance of fire in his poem *The Mistress* has been exemplified by Addison here as an example of mixed wit: "Cowley observing the cold Regard of his Mistress's Eyes, and at the same Time their Power of producing Love in him, considers them as Burning-Glasses made of Ice." Here the qualities of fire and that of love have been mixed and whiling doing so the poet surprises the reader. The resemblance lies here not only in ideas but also in words. Therefore, the foundation of a mixed wit lays partly in falsehood and partly in extravagance. Addison states that this mixed abodes in epigram<sup>1</sup>. Addison, however, is not a big supporter of the kind of writing which uses lot of wit in it. He considers witty writing as unnatural and 'gothic'. Addison says that Dryden's definition of wit as "a propriety of words and thoughts adapted to the subject" is a holistic one which could be applied to every good writing. But he does not mention Pope's definition of it which is very close to what Addison tries to define. According to him, the basis of all wit is truth. Pope defines true wit as "nature to advantage dressed." We can assume that this similarity of thought is a product of the Neo-classical tendency among the writers of the age.

Notes:

1. Epigram: It is figure of speech which is brief and satirical in nature and it surprises the reader at first with a deep meaning inherent in it. Example: "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."-Eleanor Roosevelt.

Please visit the following links for further study:

1. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Addison>
2. <http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?action=GET&textsid=38005>

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