

Poetry Terms

Aboutism: a school of poetry that believes that poems could be about something.

allegory: presents a literal surface behind which another level of meaning exists, e.g., an abstract meaning concealed behind a literal image, or a religious discourse is concealed behind a narrative about a pilgrimage. The best known example is *Pilgrim's Progress* where characters represent abstractions such as Faith, Truth, and Hope, and the journey itself represents life.

alliteration: repetition of initial consonant *sounds* in a sequence of words; repetition of interior consonants can add to the alliterative effect, e.g.

The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap (Robert Browning "Meeting at Night")

apostrophe: where the speaker of a poem addresses something non-human or abstract, or someone who has either died or is absent. See William Blake's "O Rose, thou art sick . . ." and Theodore Roethke's "Elegy for Jane: My Student Thrown by a Horse": "My sparrow, you are not here, . . ."

assonance: repetition of vowel *sounds*, e.g., "Robert Lowell's "mast-lashed master" and Shakespeare's "Time's scythe."

ballad: a short, simple narrative poem, anonymous, composed to be sung, originating in late medieval times, transmitted orally. The **ballad stanza** usually rhymes abcb. Stresses per line vary: 4-4-4-4, 4-3-4-3, 3-3-4-3, 3-3-3-3.

"How come that blood on your shirt sleeve
My son come telling to me?"
" It is the blood of the old gray mare
That pulled the plow for me." ("Edward")

blank verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo

Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.

("Sunday Morning," Wallace Stevens)

caesura: a pause or break in the middle of a line: "To be or to be – that is the question."

closure: an effect of completion, of resolution, and of stability that occurs at the end of a poem.

concrete poetry: letters, syllables, words are organised in such a way that their visual effect is as prominent as their semantic effect.

The Coffin and the Bed by Guillaume Apollinaire

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LONG LIVE FRANCE!
HE SLEEPS IN HIS LI
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couplet: two lines of verse -- usually rhyming -- that form a unit, e.g. "Instruct the planets in what orbs to run, / Correct old Time, and regulate the Sun" (Pope).

dramatic poetry: poetry, monologue, or dialogue written in the voice of a character or persona assumed by the poet, e.g. "My Last Duchess" (Browning) and "The Cremation of Sam McGee" (Service).

elegy: lament for a dead person, e.g. “Lycidas” (Milton).

end-rhyme: repetition of the same sounds at the ends of lines, e.g. Emily Dickinson’s

The Soul has Bandaged moments—
When to appalled to *stir*—
She feels some ghastly Fright come up
And stop to look at *her*—

enjambment: a line with no end punctuation that runs-on into the next line in order to complete its meaning, e.g. “Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments” (Shakespeare, Sonnet 106). Often two meanings will be created, e.g. between lines three and four below, line four transforms the image of flowers produced by the lines before it:

'a field of
 buttercups'

yellow stars
 of David
 falling (Phyllis Webb, “Treblinka Gas Chamber”)

epic poetry: a long narrative poem on a serious subject, e.g. Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

eye-rhyme: lines of poetry that end in words that are pronounced differently but spelled in the same way, e.g. “Many times man lives and dies / Between his two eternities” (Yeats).

feminine rhyme: in the rhyming words, a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable, e.g. “Art in intention is mimesis / But, realised, the resemblance ceases” (Auden).

foot: see *meter*.

free verse: A form that does not follow the rules for metrical verse. Instead its sound patterning is based on cadence or the musical rhythms of speech. Careful symmetries of sound are composed by the poet in accordance with the purpose of the immediate poem.

half rhyme/pararhyme: typical end-rhyme consists of a similarity between the vowel sounds and the final consonant (meet/seat). With half rhyme/pararhyme the vowel sounds differ while the consonants remain similar:

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

I parried; but my hands were loath and cold. (Wilfred Owen)

image: the representation of a particular thing: “petals on a wet black bough” (Ezra Pound). An image can also take the form of a simile or metaphor: “Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall/She walks by the railing of a path in Kensington Gardens” (Ezra Pound). An image may appeal to any of the senses, not only the visual sense.

Imagism: a movement that flourished between 1912 and 1917 initially in England and then also in America. Ezra Pound was a first leader of the movement followed by Amy Lowell. T.E. Hulme’s theory of poetry helped shape the movement that was formed in reaction against sentimental unskilled poetry. It favoured the use of natural language, of rhythm chosen to match the content of the individual poem, and of a strong concentrated image. Ezra Pound’s definition of Imagism: “An intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd,
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Ezra Pound)

internal rhyme: rhymes that occur within the line, e.g. “Who shall *say* of the wind’s *way*” (Swinburne).

irony: irony conceals what is really meant in such a way as to reveal it more effectively. It may employ either understatement or overstatement or state the opposite of what is intended, e.g. “For Brutus is an honorable man; / So are they all, all honourable men” (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*). The intended meaning, the irony, is that these men are in fact dishonourable.

language poetry: an experimental school of poetry that emphasizes language itself over referential content.

limerick: a popular comic verse form with two long and three short lines a a b b a. The form was popularized by Edward Lear in the 19th century.

