

Glossary of Poetic Terms

Allegory - A symbolic narrative in which the surface details imply a secondary meaning. Allegory often takes the form of a story in which the characters represent moral qualities. The most famous example in English is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the name of the central character, Pilgrim, epitomizes the book's allegorical nature. Kay Boyle's story "Astronomer's Wife" and Christina Rossetti's poem "Up-Hill" both contain allegorical elements.

Alliteration - The repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words. Example: "Fetched fresh, as I suppose, off some sweet wood." Hopkins, "In the Valley of the Elwy."

Anapest - Two unaccented syllables followed by an accented one, as in com-pre-HEND or in-ter-VENE. An anapestic meter rises to the accented beat as in Byron's lines from "The Destruction of Sennacherib": "And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea, / When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee."

Assonance- The repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sentence or a line of poetry or prose, as in "I rose and told him of my woe." Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" contains assonantal "I's" in the following lines: "How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick, / Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself."

Aubade - A love lyric in which the speaker complains about the arrival of the dawn, when he must part from his lover. John Donne's "The Sun Rising" exemplifies this poetic genre.

Ballad - A narrative poem written in four-line stanzas, characterized by swift action and narrated in a direct style. The Anonymous medieval ballad, "Barbara Allan," exemplifies the genre.

Blank verse - A line of poetry or prose in unrhymed iambic pentameter. Shakespeare's sonnets, Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, and Robert Frost's meditative poems such as "Birches" include many lines of blank verse. Here are the opening blank verse lines of "Birches": "When I see birches bend to left and right / Across the lines of straighter darker trees, / I like to think some boy's been swinging them."

Caesura - A strong pause within a line of verse. The following stanza from Hardy's "The Man He Killed" contains caesuras in the middle two lines:

He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand-like--just as I--
Was out of work--had sold his traps--
No other reason why.

Characterization - The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions. Readers come to understand the character Miss Emily in Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" through what she says, how she lives, and what she does.

Climax - The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work. The climax of John Updike's "A&P," for example, occurs when Sammy quits his job as a cashier.

Closed Form - A type of form or structure in poetry characterized by regularity and consistency in such elements as rhyme, line length, and metrical pattern. Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" provides one of many examples. A single stanza illustrates some of the features of closed form:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though.
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

Complication - An intensification of the conflict in a story or play. Complication builds up, accumulates, and develops the primary or central conflict in a literary work. Frank O'Connor's story "Guests of the Nation" provides a striking example, as does Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal."

Conceit- an ingenious and fanciful notion or conception, usually expressed through an elaborate analogy, and pointing to a striking parallel between two seemingly dissimilar things. A conceit may be a brief metaphor, but it also may form the framework of an entire poem. A famous example of a conceit occurs in John Donne's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," in which he compares his soul and his wife's to legs of a mathematical compass.

Conflict - A struggle between opposing forces in a story or play, usually resolved by the end of the work. The conflict may occur within a character as well as between characters. Lady Gregory's one-act play *The Rising of the Moon* exemplifies both types of conflict as the Policeman wrestles with his conscience in an inner conflict and confronts an antagonist in the person of the ballad singer.

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Connotation - The associations called up by a word that goes beyond its dictionary meaning. Poets, especially, tend to use words rich in connotation. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" includes intensely connotative language, as in these lines: "Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright / Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay, / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Convention - A customary feature of a literary work, such as the use of a chorus in Greek tragedy, the inclusion of an explicit moral in a fable, or the use of a particular rhyme scheme in a villanelle. Literary conventions are defining features of particular literary genres, such as novel, short story, ballad, sonnet, and play.

Couplet - A pair of rhymed lines that may or may not constitute a separate stanza in a poem. Shakespeare's sonnets end in rhymed couplets, as in "For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

Dactyl - A stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones, as in FLUT-ter-ing or BLUE-ber-ry. The following playful lines illustrate double dactyls, two dactyls per line:

Higgledy, piggledey,
Emily Dickinson
Gibbering, jabbering.

Denotation - The dictionary meaning of a word. Writers typically play off a word's denotative meaning against its connotations, or suggested and implied associational implications. In the following lines from Peter Meinke's "Advice to My Son" the references to flowers and fruit, bread and wine denote specific things, but also suggest something beyond the literal, dictionary meanings of the words:

To be specific, between the peony and rose
Plant squash and spinach, turnips and tomatoes;
Beauty is nectar and nectar, in a desert, saves--
and always serve bread with your wine.
But, son,
always serve wine.

