

Literary/Poetic Terms

allegory: a narration or description usually restricted to a single meaning because its events, actions, characters, settings, and objects represent specific abstractions or ideas.

alliteration: the repetition of the same consonant sounds at the beginnings of nearby words.

allusion: a brief reference to a person, place, thing, event, or idea in history or literature.

anagrams: words made from the letters of other words, such as *read* and *dare*.

anapest: a foot of poetry going from two unstressed to one stressed syllables.

apostrophe: a rhetorical figure in which the speaker addresses either someone who is absent and therefore cannot hear the speaker or something that is nonhuman and cannot comprehend.

assonance: the repetition of the same vowel sound in nearby words.

ballad: a song transmitted orally from generation to generation, that tells a story and that eventually is written down. Typically, ballads are dramatic, condensed, and impersonal narratives.

ballad stanza: a four-line stanza, known as a quatrain, consisting of alternating eight- and six-syllable lines. Usually only the second and fourth lines rhyme (an *abcb* pattern).

blank verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter.

carpe diem: Latin phrase meaning “seize the day.” A common literary theme (especially in lyric poetry) that emphasizes the shortness of life, and suggests that one should make the most of present pleasures.

caesura: a pause within a line of poetry.

clichés: ideas or expressions that have become trite and tired from overuse.

colloquially: in a conversational manner that may include using slang expressions not used by the culture at large.

connotations: associations and implications that go beyond a word’s literal meanings and are based on context.

consonance: an identical consonant sound preceded by a different vowel sound (e.g., *home, same; worth, breath; trophy, daffy*).

controlling metaphor: runs through an entire work and determines the form or nature of that work.

conventional symbol: something that is recognized by many people to represent certain ideas (e.g., roses, laurels, spring, the moon, etc.).

cosmic irony: a writer uses God, destiny, or fate to dash the hopes and expectations of a character or of humankind in general.

couplet: two lines that usually rhyme and have the same meter.

dactyl: a foot of poetry going from one stressed to two unstressed syllables.

denotations: literal, dictionary meanings of a word.

dialect: a type of informal diction that is spoken by definable groups of people from a particular geographic region, economic group, or social class.

diction: choice of words.

didactic poetry: poetry designed to teach an ethical, moral, or religious lesson.

dimeter: line containing two metrical feet.

doggerel: lines whose subject matter is trite and whose rhythm and sounds are monotonously heavy-handed.

dramatic irony: a discrepancy between what a character believes or says and what the reader or audience member knows to be true.

dramatic monologue: a type of poem in which a character (the speaker) addresses a silent audience in such a way as to reveal unintentionally some aspect of his or her temperament or personality.

elegy: a mournful, contemplative lyric poem written to commemorate someone who is dead, often ending in a consolation. May also refer to a serious meditative poem produced to express the speaker's melancholy thoughts.

end rhyme: rhyme that comes at the end of lines.

end-stopped line: a line that ends with a pause.

English (Shakespearean) sonnet: organized into three quatrains and a couplet, rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*.

enjambment: running over from one line to another.

epic: a long narrative poem on a serious subject chronicling heroic deeds and important events.

epigram: a brief, pointed, and witty poem that takes no prescribed form. They usually rhyme and are typically polished bits of compressed irony, satire, or paradox.

extended metaphor: a sustained comparison in which part or all of a poem consists of a series of related metaphors.

eye rhyme: spellings of words are similar, but the pronunciations are different (e.g., *bough* and *cough*, or *brow* and *blow*).

exact rhymes: share the same stressed vowel sounds, as well as any sounds that follow the vowel.

falling meters: move from stressed to unstressed sounds (trochaic and dactylic).

feminine ending: a line that ends with an unstressed syllable.

feminine rhyme: a rhymed stressed syllable followed by one or more rhymed unstressed syllables (e.g., *butter*, *clutter*, *gratitude*, *attitude*, *quivering*, *shivering*).

