

Literary Terms & Concepts

Alliteration: The repetition of sounds, especially consonant sounds, within a passage of prose or verse. The repetition of vowel sounds is sometimes distinguished from alliteration and called assonance. *Consonance* is a kind of alliteration in which a similar sequence of consonants is varied by a changing vowel sound, as in "top, tap, tip."

Allusion: A reference in one literary work to a character or theme found in another literary work. T. S. Eliot, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" alludes (refers) to the biblical figure John the Baptist in the line *Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter, . . .* In the New Testament, John the Baptist's head was presented to King Herod on a platter.

Antithesis: Opposition, contrast: the direct opposite; the second stage of a dialectic process.

Apostrophe: A figure of speech wherein the speaker speaks directly to something nonhuman. In these lines from John Donne's poem "The Sun Rising" the poet scolds the sun for interrupting his nighttime activities:

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?

Assonance: Repetition of the same sound in words close to each other.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

Blank Verse: The technical name for unrhymed [iambic pentameter](#) -- i.e., verse of five feet per line, with the stress on the second beat of each foot. It's one of the most common kinds of verse in English: many passages of Shakespeare's plays are in blank verse, as is Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

cacophony: Harsh, discordant sounds. (finger of *birth-strangled* babe)

Caesura: A pause somewhere in the middle of a verse. Some lines have strong (easily recognizable) caesurae, which usually coincide with punctuation in the line, while others have weak ones

Alas how changed! || What sudden horrors rise!
A naked lover || bound and bleeding lies!

Conceit: An elaborate, usually intellectually ingenious poetic comparison or image, such as an analogy or metaphor in which, say a beloved is compared to a ship, planet, etc. The comparison may be brief or extended. See **Petrarchan Conceit**. (Conceit is an old word for concept.) See John Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," for example: "Let man's soul be a sphere, and then, in this, / The Intelligence that moves, devotion is."

Denotation: The denotation of a word is its dictionary definition. The word **wall**, therefore, denotes an upright structure which encloses something or serves as a boundary

Diction: An author's choice of words. Since words have specific meanings, and since one's choice of words can affect feelings, a writer's choice of words can have great impact in a literary work.

Dramatic Monologue: In literature, the occurrence of a single speaker saying something to a silent audience. Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" is an example wherein the duke, speaking to a non-responding representative of the family of a prospective new duchess, reveals not only the reasons for his disapproval of the behavior of his former duchess, but aspects of his own personality as well.

Couplet: A stanza of two lines, usually rhyming. The following by Andrew Marvell is an example of a rhymed couplet:

Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.

Enjambment: The effect achieved when the syntax of a line of verse transgresses the limits set by the metre at the end of the verse. Metre aims for the integrity of the single verse, whereas syntax will sometimes efface that integrity. Thus 'Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side/ As if a voice were in them, the sick sight/ And giddy prospect of the raving stream...' End-stopping is the alternative to enjambment.

Euphemism: A mild word or phrase which substitutes for another which would be undesirable because it is too direct, unpleasant, or offensive. The word "joint" is a euphemism for the word prison. "W. C." is a euphemism for bathroom.

Euphony: Soothing pleasant sounds. "O star (the fairest one in sight) "

Figure of Speech: An example of figurative language that states something that is not literally true in order to create an effect. Similes, metaphors and personification are figures of speech which are based on comparisons. Metonymy, synecdoche, synesthesia, apostrophe, oxymoron, and hyperbole are other figures of speech.

Free Verse: Most common in the twentieth century, but by no means unique to it -- has no fixed metrical feet, and often no fixed number of feet per verse.

Hubris: Exaggerated pride or self-confidence.

Hyperbole: Exaggeration for emphasis or for rhetorical effect.

Imagery: A word or group of words in a literary work which appeal to one or more of the senses: sight, taste, touch, hearing, and smell. The use of images serves to intensify the impact of the work. The following

example of imagery in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,"

When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table.

uses images of pain and sickness to describe the evening, which as an image itself represents society and the psychology of Prufrock, himself.

Inversion: A reversal of position, order, form, or relationship: as a (1) : a change in normal word order; *especially* : the placement of a verb before its subject.

Lyric: Short poem wherein the poet expresses an emotion or illuminates some life principle. Emily Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz-When I Died" is a lyric poem wherein the speaker, on a deathbed expecting death to appear in all its grandeur, encounters a common housefly instead.

Irony: Expression of something which is contrary to the intended meaning; the words say one thing but mean another.

Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man. Shakespeare,
Julius Caesar

Metaphor: Implied comparison achieved through a figurative use of words; the word is used not in its literal sense, but in one analogous to it.

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage.
Shakespeare, Macbeth

Meter: A regular patterned recurrence of light and heavy stresses in a line of verse. [For more see following.](#)

Metonymy: Substitution of one word for another which it suggests.

He is a man of the cloth.

Narrative: Poem which tells a story. Usually a long poem, sometimes even book length, the narrative may take the form of a plotless dialogue as in Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man." In other instances the narrative may consist of a series of incidents, as in Homer's "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," John Milton's "Paradise Lost."

