

# 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-VE-NE*. 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."

## **Antagonist**

A character or force against which another character struggles. Creon is Antigone's antagonist in Sophocles' play *Antigone*; Teiresias is the antagonist of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

## **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.

### **Character**

An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change). In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona is a major character, but one who is static, like the minor character Bianca. Othello is a major character who is dynamic, exhibiting an ability to change.

### **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."

### **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.

### **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, piggedy,  
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.

### **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."

### **Fiction**

An imagined story, whether in prose, poetry, or drama. Ibsen's Nora is fictional, a "make-believe" character in a play, as are Hamlet and Othello. Characters like Robert Browning's Duke and Duchess from his poem "My Last Duchess" are fictional as well, though they may be based on actual historical individuals. And, of course, characters in stories and novels are fictional, though they, too, may be based, in some way, on real people. The important thing to remember is that writers embellish and embroider and alter actual life when they use real life as the basis for their work. They fictionalize facts, and deviate from real-life situations as they "make things up."

### **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.

### **Foreshadowing**

Hints of what is to come in the action of a play or a story. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* includes foreshadowing as does Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. So, too, do Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" and Chopin's "Story of an Hour."

### **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.

### **Irony**

A contrast or discrepancy between what is said and what is meant or between what happens and what is expected to happen in life and in literature. In verbal irony, characters say the opposite of what they mean. In irony of circumstance or situation, the opposite of what is expected occurs. In dramatic

irony, a character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or to the other characters. Flannery O'Connor's short stories employ all these forms of irony, as does Poe's "Cask of Amontillado."

### **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](#).

### **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

### **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.

### **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](#).

**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 "Crumbing 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."

**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."