

## The Poetry Terms Packet: *Terminology for Literary Analysis*

*Just as doctors or mechanics employ certain kinds of technical language in order to be more effective and efficient, the discussion of literature also requires the use of technical terminology. While most of the terms on these sheets can be used across genres (to discuss novels as well as short stories or poetry), certain terms are specific to poetry (**speaker** and **stanza**, for example) and others are generally limited to novels and short stories (**plot** and **narrator**, for example). As a historical note, the study of literature at universities began with **poetry**. It is only recently that novels and stories have been considered artistic or literary.*

*The listing of terms in this packet are alphabetical, though certain entries have sub-headings (particularly **rhyme** and **rhythm**). Each term is in bold, followed by a simple definition and an example, where possible. Often the examples are more useful than the definitions. Remember, the goal is not to memorize definitions. The goal is to be able to recognize these elements and concepts when they occur and to be able to discuss them in a meaningful way.*

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**Alliteration:** the repetition of a single consonant sound at the beginning of two or more words.

Ex. Long live Lowell the long-legged loon.

**Allusion:** a reference.

(Usually, poets make allusions to well-known literature, religion, history, or art, but one can allude to almost anything. An allusion exists when it is necessary to know about a secondary piece of information in order to understand what the poet is saying. Often it is assumed that the reader will be familiar with the source of the allusion.)

Ex. “The new teacher is Machiavellian.”—*you need to know who Machiavelli was to understand this statement (he wrote a book on how to manipulate, coerce and intimidate people to gain and maintain power).*

“Out, Out—“ *is the title of a Robert Frost poem. If you know that this line was taken from Shakespeare’s Macbeth (“Out, out, brief candle”), the title adds to the meaning of the poem and foreshadows the end.*

**Ambiguity:** having more than one meaning at the same time (therefore the intended meaning is unclear, or **ambiguous**).

Ex. “...The saw...leaped out of the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap—He must have given the hand. However it was, neither refused the meeting. But the hand!” (Frost) —(1) *the boy gave the saw a hand, and helped it cut his other hand off* (2) *the boy gave the saw his hand as a gift (the hand that was cut off)*

**Anaphora:** the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of two or more sentences. This is deliberate repetition that helps to make the author's point clear.

Ex. This is deliberate repetition. This is deliberate repetition. This is deliberate repetition.

**Apostrophe:** directly addressing someone who is not really there.

Ex. "Milton, should you be living at this hour, England has need of you." (Wordsworth)

**Assonance:** the repetition of a single vowel sound.

Ex. Go throw Moe a hoe.

**Caesura:** a deliberate space or pause in a line of poetry. Usually a caesura is visually indicated by punctuation or a space. A caesura typically occurs in poems with a clear *meter*. A caesura should not be confused with the separation of *stanzas*.

Ex.

|   |   |        |
|---|---|--------|
| 1 | Their praise is still—the style is excellent;     |        |
| 2 | The sense they humbly take up on content.         |        |
| 3 | Words are like leave; and where they most abound, |        |
| 4 | Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.      | (Pope) |

^ Lines 1 and 3 contain caesuras, indicated by the dash and the semicolon, respectively.

**Chiasmus:** A mirrored reversal of the order of ideas or of the order of grammatical structure. Generally the second line offers an inversion of the first line. If the similar parts in each line are connected by lines, an X would form, and the Greek letter for X is *Chi*—thus, *chiasmus*

Ex.                     “... This living beauty here  
                               X  
Is earth’s remembrance of a beauty dead.” (Masefield)

^ Here the order of noun—adjective is reversed and the ideas are also opposite: living vs. dead

**Colloquialism:** the use of slang or informalities in speech or writing. This includes local or regional dialects, accents, and street slang.

Ex. "Yo, son, why you talkin' to dat chickenhead?"

**Connotation:** The suggestion or implication evoked by a word or phrase. Connotation is the reason a single word can cause different reactions from different people. Connotation is the implication of a word, and that is not necessarily given in the dictionary. Connotation also determines whether or not a word is polite to use within a certain social context. (Compare *connotation* to *denotation*.)

Ex. The word *nigga* can be used by certain people in certain situations and be accepted and in other situations it would be extremely offensive. The problem with the word is not its definition, the problem is the word’s connotation.

Ex. Reporting how many people died is bad for business, so hospitals report "negative patient outcome” instead, because the phrase doesn’t have such an unpleasant connotation.

