

Glossary of Poetry Terms

by Ann-Marie Imbornoni

Accent

The prominence or emphasis given to a syllable or word. In the word *poetry*, the accent (or stress) falls on the first syllable.

Alexandrine

A line of poetry that has 12 syllables. The name probably comes from a medieval romance about Alexander the Great that was written in 12-syllable lines.

Alliteration

The repetition of the same or similar sounds at the beginning of words. Some famous examples of alliteration are tongue twisters such as *Betty Botta bought some butter* and *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers*.

Anapest

A metrical foot of three syllables, two short (or unstressed) followed by one long (or stressed), as in *'twas the **n**ight* and *to the **m**oon*. The anapest is the reverse of the dactyl.

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.

Ballade

A type of poem, usually with three stanzas of seven, eight, or ten lines and a shorter final stanza (or envoy) of four or five lines. All stanzas end with the same one-line refrain. "[Ballade of my Lady's Beauty](#)," by Joyce Kilmer, is one example of a ballade.

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](#)."

Canzone

A medieval Italian lyric poem, with five or six stanzas and a shorter concluding stanza (or envoy). The poets [Petrarch](#) and [Dante Alighieri](#) were masters of the canzone.

Carpe diem

A 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 . . .](#)"

Chanson de geste

An epic poem of the 11th to the 14th century, written in Old French, which details the exploits of a historical or legendary figure, especially [Charlemagne](#).

Classicism

The principles and ideals of beauty that are characteristic of Greek and Roman art, architecture, and literature. Examples of classicism in poetry can be found in the works of [John Dryden](#) and [Alexander Pope](#), which are characterized by their formality, simplicity, and emotional restraint.

Conceit

A 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.

Dactyl

A metrical foot of three syllables, one long (or stressed) followed by two short (or unstressed), as in *happily*. The dactyl is the reverse of the anapest.

Elegy

A 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."

Envoy, or Envoi

The shorter final stanza of a poem, as in a ballade.

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](#))

Epithalamium (or Epithalamion)

A poem in honor of a bride and bridegroom.

Feminine rhyme

A multi-syllable rhyme that ends with one or more unstressed syllables: *paper/vapor, vacation/proclamation*.

Fib

A six-line poem in which the number of syllables per line follow the [Fibonacci sequence](#): 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8. The form was invented by Gregory K. Pincus, and popularized on his blog in April 2006 (both [National Poetry Month](#) and Mathematics Awareness Month).

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 [antithesis](#), [hyperbole](#), [litotes](#), [metaphor](#), [metonymy](#), [onomatopoeia](#), [simile](#), and [synecdoche](#).

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 (also vers libre)

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.

Heptameter

A line of poetry that has seven metrical feet.

Heroic couplet

A stanza composed of two rhymed lines in iambic pentameter.

Hexameter

A line of poetry that has six metrical feet.

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**.) The iamb is the reverse of the trochee.

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**.)

Idyll, or Idyl

Either a short poem depicting a peaceful, idealized country scene, or a long poem that tells a story about heroic deeds or extraordinary events set in the distant past. *Idylls of the King*, by [Alfred Lord Tennyson](#), is about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

In Memoriam stanza

A stanza of four lines of iambic tetrameter, rhyming *abba*. This form was used by Tennyson in his long poem *In Memoriam*.

Lay

A long narrative poem, especially one that was sung by medieval minstrels called *trouvères*. The *Lais* of [Marie de France](#) are lays.

Limerick

A light, humorous poem of five usually anapestic lines with the rhyme scheme of *aabba*.

Litotes

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, that expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet. A lyric poem may resemble a song in form or style.

Masculine rhyme

A rhyme that occurs in a final stressed syllable: *cat/hat*, *endow/vow*, *observe/deserve*.

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*.

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, epics, and lays 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.

Ottava rima

A type of poetry consisting of 10- or 11-syllable lines arranged in 8-line "octaves" with the rhyme scheme *abababcc*. An example of ottava rima is "[Isabella](#)," by John Keats.

Pastoral

A poem that depicts rural life in a peaceful, idealized way.

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*.

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*, *behave/shave*, *observe/deserve*. When the rhyme ends with one or more unstressed syllables, it is said to be feminine: *vacation/sensation*, *reliable/viable*. 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.

Rhyme royal

A type of poetry consisting of stanzas of seven lines in iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme *ababbcc*. Rhyme royal was an innovation introduced by [Geoffrey Chaucer](#).

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](#).

Scansion

The analysis of a poem's meter. This is usually done by marking the stressed and unstressed syllables in each line and then, based on the pattern of the stresses, dividing the line into feet.

Senryu

A short Japanese poem that is similar to a haiku in structure but treats human beings rather than nature, often in a humorous or satiric way.

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.

Spondee

A metrical foot of two syllables, both of which are long (or stressed).

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](#).

Tetrameter

A line of poetry that has four metrical feet.

Trochee

A metrical foot of two syllables, one long (or stressed) and one short (or unstressed). An easy way to remember the trochee is to memorize the first line of a lighthearted [poem](#) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, which demonstrates the use of various kinds of metrical feet:

"Trochee/ **trips** from/ **long** to/ **short**." (The stressed syllables are in **bold**.) The trochee is the reverse of the iamb.

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).

Versification

The system of rhyme and meter in poetry.
