

Literary Terms — Poetry

General Terms

Dramatic situation: answers the question: "Who is speaking to whom under what circumstances?"

Persona: the speaker of the poem; not to be confused with the author; sometimes the persona in the poem may not be the author.

Genre: Separate categories delineated by distinct style, form, and content

Lyric poetry: a particular genre; poems that are primarily about a subject and contain little narrative content; the poet's emotions, an abstract idea, a satirical insight, or a description of a person or place. The persona in a lyric is usually closely identified with the poet. Lyric poetry remains the largest genre.

Narrative poetry: another genre; that is, poetry whose main function is to tell a story. Like prose fiction, narrative poems have characters, plot, setting, and point of view, and may be discussed in the same terms as, say, a short story. The epic is a narrative poem about the heroic exploits of the hero. Other types are folk epics, literary epics, ballads, folk ballads, art or literary ballads, metrical romances, mock-heroic narratives, and realistic narratives.

The Language of Poetry

A poet's diction: the personal use of words and style that marks a poet's poetry.

Diction: refers to the individual words in a poem.

Level of diction: may range from slang at one extreme to formal usage at the other, although most poetry tends to fall somewhere in the middle.

Denotation: literal meaning

Connotation: implied meaning or feel that some words have acquired; what a word suggests.

Syntax: word order, poets often detract from standard usage.

Etymology: the history of a word's usage, its sources and changes in meaning over time.

Concrete diction: denote that which can be perceived by the senses.

Imagery or image: sensory details denoting specific physical experiences; sight is most often used in poetry but sound, touch, taste, and smell are too. Some images incorporate more than one sense perception as well.

Abstract diction: words that do not appeal to the senses but often carry the burden of meaning of a poem.

Onomatopoeia: refers to words whose sound imitates their meaning.

Figurative Language

Metaphor: a direct comparison between two unlike things.

Implied Metaphor: a comparison which is implied or suggested but not stated.

Simile: A comparison using "like" or "as."

Conceit: an extended metaphor, in most cases comparing things that apparently have almost nothing in common; often controls the entire poem.

Hyperbole: an overstatement; a comparison using conscious exaggeration.

Understatement: the opposite of hyperbole.

Allusion: a metaphor making direct comparison to a historical or literary event or character, a myth, a biblical reference, and so forth.

Metonymy: use of a related object to stand for the thing actually being talked about.

Synecdoche: use of a part for the whole, or vice versa.

Personification: giving human traits to non-human things or abstractions.

Paradox: an apparent contradiction or illogical statement.

Oxymoron: a short paradox, usually consisting of an adjective and noun with conflicting meanings.

Allegory and Symbol

Allegory: a narrative that exists on at least two levels simultaneously, a concrete literal level and a second level of abstract meaning; throughout an allegory a consistent sequence of parallels exists between the literal and the abstract. Sometimes allegories may imply third or fourth levels of meanings as well. In prose, we often refer to allegories as parables.

Symbol: any concrete thing or any action in a poem that implies meaning beyond its literal level.

Traditional symbols: hold roughly the same meaning for members of a given society.

Tone of voice

Tone: a speaker's implied attitude toward the words said.

Irony: the element of tone by which a poet may imply an attitude that is in fact contrary to what the words appear to say; its simplest form is sarcasm; its more complex forms are satire and epigram.