

Glossary of Literary Terms

When writing a literary analysis or a poetic explication, the student's job is to ask **how** the writer says **what** he or she is saying and **why**. Examining the how and why is analysis and the process involves reading closely to see which 'tools' the writer has purposely employed to develop a specific effect or meaning.

Allegory – A narrative in which the characters, actions, and sometimes the setting, symbolically represent an idea, moral, or political or religious principles.

- Examples: Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Christ's parables of the prodigal son, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Aesop's beast fables or Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the *X-Men* comics (an allegory for the Civil Rights Movement)

Alliteration – Repetition of the same consonant sounds in two or more words (usually at the beginning of the words, but sometimes on the stressed syllables)

- Uses: adds music to a line, makes a phrase memorable or distinctive, or reflects the content of the verse (cf. **onomatopoeia**).
- Example: "Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade, / He bravely breach'd his boiling bloody breast." (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.146-147)

Allusion – A direct or indirect reference to a person, place, thing, event, or idea in history or literature. Allusions imply reading and cultural experiences shared by the writer and the reader, functioning as a kind of shorthand whereby the recalling of something outside the text supplies an emotional or intellectual context. Use the verb form, *allude*.

- Example: At the outset of his "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. says, "Five score years ago," an allusion to Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," which begins "Four score and seven years ago." King alludes to Lincoln in order to draw a parallel between the historic moment of emancipation and his own time during the Civil Rights Movement.

Antithesis – a balanced statement; a figure of speech in which words and phrases with opposite meanings are balanced against each other.

- Example: "To err is human, to forgive, divine" (Pope, "An Essay On Criticism").
- Example: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." (Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.)

Apostrophe – to turn away from the general audience of a work to address a specific group, person, or thing (see **Personification**), including those that are absent, dead, or imaginary. Often, the address is preceded by *O* or *Oh*.

- Example: "For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel / Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him! (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, III.ii.180-181) Here, the speaker, Antony, is addressing a crowd, but briefly addresses the gods mid-speech in an apostrophe.

Assonance – The repetition of vowel sounds in stressed syllables (see also **Alliteration**). Assonance differs from **rhyme** in that rhyme is a similarity of vowel and consonant: "lake" and "fake" demonstrate rhyme, "lake" and "fate" demonstrate assonance.

- "Hear the mellow wedding bells" (Poe, "The Bells")

Ballad – A narrative poem that tells a story

- Example: “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Blank Verse – Iambic pentameter (see **Meter**) without rhyme. The verse form closest to the natural rhythms of English speech.

- Example: Most of the content of Shakespeare’s plays; Milton’s “Paradise Lost”

Caesura – A pause occurring in a line of poetry, either due to sense or to natural speech rhythm. A caesura is usually accompanied by some form of punctuation. It is conventional to notate a caesura with the “double pipe” sign: ||

- Example: “How do I love thee? || Let me count the ways” (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “How Do I Love Thee?,” Sonnet 43)

Chiasmus - An inversion of the second of two parallel phrases (e.g. do not live to eat but eat to live). It is named after the Greek letter *chi* (χ), indicating a crisscross arrangement of terms. (e.g. we drive on the parkway and park on the driveway).

Cliché – An expression that has lost its freshness or appeal due to overuse.

- Examples: the writing is on the wall, as easy as pie, what goes around comes around, or turn over a new leaf

Climax – moment of greatest intensity or emotional tension as a narrative’s conflict is reached, usually marks a turning point in the plot.

- Example: In *Star Wars: A New Hope*, the climax is when Luke Skywalker, harnessing the Force with help from his deceased mentor, is able to fly up to and shoot the exact point that destroys the Death Star, just as it is about to destroy the rebel base.

Conceit – a figure of speech (such as an **analogy, metaphor, hyperbole, or oxymoron**) which sets up an unusual, exaggerated, or elaborate parallel between two different things (for example, comparing one’s beloved to a ship or planet. The comparison may be brief or may extend throughout an entire poem.

- Example: In “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” John Donne includes an extended metaphor comparing the souls of himself and his lover to a drafting compass: “If they be two, they are two so / As stiff twin compasses are two;” The poem continues to build on this image until its conclusion.

Conflict – The struggle or tension within the plot between opposing forces.

Denouement – the outcome or resolution of the plot.

Diction – A writer’s specific choice of words, phrases, sentence structures, and figurative language, which combine to create meaning. Discussions about diction consider why the writer uses this word rather than any other word that might have the same literal meaning.

Drama – A literary genre usually in the form of a story or play that focuses on and resolves some universal problem or situation.

Echo - the repetition of key words, sounds, syllables, lines or ideas for effect.

Elegy – A formal poem lamenting about the dead.

End-stop – a natural pause indicated by punctuation such as a period or comma at the end of a line.

Enjambment– when a sentence ‘steps over’ a line break into the next line without pause.

