

Key Literary Terms

Remember, although the poem is printed out for you in the unseen section, this is not a comprehension exercise. You are analysing a poem, so must show an awareness of poetic techniques. Below is a list of basic literary terms with which you should be familiar.

Alliteration: The repetition of consonant sounds, particularly at the start of words.

Allusion: A reference to another piece of literature, work of art, person, place etc.

Ambiguity: A word or expression which has two or more possible meanings.

Anthropomorphism: Giving human qualities or feelings to something which isn't human.

Assonance: The repetition of vowel sounds.

Colloquialism: A local or regional expression which may not be understood by outsiders.

Consonance: The repetition of consonants or consonant patterns, usually at the end of words. The words need not rhyme or contain the same vowel sounds. 'Think, blank'; 'Stroke, luck'.

Convention: An established technique, literary device or practice.

Couplet: Two lines, usually rhyming and having the same metre, which form a complete thought.

Genre: A particular category of writing. Each genre has its own style, form etc.

Imagery: Figurative language (metaphors, similes etc.)

Lyric: A poem in which personal and subjective feelings are expressed. Lyric poems are usually short and songlike.

Metaphor / Simile: Drawing a comparison to suggest a likeness. 'She's an angel'. A simile is like a metaphor except that the comparison is usually introduced by 'like' or 'as'. 'My love is like a red, red rose.' A metaphor is usually considered stronger than a simile.

Octet: A set of eight lines.

Onomatopoeia: A word which sounds like its meaning: 'squelch', 'slap', 'thud', 'screech', 'cheep'.

Paradox: A seeming contradiction. "Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again." (C.S. Lewis to his godchild, Lucy Barfield, to whom he dedicated *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*)

Persona: A character assumed by the poet. Derek Mahon adopts the persona of Bruce Ismay in 'After the Titanic'.

Personification: The representation of an abstraction or a thing as a human or some sort of divine being. For example, the idea of death is often represented by the Grim Reaper.

Quatrain: A group of four lines of verse.

Sestet: A group of six lines of verse.

Sibilance: Words which make or contain an 's' or 'sh' sound. "The hissing snake..."

Sonnet: A poem consisting of fourteen lines arranged according to a prescribed scheme. Shakespearean sonnets consist of three quatrains and a couplet. The couplet usually sums up the main idea (theme) of the poem or looks at the theme in a fresh way.

Symbol: Something which represents something else. Symbols have a deeper meaning than signs and can sometimes provoke strong, emotional responses.

Tercet: A group of three lines of verse. The lines often rhyme.

Tone: The attitude or feeling implied by the style of writing. A tone may be melancholy or optimistic, for example. The tone may change one or more times during the course of the poem.

Villanelle: A formal, ordered poem which consists of nineteen lines divided into five tercets (three-line stanzas) and a quatrain (four-line stanza). There are only two rhymes throughout, and two refrains. The two refrains are used as the first and third lines of the first stanza, and thereafter alternately repeated as the final line of the remaining tercets. The refrains come together again as the final two lines of the quatrain. (This sounds quite complicated until you look at the poem and see how straightforward it actually is.) Villanelles are associated with thoughts of death and grief.

Volta: This comes from the Italian word for 'turn'. A volta is the turn in thought in a sonnet that is often indicated by such initial words as 'but', 'yet' or 'and yet'.