Onomatopoeia: The use of words or sounds which appear to resemble the sounds which they describe. Some words are themselves onomatopoeic, such as "snap, crackle, pop."

Oxymoron: The juxtaposition of two contradictory ideas is oxymoron, from the Greek words for "sharp" and "foolish." Everybody's favorite

examples are facetious ("military intelligence"), but poets can often use oxymoron for striking effects (such as Milton's "darkness visible").

Paradox: An assertion seemingly opposed to common sense, but that may yet have some truth in it.

What a pity that youth must be wasted on the
young. George Bernard Shaw

Parallelism: Repeated syntactical similarities introduced for rhetorical effect.

Pathetic fallacy: Coined by John Ruskin in *Modern Painters*]. A phrase associated with the figure of speech personification, a pejorative comment on the inclination common among poets to attribute human qualities to nature: the spendthrift crocus; the cruel, crawling foam. The term 'pathetic' refers to the arousal of feeling, not to pity. Ruskin coined it to comment on 'the difference between the ordinary, proper, and true appearance of things to us; and the extraordinary, or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy'. He objected to such usage because, however attractive or dramatic it may be, it 'morbidly' imputes life and human intent to nature and is part of 'a falseness in all our impressions of external things'.

Persona: The voice or figure of the author who tells and structures the story and who may or may not share the values of the actual author.

Personification: Attribution of personality to an impersonal thing.

England expects every man to do his duty. Lord
Nelson

Point of View: A piece of literature contains a speaker who is speaking either in the first person, telling things from his or her own perspective, or in the third person, telling things from the perspective of an onlooker. The perspective used is called the Point of View, and is referred to either as first person or third person. If the speaker knows everything including the actions, motives, and thoughts of all the characters, the speaker is referred to as omniscient (all-knowing). If the speaker is unable to know what is in any character's mind but his or her own, this is called limited omniscience.

Pun: A play on words wherein a word is used to convey two meanings at the same time. The line below, spoken by Mercutio in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," is an example of a pun. Mercutio has just been stabbed, knows he is dying and says:

Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a **grave** man.

Mercutio's use of the word "grave" renders it capable of two meanings: a serious person or a corpse in his grave.

Rhyme: In poetry, a pattern of repeated sounds. In **end rhyme**, the rhyme is at the end of the line, as in these lines from "Ars Poetica" by Archibald MacLeish:

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb

When one of the rhyming words occurs in a place in the line other than at the end, it is called **Internal rhyme**. A rhyme is **masculine** when it occurs on a single stressed syllable, as in *sky/fly*, and **feminine** when it occurs with a rhyme in which the final syllable is unstressed, as in *feather/heather*.

Sarcasm: A form of verbal irony in which apparent praise is actually harshly or bitterly critical.

Setting: The total environment for the action of a fictional work. Setting includes time period (such as the 1890's), the place (such as downtown Warsaw), the historical milieu (such as during the Crimean War), as well as the social, political, and perhaps even spiritual realities. The setting is usually established primarily through description, though narration is used also.

Simile: An explicit comparison of two things, usually with the word "as" or "like." When you say "Reading D. H. Lawrence is like having teeth pulled," you liken one unpleasant experience to another.

Homer's epics employ *extended similes*, such as this passage from the *Iliad*:

As a mountain snake, who is maddened by the poisonous herbs
he has swallowed, allows a man to come up to the lair where
he lies coiled, and watches him with a baleful glitter in
his eye, Hector stood firm and unflinching.

Later epic poets have imitated this trait so often that such long similes are called "epic similes."

Soliloquy: The act of talking to oneself.

Stanza: A major subdivision in a poem. A stanza of two lines is called a couplet; a stanza of three lines is called a tercet; a stanza of four lines is called a quatrain. Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night," consists of four rhymed tercets followed by a rhymed couplet.

Symbol. Something that on the surface is its literal self but which also has another meaning or even several meanings. For example, a sword may be a sword and also symbolize justice. A symbol may be said to embody an idea. There are two general types of symbols: universal symbols that embody universally recognizable meanings wherever used, such as light to symbolize knowledge, a skull to symbolize death, etc.,

and constructed symbols that are given symbolic meaning by the way an author uses them in a literary work, as the white whale becomes a symbol of evil in Moby Dick.

Synecdoche: ("sin-EK-doh-kee") The rhetorical or metaphorical substitution of a *part* for the *whole*, or vice versa. Examples: when you refer to workers as "hands," you allow a part (the hand) to stand in for the whole (the person). Ditto in counting cattle as "heads."

Syntax: The way in which linguistic elements (as words) are put together to form constituents (as phrases or clauses); the part of grammar dealing with this; a connected or orderly system or harmonious arrangement of parts or elements; syntactics especially as dealing with the formal properties of languages.

