**Glossary of Poetic Terms**

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| **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."**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."**Ballad**A [narrative poem](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#narrative_poem) written in four-line [stanzas](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#stanza), 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](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#iamb). 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.**Couplet**A pair of rhymed lines that may or may not constitute a separate [stanza](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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, piggledy,Emily DickinsonGibbering, jabbering. **Denouement**The resolution of the [plot](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#plot) of a literary work. The denouement of *Hamlet* takes place after the [catastrophe](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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 callThat piece a wonder, now.... **Epic**A long [narrative poem](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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***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.**Foot**A [metrical](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#meter) unit composed of stressed and unstressed syllables. For example, an iamb or iambic foot is represented by ˘*'*, 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](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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*](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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. **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 armsAnd 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*](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#simile).**Meter**The measured pattern of rhythmic accents in poems. See [*Foot*](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#foot) and [*Iamb*](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#iamb).**Narrative poem**A poem that tells a story. See [*Ballad*](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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*](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#point_of_view).**Octave**An eight-line unit, which may constitute a [stanza](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#stanza); or a section of a poem, as in the octave of a [sonnet](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#sonnet).**Ode** A long, stately poem in [stanzas](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#stanza) of varied length, [meter](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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 onomatopoetic. The following line from Pope's "Sound and Sense" onomatopoetically 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](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#meter), and overall poetic structure. E.E. Cummings's "[Buffalo Bill's]" is one example. Also called **Free Verse****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.**Point of view**The angle of vision from which a story is narrated. See [*Narrator*](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#stanza) in a poem, the first four lines and the second four lines in a Petrachan sonnet. A Shakespearean sonnet contains three quatrains followed by a couplet.**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 crownClean 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 LeonardI want a diamond ring**Sestet**A six-line unit of verse constituting a [stanza](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#stanza) or section of a poem; the last six lines of an Italian [sonnet](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#sonnet). Examples: Petrarch's "If it is not love, then what is it that I feel," and Frost's "Design."**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](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#iamb). The Shakespearean or English sonnet is arranged as three [quatrains](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#quatrain) and a final [couplet](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#meter)[foot](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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.**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.**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."**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*](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html#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." |