

Glossary of Poetry Terms

- **Accent** - the prominence or emphasis given to a syllable or word. In the word *poetry*, the accent (or stress) falls on the first syllable.
- **Alliteration** - the repetition of the same or similar sounds at the beginning of words. Some famous examples of alliteration are tongue twisters such as *She sells seashells by the seashore* and *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers*.
- **Antithesis** - a figure of speech in which words and phrases with opposite meanings are balanced against each other. An example of antithesis is "To err is human, to forgive, divine." (Alexander Pope)
- **Apostrophe** - words that are spoken to a person who is absent or imaginary, or to an object or abstract idea. The poem *God's World* by Edna St. Vincent Millay begins with an apostrophe: "O World, I cannot hold thee close enough!/Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!/Thy mists that roll and rise!"
- **Assonance** - the repetition or a pattern of similar sounds, especially vowel sounds, as in the tongue twister "Moses supposes his toeses are roses."
- **Ballad** - a poem that tells a story similar to a folk tale or legend and often has a repeated refrain. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge is an example of a ballad.

- **Blank verse** - poetry that is written in unrhymed [iambic pentameter](#). Shakespeare wrote most of his plays in blank verse.
- **Caesura** - a natural pause or break in a line of poetry, usually near the middle of the line. There is a caesura right after the question mark in the first line of this sonnet by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."
- **Carpe diem** - Latin expression that means "seize the day." Carpe diem poems urge the reader (or the person to whom they are addressed) to live for today and enjoy the pleasures of the moment. A famous carpe diem poem by Robert Herrick begins "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may . . ."
- **Conceit** - fanciful poetic image or metaphor that likens one thing to something else that is seemingly very different. An example of a conceit can be found in Shakespeare's [sonnet](#) "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" and in Emily Dickinson's poem "There is no frigate like a book."
- **Consonance** - the repetition of similar consonant sounds, especially at the ends of words, as in *lost* and *past* or *confess* and *dismiss*.
- **Couplet** - in a poem, a pair of lines that are the same length and usually rhyme and form a complete thought. Shakespearean [sonnets](#) usually end in a couplet.
- **Elegy** - poem that laments the death of a person, or one that is simply sad and thoughtful. An example of this type of poem is Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."

- **Enjambment** - the continuation of a complete idea (a sentence or clause) from one line or [couplet](#) of a poem to the next line or couplet without a pause. An example of enjambment can be found in the first line of Joyce Kilmer's poem *Trees*: "I think that I shall never see/A poem as lovely as a tree." *Enjambment* comes from the French word for "to straddle."
- **Epic** - a long, serious poem that tells the story of a heroic figure. Two of the most famous epic poems are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer, which tell about the Trojan War and the adventures of Odysseus on his voyage home after the war.
- **Epigram** - a very short, witty poem: "Sir, I admit your general rule,/That every poet is a fool,/But you yourself may serve to show it,/That every fool is not a poet." (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)
- **Figure of speech** - a verbal expression in which words or sounds are arranged in a particular way to achieve a particular effect. Figures of speech are organized into different categories, such as [alliteration](#), [antithesis](#), [assonance](#), [hyperbole](#), [litotes](#), [metaphor](#), [onomatopoeia](#), and [simile](#).
- **Foot** - two or more syllables that together make up the smallest unit of rhythm in a poem. For example, an [iamb](#) is a foot that has two syllables, one unstressed followed by one stressed. An anapest has three syllables, two unstressed followed by one stressed.
- **Free verse** - poetry composed of either rhymed or unrhymed lines that have no set meter.

- **Haiku** - a Japanese poem composed of three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables. Haiku often reflect on some aspect of nature.
- **Hyperbole** - a figure of speech in which deliberate exaggeration is used for emphasis. Many everyday expressions are examples of hyperbole: *tons of money, waiting for ages, a flood of tears*, etc. Hyperbole is the opposite of [litotes](#).
- **Iamb** - a metrical foot of two syllables, one short (or unstressed) and one long (or stressed). There are four iambs in the line "Come **live**/ with **me**/ and **be**/ my **love**," from a poem by Christopher Marlowe. (The stressed syllables are in bold.)
- **Iambic pentameter** - a type of meter in poetry, in which there are five [iambs](#) to a line. (The prefix *penta-* means "five," as in *pentagon*, a geometrical figure with five sides. *Meter* refers to rhythmic units. In a line of iambic pentameter, there are five rhythmic units that are iambs.) Shakespeare's plays were written mostly in iambic pentameter, which is the most common type of meter in English poetry. An example of an iambic pentameter line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is "But **soft**!/ What **light**/ through **yon**/der **win**/dow **breaks**?" Another, from *Richard III*, is "A **horse**!/ A **horse**!/ My **king**/dom **for**/ a **horse**!" (The stressed syllables are in bold.)
- **Limerick**
A light, humorous poem of five usually anapestic lines with the rhyme scheme of *aabba*. Mr. Schoch wrote the following limerick-like poem on a student's paper during his first year of teaching (1991). That student, now a college graduate, recited the poem by heart twelve years later!