Denouement - The resolution of the plot of a literary work. The denouement of Hamlet takes place after the catastrophe, with the stage littered with corpses. During the denouement Fortinbras makes an entrance and a speech, and Horatio speaks his sweet lines in praise of Hamlet.

Dialogue - The conversation of characters in a literary work. In fiction, dialogue is typically enclosed within quotation marks. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names.

Diction - The selection of words in a literary work. A work's diction forms one of its centrally important literary elements, as writers use words to convey action, reveal character, imply attitudes, identify themes, and suggest values. We can speak of the diction particular to a character, as in Iago's and Desdemona's very different ways of speaking in Othello. We can also refer to a poet's diction as represented over the body of his or her work, as in Donne's or Hughes's diction.

Elegy - A lyric poem that laments the dead. Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" is elegiac in tone. A more explicitly identified elegy is W.H. Auden's "In Memory of William Butler Yeats" and his "Funeral Blues."

Elision - The omission of an unstressed vowel or syllable to preserve the meter of a line of poetry. Alexander uses elision in "Sound and Sense": "Flies o'er th' unbending corn...."

Enjambment - A run-on line of poetry in which logical and grammatical sense carries over from one line into the next. An enjambed line differs from an end-stopped line in which the grammatical and logical sense is completed within the line. In the opening lines of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," for example, the first line is end-stopped and the second enjambed:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now....

Epic - A long narrative poem that records the adventures of a hero. Epics typically chronicle the origins of a civilization and embody its central values. Examples from western literature include Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid, and Milton's Paradise Lost.

Epigram - A brief witty poem, often satirical. Alexander Pope's "Epigram Engraved on the Collar of a Dog" exemplifies the genre:

I am his Highness' dog at Kew;
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

Exposition - The first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot, in which necessary background information is provided. Ibsen's A Doll's House, for instance, begins with a conversation between the two central characters, a dialogue that fills the audience in on events that occurred before the action of the play begins, but which are important in the development of its plot.

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Falling action - In the plot of a story or play, the action following the climax of the work that moves it towards its denouement or resolution. The falling action of Othello begins after Othello realizes that Iago is responsible for plotting against him by spurring him on to murder his wife, Desdemona.

Falling meter- Poetic meters such as trochaic and dactylic that move or fall from a stressed to an unstressed syllable. The nonsense line, "Higgledy, piggledy," is dactylic, with the accent on the first syllable and the two syllables following falling off from that accent in each word. Trochaic meter is represented by this line: "Hip-hop, be-bop, treetop--freedom."

Figurative language - A form of language use in which writers and speakers convey something other than the literal meaning of their words. Examples include hyperbole or exaggeration, litotes or understatement, simile and metaphor, which employ comparison, and synecdoche and metonymy, in which a part of a thing stands for the whole.

Flashback - An interruption of a work's chronology to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time frame of a work's action. Writers use flashbacks to complicate the sense of chronology in the plot of their works and to convey the richness of the experience of human time. Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" includes flashbacks.

Foil - A character who contrasts and parallels the main character in a play or story. Laertes, in Hamlet, is a foil for the main character; in Othello, Emilia and Bianca are foils for Desdemona.

Foot - A metrical unit composed of stressed and unstressed syllables. For example, an iamb or iambic foot is represented by "i", that is, an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. Frost's line "Whose woods these are I think I know" contains four iambs, and is thus an iambic foot.

Free verse - Poetry without a regular pattern of meter or rhyme. The verse is "free" in not being bound by earlier poetic conventions requiring poems to adhere to an explicit and identifiable meter and rhyme scheme in a form such as the sonnet or ballad. Modern and contemporary poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries often employ free verse. Williams's "This Is Just to Say" is one of many examples.

Hyperbole - A figure of speech involving exaggeration. John Donne uses hyperbole in his poem: "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star."

Iamb - An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, as in to-DAY. See Foot.

Image - A concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea. Imagery refers to the pattern of related details in a work. In some works one image predominates either by recurring throughout the work or by appearing at a critical point in the plot. Often writers use multiple images throughout a work to suggest states of feeling and to convey implications of thought and action. Some modern poets, such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, write poems that lack discursive explanation entirely and include only images. Among the most famous examples is Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Imagery- The pattern of related comparative aspects of language, particularly of images, in a literary work. Imagery of light and darkness pervade James Joyce's stories "Araby," "The Boarding House," and "The Dead." So, too, does religious imagery.

