

English 102 Poetry Terms

What follows is a list of terms with which you should become familiar as you read and write about literature this semester. This list of terms is adapted from a handout created by Lee Baughnight, supplemented by material from *Literature for Composition*. Please consult the glossary in the textbook for further explanation and more examples.

Diction: Word choice. Words are the poet's most precious tools. As you read, assume that every word was chosen carefully.

- **Denotation:** A word's literal meaning, or, dictionary definition.
- **Connotation:** Associations, shades of meaning.
- **Ambiguity:** The use of language that allows two or more interpretations of a word, phrase, action, or situation, all of which can be supported in the context of the work. Deliberate ambiguity is a useful literary device; unintended ambiguity can cause confusion.

Figurative language: In the broadest terms, a figure of speech is a deviation from the literal; it is a way of saying one thing in terms of something else. **Metaphors** (implicit comparisons of unlike things without using like or as) and **similes** (explicit comparisons using like or as, or similar words) are common figures of speech. Others include **pun** (a play on words); **synecdoche** (a part of something is used to signify the whole: A gossip neighbor is a "wagging tongue"); **metonymy** (something closely associated with a subject is substituted for it: Britain's royalty is often referred to as "the crown"); **personification** (the attribution of human characteristics to non-human things); **hyperbole** (intentional overstatement or exaggeration used for effect: "This book bag weighs a ton"); **understatement** (the opposite of hyperbole); **paradox** (a statement that on the surface seems to be contradictory but, on closer reading, may turn out to be true: "For when I am weak, then I am strong"); **oxymoron** (a condensed form of paradox when two contradictory words are used together: "jumbo shrimp").

Word order: Just as poets choose their words carefully, so too do they decide where to put them. As you read, ask yourself what would change if the words were in a different order. Then ask why the poet chose the order she did.

Irony: A device that uses contradictory statements or situations to reveal a reality different from what appears to be true. There are different kinds of irony:

- **Verbal irony:** When a person says one thing but means another. Sarcasm is an extreme form of verbal irony that often uses false praise to hurt someone.
- **Situational irony:** The discrepancy between what appears to be true and what actually exists.
- **Dramatic irony:** When a writer allows the reader to know more about a situation than a character does.
- **Cosmic irony:** When a writer uses God, destiny, or fate to dash the hopes of a character or humankind, as in following Stephen Crane poem:

A Man Said to the Universe

A man said to the universe:

"Sir, I exist!"

"However," replied the universe,

"The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation."

Symbol: Something that represents something else. The meaning of symbols often is suggested by their context. The heart, for example, is a common symbol for love, just as night is for death.

Satire: The literary art of ridiculing people, ideas, institutions, and situations in an effort to expose or correct it.

Tone: The writer's attitude as expressed in the poem, and/or the mood the writer creates. What is the mood established by the following lines, from Katharyn Howd Machan's "Hazel Tells LaVerne"?

last night
in cleanin out my
howard johnsons ladies room
when all of a sudden
up pops this frog

Images: Language that speaks to the senses. Most often, poetic images appeal to sight (by creating verbal pictures), but they can appeal to hearing, touch, smell and taste, as well. They help readers experience the physical world in their imaginations, as in these opening lines of Jimmy Santiago Baca's "Green Chile": "I prefer red chile over my eggs / and potatoes for breakfast."

Sounds: The earliest poetry was chanted or sung, and most poems still are best experienced when read aloud. Some poetic sounds include **onomatopoeia** (the sound of a word suggests its meaning: buzz, quack, sizzle); **alliteration** (the repetition of the same consonant sounds at the start of words near each other: lovely, luscious lemons); **assonance** (the repetition of the same vowel sounds in nearby words: Lee was asleep in a tree). Notice the effect of sounds in these lines from John Updike's "Player Piano":

My stick fingers click with a snicker
And, chuckling, they knuckle the keys;
Light-footed, my steel feelers flicker
And pluck from these keys melodies.

Rhyme: Two or more words or phrases that repeat the same sounds. Rhyme can be used to create sound patterns.

Rhythm: In poetry, the recurrence of stressed and unstressed sounds. A rhythmic pattern of stresses is called the poem's **meter**.