

## **Some Key Literary Terms in Poetry** **Referenced in Julia Alvarez's "How Will This Pandemic Affect Poetry?"**

*Definitions from "A Dictionary of Literary, Dramatic, and Cinematic Terms" by Barnet, Berman, and Burto; "How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry," by Edward Hirsch, and "A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms" by Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz.*

**meter:** a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry (from Greek term meaning "measure") - a way of describing rhythmic patterning in poetry. "Meter marks a poem as verse, as a made thing, a work of art. The first pleasures of meter are physical and intimately connected to bodily experience - to the heartbeat and the pulse, to breathing, walking, running, lovemaking, to listening to waves flowing and ebbing." (*Hirsch*)

**foot:** 2-3 syllables, one of which is stressed. A foot is the basic unit of measurement in a line of poetry.

Example: **hexameter:** a line of 6 metrical feet, one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable:

*"In pro/fuse strains/ of un/premed /ita/ ted art" (Percy Bysshe Shelley)*

Example: **iambic pentameter**

**iamb:** one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable

**pentameter:** 5 feet (=10 syllables)

*"The land/ was ours/ before/ we were/ the land's." (Robert Frost)*

Meter heightens attention, reinforces emotional effects, adds emphasis, can imitate the meaning of the words. Meter produces **rhythm** (recurrences at regular intervals).

**couplet:** 2 successive lines of poetry, usually rhymed - can stand on its own as an epigram or aphorism; can be a pithy conclusion to a stanza or whole poem; can be an organizing pattern in a long poem.

*"Had we but world enough, and time,  
This coyness, Lady, were no crime." (Andrew Marvell)*

**heroic couplet:** a pair of rhymed iambic pentameter lines:

*"Not only bounded to peculiar arts,  
But oft in those confined to single parts." (Alexander Pope)*

**rhyme:** the repetition of the identical or similar stressed sound or sounds. Not all poems use rhyme, however.

**sestina:** a poem of 6 unrhymed stanzas, in which the terminal words of each line are repeated in varying orders, followed by a tercet (a unit of 3 lines), which may include 3 or 6 of the terminal words. One of the more complicated of the French fixed forms of verse, the sestina originated in medieval Provence. Used by Dante and Petrarch and several English poets.

**ode:** a lyric poem of some length, serious in subject and dignified in style

Examples: *"Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to a Nightingale," both by John Keats*

**tercet:** 3 lines of verse which constitute a unit

**terza rima:** a series of interlocking tercets in which the second line of each one rhymes with the first and third lines of the succeeding tercet, *aba, bcb, cdc, etc.* Italian in origin, used by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Example in English poetry:

*Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind"*

**haiku:** the shortest form in Japanese poetry - 17 syllables in 3 lines (5-7-5) - frequently expresses delicate emotion or presents an image

*White cloud of mist  
above white  
cherry blossoms...  
Dawn-shining mountain (Basho)*

**"Hark, a lark"** - reference to Song in William Shakespeare's play "Cymbeline"

*Hark, hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings,  
And Phoebus 'gins arise, (Phoebus: the sun)  
His steeds to water at those springs  
On chaliced flowers that lies;  
And winking Mary-buds begin  
To ope their golden eyes:  
With every thing that pretty is,  
My lady sweet, arise:  
Arise, arise.*

The **Odyssey** is one of two major ancient Greek epic poems attributed to Homer (8th or 7th century B.C.E.). The poem is divided into 24 books. It follows the Greek hero **Odysseus, king of Ithaca**, and his journey home after the Trojan War. After the war, which lasted ten years, his journey lasts for ten additional years, during which time he encounters many perils and all his crewmates are killed. In his absence, Odysseus is assumed dead, and his wife Penelope and son Telemachus must contend with a group of unruly suitors who compete for Penelope's hand in marriage, but she remains faithful to Odysseus and they are finally reunited.

**alliteration:** repetition of initial consonant sounds in two or more words; a device of phonic echoes

*"He clasps the crag with crooked hands." (Tennyson)*

**onomatopoeia** (Greek for "the making of words or names") - the invention or use of a word whose sound echoes or suggests its meaning (*hiss, buzz, hum, rustle, murmur*)

*"And the **plashing** of waterdrops  
In the marble fountain..." (later: the **plopping** of the waterdrops") (Amy Lowell)*

**personification:** the attribution of human characteristics or feelings to non-human organisms, inanimate objects, or abstract ideas.

*"Because I could not stop for Death-  
He kindly stopped for me..." (Emily Dickinson)*

**simile:** an explicit comparison between essentially unlike things, introduced by a connective (usually "like" or "as")

*"I wandered lonely as a cloud..." (Wordsworth)*

*"As I looked the poplar rose in the shining air/like a slender throat..." (Delmore Schwartz)*

**metaphor:** a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another; a device for seeing - for experiencing - one thing (or idea) in terms of another; a comparison between two things omitting "like" or "as"

*"Hope is the thing with feathers-*

*That perches in the soul..." (Emily Dickinson)*

"There is a radical difference between saying that A is *the same as* B and saying that A *is like* B. Metaphor works by condensation and compression, simile by discursiveness and digression. Metaphor works by a process of interaction. It asks the reader to think through the relation between seemingly unlike things. Meaning emerges as an intimate collaborative process between writer and reader." (*Hirsch*)

**sonnet:** a 14-line rhyming poem (from Italian *sonetto*, a little sound or a little song).

The two main types of sonnet form in English are the English or Shakespearean sonnet, and the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet ("Petrarch's 317 sonnets to Laura are a kind of encyclopedia of passion." - *Hirsch*) These have different rhythm and rhyme patterns: the Petrarchan sonnet has 8 lines + 6 lines (an octave and a sestet), and the English sonnet has 3 quatrains and a concluding couplet. "The sonnet is a small vessel capable of plunging tremendous depths." (*Hirsch*). "A sonnet is a moment's monument." (*poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti*)