

"Literary Terms and Definitions"

Seamus Heaney

ALLITERATION: Repeating a consonant sound in close proximity to others, or beginning several words with the same vowel sound. For instance, the phrase "buckets of big blue berries" alliterates with the consonant *b*. Coleridge describes the sacred river Alph in *Kubla Khan* as "Five miles meandering with a mazy motion," which alliterates with the consonant *m*. The line "apt alliteration's artful aid" alliterates with the vowel sound *a*. One of Dryden's couplets in *Absalom and Achitophel* reads, "In pious times, ere priestcraft did begin, / Before polygamy was made a sin." It alliterates with the letter *p*. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" employs the technique: "I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass." Most frequently, the alliteration involves the sounds at the beginning of words in close proximity to each other. Alliteration is an example of a rhetorical scheme. Alliteration in which the first letters of words are the same (as opposed to consonants alliterating in the middles or ends of words) is more specifically called **head rhyme**, which is a bit of a misnomer since it doesn't actually involve rhyme in a technical sense. If alliteration also involves changes in the intervening vowels between repeated consonants, the technique is called **consonance**. See **alliterative verse**, **alliterative prose**, **assonance**, and **consonance**. See also **alliterative revival** and **sound symbolism**.

EPIC: An epic in its most specific sense is a *genre* of classical poetry. It is a poem that is (a) a long narrative about a serious subject, (b) told in an elevated style of language, (c) focused on the exploits of a hero or demi-god who represents the cultural values of a race, nation, or religious group (d) in which the hero's success or failure will determine the fate of that people or nation. Usually, the epic has (e) a vast setting, and covers a wide geographic area, (f) it contains superhuman feats of strength or military prowess, and gods or supernatural beings frequently take part in the action. The poem begins with (g) the invocation of a muse to inspire the poet and, (h) the narrative starts *in medias res* (see above). (i) The epic contains long catalogs of heroes or important characters, focusing on highborn kings and great warriors rather than peasants and commoners.

J. A. Cuddon notes that the term **primary epic** refers to folk epics, i.e., versions of an epic narrative that were transmitted orally in pre-literate cultures; the term **secondary epic** refers to literary epics, i.e., versions that are actually written down rather than chanted or sung (284). Often, these secondary epics retain elements of oral-formulaic transmission, such as staggered intervals in which the poet summarizes earlier events, standardized **epithets** and phrases originally used by singers to fill out dactylic hexameters during extemporaneous performance, and so on.

The term *epic* applies most accurately to classical Greek texts like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. However, some critics have applied the term more loosely. The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* has also been called an epic of Anglo-Saxon culture, Milton's *Paradise Lost* has been seen as an epic of Christian culture, and Shakespeare's various History Plays have been collectively called an epic of Renaissance Britain. Other examples include Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* and the anonymous *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is the oldest example known. Contrast with **mock epic**. See **epic simile** below.

KENNING: A form of **compounding** in **Old English**, Old Norse, and Germanic poetry. In this poetic device, the poet creates a new compound word or phrase to describe an object or activity. Specifically, this compound uses mixed imagery (**catagoresis**) to describe the properties of the object in indirect, imaginative, or enigmatic ways. The resulting word is somewhat like a riddle since the reader must stop and think for a minute to determine what the object is. Kennings may involve conjoining two types of dissimilar imagery, extended metaphors, or mixed metaphors. Kennings were particularly common in Old English literature and Viking poetry. The most famous example is *hron-rade* or *hwal-rade* ("whale-road") as a poetic reference to the sea. Other examples include "Thor-Weapon" as a reference to a smith's hammer, "battle-flame" as a reference to the way light shines on swords, "gore-bed" for a battlefield filled with motionless bodies, and "word-ward" for a man's eloquence. In *Njal's Saga* we find Old Norse kennings like *shield-tester* for warrior, *orprayer-smithy* for a man's heart, or *head-anvil* for the skull. In *Beowulf*, we also find Anglo-Saxon *banhus* ("bone-house") for body, *goldwine gumena* ("gold-friend of men") for generous prince, *beadoleoma* ("flashing light") for sword, and *beaga gifa* ("ring-giver") for a lord.