Rebecca Ann writes as small as she can
When taking a quiz or a test
She thinks it's a joke
But poor Mr. Schoch
Needs to give his eyes a rest.

- **Litotes** (LIE tuh TEEZ)
A figure of speech in which a positive is stated by negating its opposite. Some examples of litotes: *no small victory*, *not a bad idea*, *not unhappy*. Litotes, which is a form of understatement, is the opposite of [hyperbole](#).
- **Lyric** - a poem, such as a [sonnet](#) or an [ode](#), which expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet. A lyric poem may resemble a song in form or style.
- **Metaphor** - a figure of speech in which two things are compared, usually by saying one thing is another, or by substituting a more descriptive word for the more common or usual word that would be expected. Some examples of metaphors: *the world's a stage*, *he was a lion in battle*, *drowning in debt*, and *a sea of troubles*. Also see [metonymy](#).
- **Meter** - the arrangement of a line of poetry by the number of syllables and the rhythm of accented (or stressed) syllables.
- **Metonymy** - a figure of speech in which one word is substituted for another with which it is closely associated. For example, in the expression *The pen is mightier than the sword*, the word *pen* is used for "the written word," and *sword* is used for "military power."
- **Narrative** - telling a story. [Ballads](#) and epics are different kinds of narrative poems.

- **Ode** - a lyric poem that is serious and thoughtful in tone and has a very precise, formal structure. John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a famous example of this type of poem.
- **Onomatopoeia** - a figure of speech in which words are used to imitate sounds. Examples of onomatopoeic words are *buzz, hiss, zing, clippety-clop, cock-a-doodle-do, pop, splat, thump, and tick-tock*. Another example of onomatopoeia is found in this line from Tennyson's *Come Down, O Maid*: "The moan of doves in immemorial elms,/And murmuring of innumerable bees." The repeated "m/n" sounds reinforce the idea of "murmuring" by imitating the hum of insects on a warm summer day.
- **Pentameter** - a line of poetry that has five metrical [feet](#).
- **Personification** - a figure of speech in which nonhuman things or abstract ideas are given human attributes: *the sky is crying, dead leaves danced in the wind, blind justice*.
- **Poetry** - a type of literature that is written in [meter](#).
- **Quatrain** - a [stanza](#) or poem of four lines.
- **Refrain** - a phrase, line, or group of lines that is repeated throughout a poem, usually after every stanza.
- **Rhyme** - the occurrence of the same or similar sounds at the end of two or more words. When the rhyme occurs in a final stressed syllable, it is said to be masculine: *cat/hat, desire/fire, observe/deserve*. When the rhyme occurs in a final unstressed syllable, it is said to be feminine: *pleasure/leisure, longing/yearning*. The pattern of rhyme in a [stanza](#) or poem is shown usually by using a different letter for each final sound.

In a poem with an *aabba* rhyme scheme, the first, second, and fifth lines end in one sound, and the third and fourth lines end in another.

- **Romanticism** - the principles and ideals of the Romantic Movement in literature and the arts during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Romanticism, which was a reaction to the classicism of the early 18th century, favored feeling over reason and placed great emphasis on the subjective, or personal, experience of the individual. Nature was also a major theme. The great English Romantic poets include Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats.
- **Simile** - a figure of speech in which two things are compared using the word "like" or "as." An example of a simile using *like* occurs in Langston Hughes's poem *Harlem*: "What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it dry up/ like a raisin in the sun?"
- **Sonnet** - a [lyric](#) poem that is 14 lines long. Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnets are divided into two [quatrains](#) and a six-line "sestet," with the rhyme scheme *abba abba cdecde* (or *cdcdcd*). English (or Shakespearean) sonnets are composed of three quatrains and a final couplet, with a rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg*. English sonnets are written generally in iambic pentameter.
- **Stanza** - two or more lines of poetry that together form one of the divisions of a poem. The stanzas of a poem are usually of the same length and follow the same pattern of [meter](#) and rhyme.

- **Stress** - the prominence or emphasis given to particular syllables. Stressed syllables usually stand out because they have long, rather than short, vowels, or because they have a different pitch or are louder than other syllables.
- **Synecdoche** - a figure of speech in which a part is used to designate the whole or the whole is used to designate a part. For example, the phrase "all hands on deck" means "all men on deck," not just their hands. The reverse situation, in which the whole is used for a part, occurs in the sentence "The U.S. beat Russia in the final game," where the *U.S.* and *Russia* stand for "the U.S. team" and "the Russian team," respectively.
- **Tanka** - a Japanese poem of five lines, the first and third composed of five syllables and the rest of seven.
- **Terza rima** - a type of poetry consisting of 10- or 11-syllable lines arranged in three-line "tercets" with the rhyme scheme *aba bcb cdc*, etc. The poet Dante is credited with inventing terza rima, which he used in his Divine Comedy. Terza rima was borrowed into English by Chaucer, and it has been used by many English poets, including Milton, Shelley, and Auden.
- **Trope** - a figure of speech, such as [metaphor](#) or [metonymy](#), in which words are not used in their literal (or actual) sense but in a figurative (or imaginative) sense.
- **Verse** - a single metrical line of poetry or poetry in general (as opposed to prose).