

KEY POETRY TERMS

With examples from the Clarke/Heaney and pre-1914 Literature poems.

Alliteration

What is it?

The repetition of words beginning with the same letter.

What is its effect?

To draw attention to a particular sound and/or movement, to intensify meaning, or to bind words in a sentence together.

Example

a **c**oarse **c**roaking that I **h**ad not **h**ead [‘Death of a Naturalist’];
worse than for the **w**oman who **w**aits ... [‘Baby-sitting’]

Allusion (see also Connotation)

What is it?

A word or phrase that suggests something else – often a story or idea that many people know.

What is its effect?

If many people can relate to it, it allows you to connect with the subject matter of the poem.

Example

Then the second lamb slips through her opened door,
the stone rolled away. [‘A Difficult Birth, Easter 1998’ – the allusion here is to Christ’s resurrection; the stone being rolled away from his tomb at Easter-tide to show that he had risen and gone.]

Ambiguity

What is it?

A word or phrase that could mean more than one thing.

What is its effect?

To get the reader thinking about the different possibilities in the word/phrase – perhaps both are relevant to the poem.

Example

As you ask may you skate
In the dark, for one more hour. [‘Catrin’. Does the poet mean actually in the dark of night, or does she imply that she as the mother is *in the dark* about her daughter/where she is going?]

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Anthropomorphism

What is it?

Giving human characteristics to an animal.

What is its effect?

Connects us to that animal being described; makes us more sympathetic towards it.

Example

He clasps the crag with crooked **hands** ... ['The Eagle']

Assonance

What is it?

The repetition of similar or identical vowel sounds in words which follow each other.

What is its effect?

Like alliteration, to draw attention to a particular sound and/or movement, to intensify or emphasise something, or to connect words in a sentence.

Example

a **heroine**, **her red head** bowed ... ['Cold Knap Lake']

Connotation (see also Allusion)

What is it?

An idea or feeling that is often associated with a specific word or phrase.

What is its effect?

To hint to the audience/readers that there is a bigger theme or idea behind the words. Perhaps to hint at what else might happen in the poem.

Example

Counting **bells knelling** classes to a close. ['Mid-Term Break' – These words have connotations of death: when funeral bells ring they are described as knelling.]

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Enjambement

What is it?

A technique in which the idea and perhaps rhythm of one line are *continued* and completed in the next line.

What is its effect?

May be used to show excitement. Can also suggest movement – just as the line moves across and down the page, so too it may refer to the real movement it is describing [see example]. It also draws attention to the words at the start of the next line – perhaps these are important?

Example

At the headrig, with a single pluck
Of reins, the sweating team turned round ... ['Follower' – the enjambement works here because starting a new line (and a new verse) is like the horses turning around in the field to plough the next furrow.]

Euphemism

What is it?

A word or expression used instead of saying something which might be unpleasant or embarrassing.

What is its effect?

To communicate an awkward emotion, often suggests how someone feels about a traumatic event, for instance a death.

Example

And tell me they were '**sorry for my trouble**' ['Mid-Term Break'];
'**Rest in soft peace ...**' ['On My First Sonne' – death turned into something comforting.]

First person

What is it?

Using the pronoun 'I'. Often means the piece is autobiographical.

What is its effect?

As if the poet is letting you in on something. Also: **second person**, the use of the pronoun 'you'. Poet addresses reader directly to get them involved.

Example

I sat all morning in the college sick bay ... ['Mid-Term Break']

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Free verse

What is it?

Poetry that avoids regular patterns of rhyme and rhythm, although it may use other repetitive patterns of word, phrases or structures.

What is its effect?

Doesn't sound so much like a poem – seems more natural; perhaps the poet is trying to speak to you directly.

Examples

'On the Train'; 'Storm on the Island'.

Imagery

What is it?

Use of word-pictures (images), figures of speech (similes, metaphors) and description.

What is its effect?

To evoke ideas feelings, objects, actions, states of mind ...

Examples

Many!

Metaphor

What is it?

Like the simile, is comparing one thing with another thing; but whereas the simile states that one thing is *like* another, the metaphor identifies them completely, without using the words 'like' or 'as'. So, 'that girl chattered like a monkey' is a simile, but 'that girl is a monkey' is a metaphor.

What is its effect?

To allow people to create a clear picture in their heads, by comparing the thing to something else that is striking. Perhaps we already have certain ideas with the thing (for instance a snare drum is a special drum used in the army) so this changes our view about the thing being compared.

Example

... the long grass **is a snare drum**. ['The Field-Mouse']; '**A Difficult Birth**' – the birth of the lamb is a metaphor for the 'birth' of the peace deal in Northern Ireland.

Also: **Extended Metaphor** – a metaphor which appears more than once in a poem. An **example** is the mouse in 'The Field Mouse'.