Kennings are less common in **Modern English** than in earlier centuries, but some common modern examples include "beer-goggles" (to describe the way one's judgment of appearances becomes hazy while intoxicated) and "surfing the web" (which mixes the imagery of skillful motion through large amounts of liquid, amorphous material with the imagery of an interconnected net linked by strands or cables), "rug-rats" (to describe children), "tramp-stamps" (to describe trashy tattoos), or "bible-thumpers" (to describe loud preachers or intolerant Christians). See also **compounding** and **neologism**.

LITOTES: A form of **meiosis** using a negative statement. (See more under discussion of **meiosis**.)

MEIOSIS: Understatement, the opposite of exaggeration: "I was somewhat worried when the psychopath ran toward me with a chainsaw." (i.e., I was terrified). **Litotes** (especially popular in Old English poetry) is a type of meiosis in which the writer uses a statement in the negative to create the effect: "You know, Einstein is not a bad mathematician." (i.e., Einstein is a good mathematician.)

WERGILD (Anglo-Saxon, lit. "man-gold," also spelled *wergeld*): The legal system of many Germanic tribes, including the Anglo-Saxons. This tradition allowed an individual and his family to make amends for a crime by paying a fine known as *wergild* to the family of another man whom he had injured or killed. The price varied depending upon the nature of the injury and the status of the injured man. Surviving laws of Wihtfrid (8th century CE) show how elaborate the *wergild* system had become by the ninth century. Wihtfrid included a varying price in silver for each tooth knocked out during a fight. If an individual could not or would not pay the *wergild*, the injured family was considered within its traditional rights to kill a member of the culprit's family of similar rank and status. This process often led to extended **blood-feuds** lasting several generations. The concerns of *wergild* appear prominently in Anglo-Saxon poems such as *Beowulf*, in which the supernatural predations of the monsters are figured in the legalistic language associated with this practice. See also **peace-weaver**. **NB:** *Wergild* should not be confused with **Danegeld**, the practice of paying extortive Vikings to go away without attacking.

WYRD: Often translated as "fate," *wyrd* is an **Anglo-Saxon** term that embodies the concept of inevitability in Old English poetry. Unlike destiny, in which one imagines looking forward into the future to see the outcome of one's life, *wyrd* appears to be linked to the past. As an example illustrating this difference, a male speaker might claim, "It is my *destiny* to eat too many hamburgers, develop high cholesterol, and die of a heart attack in Pittsburgh at age fifty-three." The speaker is predicting what will inevitably happen to him, what is fated to occur sometime in the future. On the other hand, one might claim, "It is my *wyrd* to be born as a Caucasian child to impoverished parents who neglected to feed me properly, so that my health is always bad." In the first case, the speaker describing *destiny* implies that the future is set, and therefore the outcome of his life is beyond his control. In the second case, the speaker describing *wyrd* implies that the past is unchangeable, and therefore the current circumstances in which he finds himself are beyond his alteration. In Anglo-Saxon narratives, heroic speakers like Beowulf describe themselves as being "fated" (i.e., having a *wyrd*) that requires them to act in a certain way. It is Beowulf's *wyrd* to help King Hrothgar, not because some abstract destiny wills it so, but because in the past, Hrothgar helped Beowulf's father, and it is Beowulf's duty to return that favor. The exact circumstances are beyond Beowulf's control, but Beowulf can choose how he reacts to that "fate." This idea contrasts with the Greek idea of *moira*.

Although *wyrd* dies out in Middle English and Early Modern usage, some scholarly speculation has posited that the three "weird" sisters in *Macbeth* may actually be the three "*wyrd*" sisters, thus the three fates in an **archetypal** form.