- Examples of end-stop and enjambment from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130. The first line is end-stopped; the last two are enjambed.
 - My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.end-stopped
 - And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As she belied with false compare.enjambment

Epic – A long narrative poem about the deeds of a hero, often set in a past that is depicted as greater than the present.

Epigram – Originally a brief poem, usually solemn, but now usually refers to a short poem with a cutting remark at the end.

Euphemism – Mild or indirect words replacing harsher or more direct words

- Example: “he passed away” instead of “he died.”

Figurative Language also called **Figures of Speech** – describe something as one thing when it is another; it is the opposite of literal language.

- Example: Shakespeare’s phrase “My love is a fever” (Sonnet 147) is figurative because love is not a high body temperature. The phrase, rather, might describe the speaker’s emotion in an alternative way to express the degree of feeling or the idea of being stricken with a condition.
- Figurative language can be found in: **allegory, apostrophe, conceit, hyperbole, irony, litotes, metonymy** (and **synecdoche**), **oxymoron, paradox, personification, simile, and symbolism.**

Foot – the basic unit of rhythm in poetry consisting of a group of two or three syllables. For example, a line of poetry ten syllables long written in iambs (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable) would be iambic pentameter. Note that variation is important in poetry; therefore, the prevailing foot may be spotted with different feet. A line of iambic poetry may begin with a trochee.

Types of feet: U (unstressed); / (stressed)

- Iamb: U /
- Trochee: / U
- Anapest: U U /
- Dactyl: / U U
- Spondee: //
- Pyrrhic: U U

Free Verse – flowing lines, usually unrhymed, that vary in length and with no fixed meter.

Genre – A type of literature

- Example: **Epic** or **Tragedy**

Heroic Couplet – Two lines of rhyming iambic pentameter.

Hyperbole – Exaggeration or overstatement used to emphasize a point rather than to be taken literally.

- Example: “Everyone in the world is mad at me today.”

Imagery – Descriptive sensory words and specific details that illustrate or “paint a picture” for readers. Emotions, moods, themes, and tone may be conveyed by images. Images may repeat and be thematic, and a whole poem may be organized around a single image.

- For example, consider this image of the flowers in William Wordsworth’s poem *Daffodils*:

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

Irony – a contrast between the intent and the literal meaning of words or action. Irony is not an unfortunate coincidence; rather, it is a planned and purposeful tool used to emphasize an idea.

- Dramatic irony shows how a character’s intentions have the opposite effect from what is desired.
 - Example: in Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth*, Macbeth kills Duncan because he thinks it will lead to his happiness, but in fact he loses everything that does make him happy.
- Verbal irony says “what a beautiful day outside” when it is actually pouring.

Litotes – (pronounced lie-toe-teez) a type of understatement which uses a double negative as a form of understatement.

- Example: “she’s no fool,” means “she’s clever.”

Melodrama – A **drama** (play) which sets clearly “good guys” against obviously “bad guys” in scenes of sensational action and suspense, but ends happily.

Metaphor – A figure of speech that draws *implicit* comparison between two unlike things, that is, without using a word such as “like” or “as.”

- Example: “All the world’s a stage” (Shakespeare *Hamlet* II.vii.139)

Meter – the sound a poem makes based on regular or irregular patterns of syllables and stresses in each line. Meter is measured in ‘feet’ per line of a poem, and the lines are measured as ‘versification.’ Figuring out a poem’s meter can be a bit tricky, but usually a pattern emerges after you ‘scan’ a few lines and mark the stressed and unstressed syllables and add up the ‘feet,’ or stresses. These patterns (or ‘scansion’) are assigned names such as “iambic pentameter,” which means each lines has five ‘iamb’ (one unstressed + one stressed syllable) for a total of ten beats per line. Certain forms of poetry prescribe a certain meter. Sonnets, for example, are usually iambic pentameter. It’s helpful to scan a poem for meter for a few reasons. For one, meter can help you figure out the form of a poem, which can give you clues about the writer and his or her historical, social or cultural context; this can help you ask questions about the conventions and expectations of the poem. Additionally, meter can help you figure out the overall ‘sound’ of the poem and consider the pacing---how fast or how slow it moves and why. Further, meter might complement imagery. For example, long deep-breathing lines followed by shorter lines might mimic waves crashing on a beach and then receding.

Metonymy – a **figure of speech** in which a phrase or word is substituted for one which is closely related to it.

- Example: “The White House made an announcement today.” ‘The White House’ is used when what is literally meant is the president and/or his cabinet members and staff, etc.
- If someone says they are reading Dickens, they mean they are reading something written by the author.

Mood – see **Tone**

Ode – A lyrical poem of high emotions.

Onomatopoeia – The use of words or passages that imitate sounds. Words like moo, sizzle, and zoom are examples, but poets often use the rhythm of the lines and sound effects like **alliteration** and **assonance** to achieve sound effects, as well.