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Onomatopoeia

What is it?

Use of words which sound like the things they are describing.

What is the effect?

To further describe the scene by communicating to the reader/listener the sounds that were heard.

Example

The **slap** and **plop** were obscene threats. ['Death of a Naturalist' – the words 'slap' and 'plop' sound like the sounds they are describing.]

Oxymoron

What is it?

A phrase combining two terms that seem to be opposites.

What is the effect?

The poet can show us that two very different things were going on at the same time. They can make us think again about something (for instance a stormy sea) we took for granted. It can suggest unpredictability: that things could change at any time.

Example

You might think that the sea is company,
Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs ... ['Storm on the Island']

Pathetic fallacy

What is it?

Describing a natural thing like the weather or the sea, as if it is feeling the emotion expressed by the poet/characters.

What is the effect?

Emphasises the emotion/mood felt by the poet/characters by making it seem as if *everything* in the poem is feeling that emotion, even the natural world.

Example

I love to see the summer **beaming forth** ... ['Sonnet' – suggests the summer is as happy as the poet is.]

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Personification

What is it?

Giving human qualities to things that are not human. (See also **Anthropomorphism**.)

What is its effect?

Connects us to that thing being described; gives us more sympathy for it.

Example

Wild, wild the storm, and the sea high **running**,
Steady the roar of the gale, with incessant undertone **muttering**.
['Patrolling Barnegat']

Pun

What is it?

A play on words, in which two different meanings are suggested either by the same word or two similar sounding words.

What is its effect?

Sometimes for humorous effect, sometimes to allow the poet to communicate to us more than one meaning for this part of the poem.

Example

The title '**Mid-Term Break**' (could be school break; something damaged; broken family; broken bones/skull).

Repetition

What is it?

Repeating a word or phrase.

What is its effect?

Emphasises whatever is being repeated.

Example

Please call later. And **calling later**,
calling later their phones ring **in the rubble**
and **in the rubble** of suburban kitchens ... ['On the Train' – here the repetition of 'calling later' suggests relatives calling and calling to try and contact loved ones; repetition of 'in the rubble' suggests the physical devastation of the crash is just as great as the emotional devastation in the homes of those who knew victims of the crash.]

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Rhyme

What is it?

The use of words with matching sounds, often at the end of each line.

What is its effect?

Links significant words together, connects lines in the poem. Can, as in 'Patrolling Barnegat' suggest something going on and on if all the lines have the same rhyme.

Example

Wild, wild the storm, and the sea high running,
Steady the roar of the gale, with incessant undertone muttering ... ' ['Patrolling Barnegat' – here the rhymes at the ends of the lines link the words together, and since they are verbs, suggests that action is going on and on ...]

Rhythm

What is it?

Just as in music, the pattern of beats created by the words in a poem and the way they are organized.

What is its effect?

Can move the poem along at a certain pace. Like a song, can sometimes suggest the rhythm of something it is describing. Rhythm often used when describing movement.

Example

Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod. ['Follower' – when saying 'dipping and rising', your voice works up and down in rhythm, suggesting the up and down motion of what is being described.]

Similes

What is it?

Comparing one thing to another thing using the words 'like' or 'as'.

What is its effect?

Like a metaphor, it allows us to build up a clear picture of the thing being described. Perhaps we already have certain ideas with the thing (for instance pebbles are small stones; things that cannot be eaten) so this changes our view about the thing being compared.

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Similes (*contd.*)

Example

Flint-white, purple. They lie scattered **like inflated pebbles**. [‘At a Potato Digging’ – the comparison with pebbles describes what the potatoes look like, but also suggests they cannot be eaten, just as during the famine people couldn’t eat the diseased potatoes.]

Sonnet

What is it?

A particular type of poem, very traditional, and usually only a single stanza. It is always fourteen lines long. Often the first eight lines express one idea, and the next six express another or change the point-of-view.

What is its effect?

Since it is so short, a sonnet usually is about **one** idea or only explores **one** incident (‘Sonnet’ is about Clare’s attitude to the beauty of nature in summer; ‘Patrolling Barnegat’ is about a storm). As a result, it is usually very descriptive, with very little narrative.

Examples

‘Patrolling Barnegat’; ‘Sonnet’.

Tone

What is it?

The general mood/atmosphere that is communicated in the poem, often by the way in which something is expressed.

What is its effect?

Controls your emotional response to the poem.

Examples

The tone of ‘**On the Train**’ is one of apprehension: could the same tragedy occur again? ‘**Death of a Naturalist**’ by contrast is a humorous poem, with descriptions of Heaney’s innocent childhood views of frogs at school and then the shattering of that innocence when he discovered the frogs again ‘poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.’