

What terminology do I need to know?



Some books and websites will provide a lovely long list of poetic terms. Most of them can be ignored unless you happen to find them interesting. You will not get marks in an exam for spotting them. Here are some that are worth knowing about.

ALLITERATION

This is one of the easiest things in the world, isn't it? Kids in Infant class can do this, and enjoy it even if they don't know the words for it. (Ten to one someone has written it in large letters on some classroom wall, though.) Like other devices, one does have to ask - so what? - when we come across it. Sometimes it's obvious. All those *mmm* sounds in the first verse of 'To Autumn' giving us the feeling of the fullness of the autumnal fruits and the still balmy atmosphere. (The question of why *mmm* evokes that response and *nnn* a very different one is harder to answer but most of us are prepared to take it on trust for the time being.)

What, though, is the point of the alliteration in, say, 'Inversnaid'? 'Degged with dew, dappled with dew' for instance? Is there something about a 'd' sound which I'm missing here? Maybe. However, there are many moments in writing when the repeated sound is simply more sonorous, more melodious to the ear, without there being a 'meaning' to it. Hopkins loved the richness of words and the sounds they made. Probably one of the few pleasures left to him - and which he felt guilty about, as I recall. Poor chap.

Anyway, the point is, that not all alliteration can be said to be significant in a specific way. This doesn't mean it shouldn't be mentioned but that students might have to accept that it is a general effect in the same way that rhyme is. The rhyme doesn't have a meaning, it is just part of how the poem expresses itself as a poem.

IMAGE METAPHOR SIMILE

My cat is as vain as a film star or a queen like Cleopatra.

What's this? It's an image – specifically a comparison, something extremely common in writing but especially in poetry.

Even more specifically, it's a simile. It uses *as* or *like*. Those words make the fact that it's a comparison really obvious. If the writer said 'My cat is a Queen' or 'My cat is a film star' the term would be metaphor. Most of the time it's pretty clear that my cat isn't really a Queen so the use of *as* or *like* is up to you as a writer, whether to use them.

Lots of teachers make a big thing of the difference between similes and metaphors but I can't see the point of that. The important thing is that they create a way of looking at something. If you were commenting on this extract – she's a tightrope walker on padded paws – the important thing to say is that the writer creates an images of the cat (or 'presents the cat', or 'sees the cat') as a tightrope walker, a creature of great dexterity and skill; in this case, the ability to walk along narrow objects. Whether it's a simile or a metaphor really

doesn't matter. The cat is also seen as having padded paws – soft and rather large. This is a contrast to the image of the tightrope walker who you might expect to have small dainty shoes (rather than big fluffy slippers). Does that work well or not? Don't always assume that the poet (or any writer) is perfect. Don't assume they've got it right. They might have written something which doesn't work all that well, or which contains a contradiction or which simply doesn't make sense!

ENJAMBMENT - RUN ON LINES

Enjambment! I think this must be one of the favourite words of those who write about poetry – and a word most poets would never themselves use. It means a line which doesn't pause at the end of a line but carries on to the next line. Examples are so plentiful that it's hardly worth drawing attention to.

Another word for enjambment is a 'run-on' line. The opposite is an end-stopped line, though this is a bit misleading as the line does have to stop. It could merely pause, like this, and then resume.

There is a grey area where you could argue whether a line runs on or not...

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch eves run...

Line 3 definitely runs on to line 4 – but what about 1 to 2 or 2 to 3?

A lot of late 20th and 21st C poetry is written in a conversational style, or a style which makes it hard to distinguish from prose if heard read aloud. (It's sometimes hard to distinguish from prose when seen on the page, too!) What such a way of writing does lead to is, yes, a lot of enjambment.

It seems to me that at one extreme, run-on lines are a feature of poetry which is very nearly prose and at the other extreme, poetry which is full of end-stopped lines and has no run-on lines is likely to be rather mechanical but might well be good humorous verse.

Go and see if you can find examples which prove me wrong.