Literal Language- A form of language in which writers and speakers mean exactly what their words denote. See Figurative language, Denotation, and Connotation.

Lyric poem - A type of poem characterized by brevity, compression, and the expression of feeling. Most of the poems in this book are lyrics. The anonymous "Western Wind" epitomizes the genre:

Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again!

Metaphor- A comparison between essentially unlike things without an explicitly comparative word such as like or as. An example is "My love is a red, red rose,"

From Burns's "A Red, Red Rose." Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" is built entirely of metaphors. Metaphor is one of the most important of literary uses of language. Shakespeare employs a wide range of metaphor in his sonnets and his plays, often in such density and profusion that readers are kept busy analyzing and interpreting and unraveling them. Compare Simile.

Meter- The measured pattern of rhythmic accents in poems. See Foot and Iamb.

Metonymy - A figure of speech in which a closely related term is substituted for an object or idea. An example: "We have always remained loyal to the crown." See Synecdoche.

Narrative poem - A poem that tells a story. See Ballad.

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Narrator - The voice and implied speaker of a fictional work, to be distinguished from the actual living author. For example, the narrator of Joyce's "Araby" is not James Joyce himself, but a literary fictional character created expressly to tell the story. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" contains a communal narrator, identified only as "we." See Point of view.

Octave - An eight-line unit, which may constitute a stanza; or a section of a poem, as in the octave of a sonnet.

Ode - A long, stately poem in stanzas of varied length, meter, and form. Usually a serious poem on an exalted subject, such as Horace's "Eheu fugaces," but sometimes a more lighthearted work, such as Neruda's "Ode to My Socks."

Onomatopoeia - The use of words to imitate the sounds they describe. Words such as buzz and crack are onomatopoeic. The following line from Pope's "Sound and Sense" onomatopoeically imitates in sound what it describes:

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow.

Most often, however, onomatopoeia refers to words and groups of words, such as Tennyson's description of the "murmur of innumerable bees," which attempts to capture the sound of a swarm of bees buzzing.

Open form - A type of structure or form in poetry characterized by freedom from regularity and consistency in such elements as rhyme, line length, metrical pattern, and overall poetic structure. E.E. Cummings's "[Buffalo Bill's]" is one example. See also Free verse.

Parody - A humorous, mocking imitation of a literary work, sometimes sarcastic, but often playful and even respectful in its playful imitation. Examples include Bob McKenty's parody of Frost's "Dust of Snow" and Kenneth Koch's parody of Williams's "This is Just to Say."

Personification - The endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities. An example: "The yellow leaves flaunted their color gaily in the breeze." Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" includes personification.

Plot - The unified structure of incidents in a literary work. See Conflict, Climax, Denouement, and Flashback.

Point of view - The angle of vision from which a story is narrated. See Narrator. A work's point of view can be: first person, in which the narrator is a character

or an observer, respectively; objective, in which the narrator knows or appears to know no more than the reader; omniscient, in which the narrator knows everything about the characters; and limited omniscient, which allows the narrator to know some things about the characters but not everything.

Protagonist - The main character of a literary work--Hamlet and Othello in the plays named after them, Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Paul in Lawrence's "Rocking-Horse Winner."

Pyrrhic - A metrical foot with two unstressed syllables ("of the").

Quatrain - A four-line stanza in a poem, the first four lines and the second four lines in a Petrarchan sonnet. A Shakespearean sonnet contains three quatrains followed by a couplet.

Recognition - The point at which a character understands his or her situation as it really is. Sophocles' Oedipus comes to this point near the end of Oedipus the King; Othello comes to a similar understanding of his situation in Act V of Othello.

Resolution - The sorting out or unraveling of a plot at the end of a play, novel, or story. See Plot.

Reversal - The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the protagonist. Oedipus's and Othello's recognitions are also reversals. They learn what they did not expect to learn. See Recognition and also Irony.

Rhyme - The matching of final vowel or consonant sounds in two or more words. The following stanza of "Richard Cory" employs alternate rhyme, with the third line rhyming with the first and the fourth with the second:

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him;
He was a gentleman from sole to crown
Clean favored and imperially slim.

Rhythm - The recurrence of accent or stress in lines of verse. In the following lines from "Same in Blues" by Langston Hughes, the accented words and syllables are underlined:

I said to my baby,
Baby take it slow...
Lulu said to Leonard
I want a diamond ring

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Rising action - A set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a play's or story's plot leading up to the climax. See Climax, Denouement, and Plot.