figures of speech: a way of saying one thing in terms of something else. Ways of using language that deviate from the literal, denotative meanings of words in order to suggest additional meanings or effects.

fixed form: a poem that follows a prescribed model.

foot: the metrical unit by which a line of poetry is measured. A foot usually consists of one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables.

form: the overall structure or shape of a poem.

formal diction: dignified, impersonal, and elevated use of language.

found poem: an unintentional poem discovered in a nonpoetic context, such as a conversation, news story, or an advertisement.

free verse (*vers libre*): Also called open form poetry, characterized by nonconformity to established patterns of meter, rhyme, and stanza. Uses elements such as speech patterns, grammar, emphasis, and breath pauses to decide line breaks, and usually does not rhyme.

haiku: style of lyric poetry borrowed from the Japanese that typically presents an intense emotion or vivid image of nature, which, traditionally, is designed to lead to a spiritual

insight. Consists of seventeen syllables organized into three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables.

heptameter: line containing seven metrical feet.

heroic couplet: a couplet using rhymed iambic pentameter.

hexameter: line containing six metrical feet.

iambic: a foot of poetry going from one unstressed to one stressed syllable; the most common meter in English poetry.

image: a word, phrase, or figure of speech (esp. a simile or metaphor) that addresses the senses, suggesting mental pictures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, or actions.

implied metaphor: a subtle comparison in which the terms being compared are not specifically explained.

informal diction: represents the plain language of everyday use, and often includes idiomatic expressions, slang, contractions, and many simple, common words.

internal rhyme: places at least one of the rhymed words within the line.

irony: a literary device that uses contradictory statements or situations to reveal a reality different from what appears to be true.

Italian sonnet (Petrarchan sonnet): a sonnet divided into two parts. The first eight lines (the octave) rhyme *abbaabba*, and the final six lines (the sestet) may vary, such as *cdecde*, *cdcdcd*, and *cdccdc*. Very often the octave presents a situation, attitude, or problem that the sestet comments upon or resolves.

jargon: a category of language defined by a trade or profession.

limerick: a light, humorous style of fixed form poetry. Usually consists of five lines with the rhyme scheme *aabba*; lines 1, 2, and 5 contain three feet, while lines 3 and 4 usually contain two feet. Range in subject matter from the silly to the obscene.

line: a sequence of words printed as a separate entity on the page. In poetry, lines are usually measured by the number of feet they contain.

literary ballad: a narrative poem that is written in deliberate imitation of the language, form, and spirit of the traditional ballad.

literary or contextual symbol: a setting, character, action, object, name, or anything else in a work that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meanings.

lyric: a common type of poem that expresses that personal emotions and thoughts of a single speaker. Often written in first person, but sometimes no speaker is specified. Presents a subjective mood, emotion, or idea. Very often, but not always, about love or death.

masculine ending: a line that ends with a stressed syllable.

masculine rhyme: the rhyming of single-syllable words.

metaphor: like a simile, makes a comparison between two unlike things, but does so implicitly, without words such as *like* or *as*.

meter: the rhythmic pattern of stresses recurring in a poem.

metonymy: something closely associated with a subject is substituted for it.

middle diction: language used by most educated people.

monometer: line of one metrical foot.

narrative poem: a poem that tells a story; may be short or very long.

near rhyme (off rhyme, slant rhyme, or approximate rhyme): the sounds are almost but not exactly alike.

octameter: line containing eight metrical feet.

ode: a relatively lengthy lyric poem that often expresses lofty emotions in a dignified style. Odes are characterized by a serious topic, such as truth, art, freedom, justice, or the meaning of life; their tone tends to be formal. There is no prescribed pattern that defines an ode.

onomatopoeia: the use of a word that resembles the sound it denotes (e.g., quack, buzz, rattle, bang, squeak, bowwow, burp, choo-choo, etc.).