**Consonance:** the repetition of consonant sounds anywhere in a series of words, sometimes in a pattern.

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Ex. LiNGeR, longer, languor | Ex. despite incipient seepage, Prince sipped espresso |
|-----------------------------|---|

**Denotation:** The actual, literal definition of a word as it is given in a dictionary

**Diction:** the writer's word choices, especially his/her style, correctness, clearness, and effectiveness.

Ex. You could say, "The writer's diction made a very simple story laborious and confusing."

**Epithet:** a descriptive phrase that accompanies (or occasionally replaces) a person's name. The epithet is a Greek technique, and in fact means *adjective* in Greek. (Compare *epithet* to *kenning*.)

|                                   |                    |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Ex. "the long-suffering Odysseus" | "Grey-eyed Athena" |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|

**Euphemism:** literally "good speech," this is when a kinder, gentler phrase is used instead of something more direct (or less appropriate). A euphemism is always about choosing the phrase with the nicer or more polite **connotation**.

Ex. *Bad:* "I heard he bled to death while his entrails were being ripped out. Bummer, dude."  
*Good (and a euphemism):* "I'm very sorry to hear that your friend has passed on."

**Hyperbole:** an exaggeration.

Ex. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.

**Imagery:** exceptionally vivid or descriptive language that allows a particular image to come alive.

Ex. He ran his rough, callused hand over the soft, wine-colored velvet covering of the altar.

**Invective:** an emotionally violent verbal denunciation or attack using strong, abusive language. Curses are invectives, but many other expressions and words can be used to hurt as well.

Ex. "You stupid little cockroach!"  
"What kind of @\$#!@# @\$%#\$@ doesn't know what a !@#@%\$# invective is?"

**Irony:** when the underlying attitude or meaning is quite different from (and often opposite to) what is literally expressed. Irony can also occur when an outcome is the opposite of what you expect to occur, and in mockery of the appropriate result.

Ex. A dentist with tooth problems would be ironic.

**Kenning:** a descriptive phrase used to name something (this is actually a specialized metaphor), generally based on the action the thing performs. This is similar to an **epithet**, but comes from the Anglo-Saxons.

Ex. an ocean may be *the whale's road*, and in old English legends, the King could be called *the ring giver*. Your teacher would be *the Grade Giver*.

**Metaphor:** an IMPLIED COMPARISON between two unlike objects/ideas/actions. The comparison words (like, as) are taken away, but the comparison still exists.

Ex. He was a hog at the dinner table.

**Metonymy:** referring to a thing by its symbol. Generally metonymy relies on well-known symbols.

Ex. "The order came from the White House"  
(^ *it came from the President, but the White House is a symbol of the Presidency*).

**Mood:** the atmosphere or feeling in a story or poem. Often the writer's tone and diction help to create the mood.

**Narrator:** the voice that tells the story. A story can be told as a first or third person narrative.  
(**First Person:** I am telling you this story;      **Third Person:** This story is being told.)

**Non-Sequitur:** literally "does not follow," this occurs when what is said is completely unrelated to what came before, even though it is expressed as if there were a connection. This DOES NOT MAKE SENSE!

Ex. "He flipped the coin, therefore it was a shrimp fork."

**Onomatopoeia:** a word that sounds like what it means, or a word that IS its own sound.

Ex. bang, buzz, whir, woof, splat, whiz

**Oxymoron:** a direct contradiction: opposite words or ideas put together.

Ex. jumbo shrimp            the little giant            a cold hot pocket

**Paradox:** a statement that initially seems impossible, illogical, or absurd but ends up having a rational meaning (often in an unexpected way).

Ex. In Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, Danny tells us, "I've learned that you can listen to silence."

**Parallelism:** (or **parallel structure**) this refers to phrases or situations with similarity, either structural similarity or conceptual similarity.

Ex. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." (Dickens) --structural similarity

**Parody:** a work that closely imitates another in order to poke fun at the original.

Ex. *Scary Movie* is a parody of many horror movies, like *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*.

**Paronomasia:** better known as a **PUN**, or a play on words. A pun is generally intended to be humorous, and functions by playing off a word's second possible meaning.

Ex. Why did the mushroom go to the party? He was a fungi ( => a fun guy).