Rising meter - Poetic meters such as iambic and anapestic that move or ascend from an unstressed to a stressed syllable. See Anapest, Iamb, and Falling meter.

Satire - A literary work that criticizes human misconduct and ridicules vices, stupidities, and follies. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a famous example. Chekhov's *Marriage Proposal* and O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," have strong satirical elements.

Scansion- a system for describing the meter of a poem by identifying the number and the type(s) of feet per line. Following are the most common types of meter:

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|------------|---------------------|
| monometer | one foot per line |
| dimeter | two feet per line |
| trimeter | three feet per line |
| tetrameter | four feet per line |
| pentameter | five feet per line |
| hexameter | six feet per line |
| heptameter | seven feet per line |
| octameter | eight feet per line |

Using these terms, then, a line consisting of five iambic feet is called "iambic pentameter," while a line consisting of four anapestic feet is called "anapestic tetrameter."

In order to determine the meter of a poem, the lines are "scanned," or marked to indicate stressed and unstressed syllables which are then divided into feet. The following line has been scanned:

u / u / u / u / u /
And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep

Sestet - A six-line unit of verse constituting a stanza or section of a poem; the last six lines of an Italian sonnet. Examples: Petrarch's "If it is not love, then what is it that I feel," and Frost's "Design."

Sestina - A poem of thirty-nine lines and written in iambic pentameter. Its six-line stanza repeat in an intricate and prescribed order the final word in each of the first six lines. After the sixth stanza, there is a three-line envoi, which uses the six repeating words, two per line.

Setting - The time and place of a literary work that establish its context. The stories of Sandra Cisneros are set in the American southwest in the mid to late 20th century, those of James Joyce in Dublin, Ireland in the early 20th century.

Simile - A figure of speech involving a comparison between unlike things using like, as, or as though. An example: "My love is like a red, red rose."

Sonnet - A fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter. The Shakespearean or English sonnet is arranged as three quatrains and a final couplet, rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*. The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet divides into two parts: an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet, rhyming *abba abba cde cde* or *abba abba cd cd cd*.

Spondee - A metrical foot represented by two stressed syllables, such as KNICK-KNACK.

Stanza - A division or unit of a poem that is repeated in the same form--either with similar or identical patterns or rhyme and meter, or with variations from one stanza to another. The stanzas of Gertrude Schnackenberg's "Signs" are regular; those of Rita Dove's "Canary" are irregular.

Style - The way an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences or in lines of dialogue or verse, and develops ideas and actions with description, imagery, and other literary techniques. See Connotation, Denotation, Diction, Figurative language, Image, Imagery, Irony, Metaphor, Narrator, Point of view, Syntax, and Tone.

Subject - What a story or play is about; to be distinguished from plot and theme. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is about the decline of a particular way of life endemic to the American south before the civil war. Its plot concerns how Faulkner describes and organizes the actions of the story's characters. Its theme is the overall meaning Faulkner conveys.

Subplot - A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel plot in a play or story that coexists with the main plot. The story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forms a subplot with the overall plot of Hamlet.

Symbol - An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself. The glass unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie*, the rocking horse in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the road in Frost's "The Road Not Taken"--all are symbols in this sense.

Synecdoche - A figure of speech in which a part is substituted for the whole. An example: "Lend me a hand." See Metonymy.

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Syntax - The grammatical order of words in a sentence or line of verse or dialogue. The organization of words and phrases and clauses in sentences of prose, verse, and dialogue. In the following example, normal syntax (subject, verb, object order) is inverted:

"Whose woods these are I think I know."

Tercet - A three-line stanza, as the stanzas in Frost's "Acquainted With the Night" and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." The three-line stanzas or sections that together constitute the sestet of a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet.

Theme - The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. See discussion of Dickinson's "Crumbling is not an instant's Act."

Tone - The implied attitude of a writer toward the subject and characters of a work, as, for example, Flannery O'Connor's ironic tone in her "Good Country People." See Irony.

Trochee - An accented syllable followed by an unaccented one, as in FOOT-ball.

Understatement - A figure of speech in which a writer or speaker says less than what he or she means; the opposite of exaggeration. The last line of Frost's "Birches" illustrates this literary device: "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches." (Also MEIOSIS.)

Villanelle - A nineteen-line lyric poem that relies heavily on repetition. The first and third lines alternate throughout the poem, which is structured in six stanzas --five tercets and a concluding quatrain. Examples include Bishop's "One Art," Roethke's "The Waking," and Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."