open form: another way of saying *free verse*.

overstatement/hyperbole: exaggeration or overstatement used for an effect.

oxymoron: a condensed form of paradox in which two contradictory words are used together (e.g., military intelligence, government efficiency, etc.).

paradox: a statement that initially appears to be self-contradictory, but that on closer inspection turns out to make sense.

paraphrase: a prose restatement of the central idea(s) of a poem in your own language.

parody: a humorous imitation of another, usually serious, work. It can take any fixed or open form, because parodists imitate the tone, language, and shape of the original in order to deflate the subject matter, making the original work seem absurd. Parody may also be used as a form of literary criticism to expose the defects of a work.

pentameter: line containing five metrical feet.

persona: a speaker created by the poet.

personification: the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things.

picture poem: a type of open form poetry in which the poet arranges the lines of the poem so as to create a particular shape on the page. The shape of the poem embodies its subject; the poem becomes a picture of what the poem is describing.

poetic diction: the use of elevated language over ordinary language.

prosody: all the metrical elements in a poem taken together.

pun: a play on words that relies on a word having more than one meaning or sounding like another word.

quatrain: four-line stanza, the most common stanzaic form in the English language, and can have various meters and rhyme schemes.

rhyme: two or more words or phrases that repeat the same sounds.

rhyme scheme: the pattern of end rhymes.

rhythm: the recurrence of stressed and unstressed sounds.

rising meters: move from unstressed to stressed sounds (iambic and anapestic).

run-on line: a line that ends without a pause and continues into the next line for its meaning.

satire: the literary art of ridiculing a folly or vice in order to expose or correct it.

scansion: measuring the stresses in a line to determine its metrical pattern.

sentimentality: exploits the reader by inducing responses that exceed what the situation warrants.

sestina: consists of thirty-nine lines of any length divided into six, six-line stanzas and a three-line concluding stanza called an **envoy**. The six words at the ends of the first

stanza's lines are repeated at the ends of the lines in the other five, six-line stanzas as well.

simile: makes an explicit comparison between two things by using words such as *like, as, than, appears, or seems*.

situational irony: an incongruity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens due to forces beyond human comprehension or control.

sonnet: a fixed form of lyric poetry that consists of fourteen lines, usually written in iambic pentameter, with varying rhyme schemes.

speaker: the voice used by the author in the poem. Often a created identity rather than the author's actual self.

spondee: a foot of poetry comprising two stressed syllables, and used for variety or emphasis.

stanza: a grouping of lines, set off by a space, that usually has a set pattern of meter and rhyme.

stock responses: predictable, conventional reactions to language, characters, symbols, or situations (e.g., God, heaven, the flag, motherhood, hearts, puppies, and peace).

stress (or accent): places more emphasis on one syllable than on another.

symbol: something that represents something else.

synecdoche: a figure of speech in which part of something is used to signify the whole.

syntax: the ordering of words into meaningful verbal patterns.

tercet: a three-line stanza.

terza rima: an interlocking three-line rhyme scheme: *aba, bcb, cdc, ded*, etc.

tetrameter: line containing four metrical feet.

theme: a central idea or meaning.

tone: the author's attitude toward the subject; the mood created by all the elements in the poem.

trimeter: line containing three metrical feet.

triplet: when all three lines of a tercet rhyme.

trochee: a foot of poetry going from one stressed to one unstressed syllable.

understatement: the opposite of hyperbole; a figure of speech in which less is said than is intended.

verbal irony: a figure of speech that occurs when a person says one thing but means the opposite.

villanelle: form consisting of nineteen lines of any length divided into six stanzas: five tercets and a concluding quatrain. The first and third lines of the initial tercet rhyme; these rhymes are repeated in each subsequent tercet (*aba*) and in the final two lines of the quatrain (*abaa*). Line 1 appears in its entirety as lines 6, 12, and 18, while line 3 appears as lines 9, 15, and 19.