- Example: in Seamus Heaney’s poem “Mid-term Break,” the sound of the second line recalls the sound of bells clanging: “I sat all morning in the college sick bay/ Counting bells knelling classes to a close.”

Oxymoron – A **figure of speech**, usually consisting of two words, which combines two contradictory terms in a surprising and descriptive way.

- Examples: “*deafening silence*”
Milton’s description of hell as “No light, but rather *darkness visible*” (*Paradise Lost*, l.63)

Paradox – A statement that seems to be self-contradictory or even absurd, but is used to demonstrate a truth.

- Alexander Pope uses paradox when he suggests, in “An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot,” that a literary critic could “damn with faint praise.”
- “Cowards die many times before their deaths” Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II.ii.32

Personification – Figurative language in which inanimate objects or abstract concepts are given human qualities.

- Example: “The *leaves danced* in the wind”

Prose – The ordinary language of speaking or writing, without meter.

Realism – representation of objects, actions, or social conditions as they really are. There is usually an emphasis on the everyday, familiar, and an avoidance of idealization.

Repetition – using syllables, words, phrases, lines, or stanzas more than once. Repetition is often used to unify both poetry and prose, and often serves to structure a literary work.

Rhyme – Repetition of the same sound in words or lines.

- **End-rhyme** occurs when the last sound in the line rhymes
- **Internal rhyme** occurs when sounds within the line rhyme
 - Example: “Each narrow cell in which we dwell” (Oscar Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*).
- **Rhyme scheme** is the pattern of the end-rhymes in a poem or **stanza**. Rhyme schemes are noted by lower-case letters: the first line and every following line that rhymes with it are “a,” the first line that doesn’t rhyme with “a” is called “b,” as are all lines rhyming with “b,” and so on.
 - Example: a poem noted as *abac* would have rhyming first and third lines. Recognizing a rhyme scheme can tell a reader what form the poem is.
- **Near** or **slant rhyme** refers to words that sound similar, but do not fully rhyme
 - Example: “mother” and “father.”
- **Eye rhyme** is the term for words that look like they should rhyme because of their spelling, but do not
 - Example: tough/cough/bough; love/move/prove; or daughter/laughter.
- **Feminine rhyme** is a rhyme of two or more syllables wherein the first syllable is stressed and the following unstressed
 - Example: butter/clutter or attitude/gratitude.
- **Masculine rhyme** is a rhyme of one or more syllables wherein the final syllables are stressed
 - Example: grade/shade or defend/contend.
- **Couplet** is the term for a pair of successive lines with end-rhymes, and is also the name of a unit of verse that has two lines that (usually) rhyme and have the same meter.

Sarcasm – An unsophisticated or heavy-handed form of verbal **irony** (see “irony” for further clarification).

Satire – A type of literary work which uses irony, sarcasm, wit, and ridicule to expose and criticize the follies and vices of a person, custom, or institution. Famous examples in English literature include Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. Modern examples on television include *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*, and in print and online is the satirical publication *The Onion*.

Simile – A figure of speech that draws an *explicit* comparison between two unlike things by using *like*, *as*, *than*, or *seems*.

- Example: “my love is like a red, red rose,” (Robert Burns “Red, Red Rose”)

Sonnet – A poem typically consisting of fourteen lines.

Stanza – a unit of structure in a poem, consisting of a group of lines separated by blank space. Stanzas may be thought of as the paragraphs of a poem.

Symbol/Symbolism – something that represents or stands for something else; in literature, a concrete image can express an emotion or abstract idea because of symbolism.

- Examples: a bulldog can symbolize tenacity, a dove can represent peace, and scales can stand for justice.
- In Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the beating heart that the narrator hears may symbolize his conscience, his increasing madness, or a countdown to death.

Synecdoche (pronounced 'sin-eck-doe-key') refers to a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole or the whole represents a part.

- Examples: "all hands on deck" - the hand represents a whole person
"Philadelphia won the baseball game," - Philadelphia represents the Phillies' baseball team.

Theme – The central meaning or dominant idea of a work. A theme provides a unifying point around which plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbols and other elements are developed.

- Example: The theme of Shakespeare's *Othello* is jealousy.

Tone – the attitude in which an author expresses his idea. Tone or mood is inferred by elements of the author's style. Just as a tone of voice in a conversation can convey an attitude, a tone in a written work can indicate a mood like seriousness, happiness, anger, nostalgia, etc. Note that the tone doesn't always coincide with its content; a poem about death may have a silly or ironic tone, and a poem about a paper cut may have a serious tone.

Versification - Generally, the structural form of a verse, as revealed by scansion. Identification of verse structure includes the name of the metrical type and the name designating number of feet:

- Monometer: 1 foot
- Dimeter: 2 feet
- Trimeter: 3 feet
- Tetrameter: 4 feet
- Pentameter: 5 feet
- Hexameter: 6 feet
- Heptameter: 7 feet
- Octameter: 8 feet
- Nonameter: 9 feet

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