A limerick packs laughs anatomical
Into space that is quite economical.
But the good ones I’ve seen
So seldom are clean,
And the clean ones so seldom are comical.

line: the defining feature of poetry; the one that distinguishes it from prose. The line is a rhythmical unit structured according to various principles. Metrical lines are organized into feet:

dimeter: a line consisting of two feet, e.g.,

When I / descend
Towards / their brink
I stand / and look,
And stoop / and drink . . . (Thomas Hardy, "The Robin.")

trimeter: a line consisting of three feet, e.g.,
Alone / he rides, / alone,
The fair / and fa / tal king: (Lionel Johnson)

Oh, but / it is / dirty!
--this lit / tle Fill / ing station (Elizabeth Bishop)

tetrameter: a line consisting of four feet, e.g.,
Tyger! / Tyger! / burning / bright
In the / forests / of the / night. (William Blake)

pentameter: a line consisting of five feet, e.g.,
I work / all day / and get / half-drunk / at night (Larkin)

hexameter: a line consisting of six feet, e.g.,
This is the / forest pri / meval. The / murmuring / pines and the / hemlocks
(Longfellow)

long poem: includes epics and narrative poems such as Homer's *Odyssey* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Famous modern long poems include Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* (1855) and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1925-72). Because of the lack of unified values in modern society, it is difficult for a modern long poem to speak in a single narrative for a single culture in the way that earlier long poems were able to do. It therefore attempts to synthesize the various voices and details of culture often using fragmentary materials including letters, songs, notes, dreams, journals, etc.

lyric poetry: a poem composed to be sung or at least capable of being sung, expressing the personal emotion of the one voicing it.

masculine rhyme: where the rhyming words at the ends of lines have one stressed syllable, e.g. "he that first invented thee, / May his joynts tormented bee" (Ben Jonson).

metaphor: figurative language that sees a similarity between things: "The moon was a ghostly galleon" or "the crumpled ticket of your prayers" (R. S. Thomas).

meter: the regular recurrence of stresses or syllables in a line of poetry. Each unit of recurrence is called a "foot." There are five types of metrical feet:

anapestic: Two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed, as in "Tennessee."

dactylic: a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables, as in “Leningrad.”

iambic: an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, as in “New York.”

spondaic: Two successive syllables with approximately equal strong stresses, as in “draw back.”

trochaic: A stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, as in “London.”

metonymy: the figure of speech in which the name of one thing is used to refer to something associated with it, e.g. the pen is mightier than the sword. Metonymy works by association.

onomatopoeia: the use of words that imitate the sound of a thing, e.g. “The moan of doves in immemorial elms, / And murmuring of innumerable bees” (Tennyson).

persona: the first-person speaker of a poem, often an adopted character, e.g. the Duke who tells the emissary about his former wife in Browning “My Last Duchess.”

personification: where an inanimate object or abstract concept is spoken of as though it had human qualities, e.g. “Sky lowered, and muttering thunder, some sad drops / Wept at completing of the mortal sin” (Milton).

prosody: the principles relating to the structure of poetry.

quatrain: a four-line stanza.

sestina: an elaborate poetic form consisting of six stanzas of six lines each and a final tercet. It is usually unrhymed but the end words of the first stanza dictate a pattern almost more demanding than a rhyme scheme. The numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 refer to the end word of stanza one; the end words of the six stanzas must adhere to this pattern:

1,2,3,4,5,6
6,1,5,2,4,3
3,6,4,1,2,5
5,3,2,6,1,4
4,5,1,3,6,2
2,4,6,5,3,1

The tercet must use end words 5,3,1 and 2,4,6 must be used either at the start or in the middle of the lines.

simile: like metaphor, two things are compared but the comparison is identified by the words “like” or “as”: “Their monument sticks like a fishbone / in the city’s throat” (Robert Lowell).

sonnet: a poem of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter often divided into an octet and a sestet with a prescribed rhyme scheme. Variations occur from one sonnet type to another: the Petrarchan, the Shakespearean, the Spenserian, the Miltonic, and less regular modern sonnets.

speaker: like persona, the first-person speaker of the poem.

Sprung Rhythm: a term coined by Gerard Manley Hopkins to describe his metrical innovation where the line is measured by the number of stresses, each coinciding with the natural speech stress. The resulting line seems abrupt compared to the more traditional flowing metrical line. Stresses crowd in on each other: “The heart rears wings bold and bolder.”

stanza: lines of poetry grouped into a pattern that is often repeated. Different stanza forms are recognized by their number of lines, their meter, or their rhyme scheme.

stress: see *meter*.

symbol: a figure of speech where something material means, by way of association or suggestion, something else. Symbols tend to derive their meaning from the cultural conventions within which they occur. For example, fruit, especially the apple, symbolizes temptation in Christian and Jewish cultures. A symbol used in mathematics has a precise and defined meaning. In poetry, a symbol produces a larger more indefinite sense of meaning and feeling.

symbolism: a late 19th century movement in France that explored the large indefiniteness of the use of the symbol.

tercet / triplet: the terms are used interchangeably to refer to three lines of poetry that form a group or a stanza. Triplets, however, are more likely to share the same rhyme.

villanelle: a French poetic form consisting of nineteen lines with two rhymes in six stanzas:

Mad Girl's Love Song

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you'd return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head.) (Sylvia Plath)

The first five stanzas are tercets; the final stanza is a quatrain. The first and third line of the opening tercet becomes the final line of the other stanzas. The first line is used to end the second and fourth tercets, and the third line is used to end the third and fifth tercets. In the final stanza, these two lines become the final two lines of the quatrain.

For further information refer to the following texts in the Writing Centre:

Packard, William. *The Poet's Dictionary: A Handbook of Prosody and Poetic Devices*.

New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

Preminger, Alex, and T.V.F. Brogan, eds. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.