Tone: The manner in which an author expresses his or her attitude; it is the intonation of voice which expresses meaning. Tone may shift from paragraph to paragraph, or even from line to line; it is the result of allusion, diction, figurative language, imagery, irony, motif, symbolism, syntax and style. (nostalgic, pedantic, didactic, sardonic, empathetic, wistful, imperious, supplicative, prideful)

Understatement: A statement which lessens or minimizes the importance of what is meant. For example, if one were in a desert where the temperature was 125 degrees, and if one were to describe thermal conditions saying "It's a little warm today." that would be an understatement. In Shakespeare's "Macbeth," Macbeth, having murdered his friend Banquo, understates the number of people who have been murdered since the beginning of time by saying "Blood hath been shed ere now."
The opposite is **hyperbole**.

Alliteration - the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words or within words

Assonance - repetition of vowel sounds - usually internal

Ballad - a narrative of unknown authorship; It often makes use of repetition and dialogue

Blank Verse - a type of poetry that is free from rhyme, but has a fixed form of meter

Cacophony - j, x, k, ch, g sounds

Caesura - a pause in verse, usually dictated by the sense of the line & often more than a normal pause

Consonance - the repetition of consonant sounds that are preceded by different vowel sounds

Couplet - a pair of rhyming lines with identical meter

Dactyl - a three-syllable metrical FOOT, consisting of one accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables, as in the word merrily

Diction - the author's choice of words or phrases in a literary work; this choice involves both the connotative and denotative meaning of a word as well as levels of usage

Dramatic Monologue - a LYRIC poem in which the speaker, usually at a critical moment in life, addresses someone whose replies are not recorded

Elegy - a solemn, reflective poem, usually about death, written in a formal style (ex. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is Walt Whitman's elegy written on the death of Abraham Lincoln)

End Rhyme - the rhyming of words at the ends of lines of poetry

End-Stopped Line - a line of poetry that contains a complete thought, thus necessitating the use of a semicolon or period at the end

Euphony - a combination of pleasing sounds in poetry or prose

Foot - in verse, a group of syllables usually consisting of one accented syllable and all unaccented syllables associated with it

Free Verse - a type of poetry that differs from conventional verse forms in being "free" from a fixed pattern of METER and RHYME, but uses RHYTHM and other poetic devices

Haiku - made up of seventeen Japanese characters, translated in English to seventeen syllables in three lines: 5, 7, 5. A haiku usually contains these elements: Commonplace world; a singular moment; contains a word that refers to a season or time; links an insight with nature; is in the physical world.

Iamb - a two-syllable metrical FOOT consisting of one unaccented syllable followed by one accented syllable, as in the word *decide*

Imagery - the sensory details that provide vividness in a literary work and tend to arouse emotions or feelings in a reader which abstract language does not

Internal Rhyme - rhyming words within lines which also may or may not rhyme at the end

Lyric - a poem, usually short, that expresses some basic emotion or state of mind; it usually creates a single impression and is highly personal; it may be rhymed or unrhymed

Metaphor - a figure of speech involving an implied comparison

Meter - the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry

Motif - a character, incident, or idea that recurs in various works or in various parts of the same work

Ode - a long LYRIC poem, formal in style and complex in form, often written in commemoration or celebration of a special occasion

Onomatopoeia - use of a word or words whose sounds imitate the sound of the thing spoken about. Words such as *hiss*, *mumble*, *mew* are onomatopoeic words

Paradox - a statement, often metaphorical, that seems to be self-contradictory but has valid meaning

Pentameter - a metrical line of five feet

Personification - giving human qualities or characterizations to ideas, animals, or inanimate

Prose Poem - writing set down as prose but having qualities associated with poetry

Quatrain - verse STANZA of four lines

Refrain - the repetition of one or more lines in each STANZA of a poem

Rhyme - exact repetition of sounds in at least the final accented syllable of two or more words

Rhyme Scheme - any pattern of rhyme in a STANZA

Rhythm - the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables in speech or writing

Run-On Line - a line in which the thought continues beyond the end of the poetic line

Simile - a figure of speech involving a comparison using like or as

Slant Rhyme - rhyme in which the vowel sounds are not quite identical, as in the first and third lines:

By the rude bridge that
arched the flood, (A)
their flag to April's breeze
unfurled, (B)
Here once the embattled
farmers stood (A)
And fired the shot heard
round the world. (B)
**- Emerson, "Concord
Hymn"**

Sonnet - a LYRIC poem with a traditional form of fourteen IAMBIC PENTAMETER lines and one of several fixed RHYME schemes

Stanza - a group of lines which are set off and form a division in a poem

Stream of Consciousness - the recording of a character's flow of thought without any attempt of explanation

Tetrameter - a metrical line of four feet

Trimeter - metrical line of three feet

Tanka - sometimes called waka, is a Japanese poetic form that dates from the early 7th century: 31 syllables in five lines, as follows: 5, 7, 5, 7, 7.

Trocheé - metrical foot made up of one accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable, as in the word púmpkin

Verse - in its most general sense, a synonym for poetry