**Personification:** giving human characteristics to something that is not human. (little children often do this)

Ex. "...the saw, as if to prove saws knew what supper meant, leaped out of the boy's hand..." (Frost)

**Rhyme:** the repetition of a sound or sounds in verse. Traditionally, rhymes occur at the end of each line, and in a pattern. Rhyme is typically labeled by assigning a letter of the alphabet to each rhyme appearing in a poem.

Ex. "I will not eat green eggs and ham    *A*  
 I will not eat them, Sam I am        *A* ←  
 I will not eat them in a box         *B*  
 I will not eat them with a fox."    *B*                    (Suess)

**Eye Rhyme:** occurs when two words are spelled the same but pronounced differently (and therefore do not rhyme). This effect is caused by the oddities of English spelling and pronunciation.

Ex. tomb and bomb                    love and move                    through and rough

**Imperfect Rhyme / Slant Rhyme:** occurs when, according to the pattern the poet has developed, two words are supposed to rhyme, but the rhyme is not quite perfect.

Ex. "Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,  
 We will make amends ere long"        (Shakespeare)  
    ^ *tongue* and *long* are supposed to rhyme, but do not rhyme well.

**Perfect Rhyme:** another term for ordinary *rhyme*. Occasionally the term *perfect rhyme* is used to distinguish it from *imperfect rhyme*.

**Internal Rhyme:** when words *within* a single line of verse rhyme.

Ex. "I say to the river, to the water, to the son or daughter..." (DiFranco) --*water* and *daughter* rhyme

**End Rhyme:** traditional rhyme, where the rhyming words occur at the end of subsequent lines. (Compare *end rhyme* to *internal rhyme*.)

**Rhythm:** having a distinct beat.

Ex. “Whose woods these are, I think I know  
His house is in the village though” (Frost) <= rhymed iambic tetrameter ☺

**Poetic Feet:** groups of long and short syllables; alternately, groups of stressed and unstressed syllables.  
Notation: long = stressed = **l** short = unstressed = **u**

|  |            |          |
|--|------------|----------|
| <i>iamb</i> —one short followed by one long: <b>u l</b>      | Vermont    | New York |
| <i>trochee</i> —one long followed by one short: <b>l u</b>   | Boston     | London   |
| <i>anapest</i> —two short followed by one long: <b>u u l</b> | Tennessee  |          |
| <i>dactyl</i> —one long followed by two short: <b>l u u</b>  | Washington | India    |
| <i>spondee</i> —(rare) two long syllables: <b>ll</b>         | GET OUT    |          |
| <i>pyrrhic</i> —(rare) two short syllables: <b>u u</b>       | in a       |          |

**Meter:** the measure of rhythm. Establish the meter by counting the number of *poetic feet* in one line.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>monometer</i> —one poetic foot line        |  |
| <i>dimeter</i> —two poetic feet per line      |  |
| <i>trimeter</i> —three poetic feet per line   |  |
| <i>tetrameter</i> —four poetic feet per line  | (found in Romantic and more modern poetry) |
| <i>pentameter</i> —five poetic feet per line  | (typically found in Shakespeare)           |
| <i>hexameter</i> —six poetic feet per line    | (typically found in ancient Greek epics)   |
| <i>heptameter</i> —seven poetic feet per line | (rare!)                                    |

**Simile:** a DIRECT COMPARISON between two objects/ideas/actions, signified by a stated comparison word. The most common comparison words are *like* and *as*, but there are others.

Ex. He eats like a hog.

**Speaker:** the voice that talks in a POEM (compare to *narrator*).

**Stanza:** the sections a poem is broken into. Stanzas are separated by a space and are NOT paragraphs.

**Syllogism:** a form of logic that states a general rule and then draws a specific conclusion from a specific situation.

Ex.  
(General rule=) All men have mothers.  
(Specific situation=) Bruce Wayne is a man.  
(specific conclusion=) Therefore Bruce Wayne has a mother.

**Symbol:** a person, place or thing that represents an IDEA.

Ex. The American flag is a symbol of democracy.

**Synecdoche:** when a part is named but the whole thing is meant or implied.

Ex. When saying “All hands on deck,” a captain expects the rest of the sailor’s body to come with the sailors’ hands.

**Understatement:** to minimize what is happening, make it seem less significant than what really is. The most common form of understatement is the double negative. (Compare understatement to its opposite: **hyperbole**.)

Ex. When the elephant fell on him, it might have hurt a little. (situational)  
Ex. I was not unimpressed with his performance. (double negative)

**Wit:** clever, humorous language that surprises and delights, usually by its insight and few words.