

Art of Telling — Glossary of Poetic Terms

A student-facing reference for Unit II (Poetry)

Reference for: Elizabeth Bishop • Robert Frost • William Carlos Williams • Mary Oliver — Unit II of the Art of Telling salon, 2601 Parkway, Philadelphia. Print this page or keep it open while you read and write. Every term is defined briefly and illustrated, where possible, with a line from one of the Session 5 poems.

How to use this handout: When you encounter a term in class or in your own reading, find it here, read the definition, and look at the example. Then return to the poem and listen for the same move. The point is not memorization. The point is a working vocabulary you can use to talk about, and write, your own poems.

Sources for examples: Bishop, “One Art” (1976); Frost, “Birches” (1916); Williams, “The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923); Oliver, “The Summer Day” (1990).

A

Allegory. A sustained metaphor in which characters or events systematically represent abstract ideas.

Example. In Frost’s “Birches,” climbing toward heaven and bending back to earth can be read allegorically as the human imagination’s longing to escape life while still belonging to it.

Alliteration. Repetition of initial consonant sounds in nearby words.

Example. Frost: “Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning.” The repeated /l/ links the loaded branches to a slow, weighted music.

Allusion. A reference to another text, work, person, or event.

Example. Frost’s “heaven’s inner dome” alludes to the medieval and Renaissance image of the firmament as a crystalline sphere above the earth.

Anaphora. Repetition of the same opening word or phrase across successive lines or stanzas.

Example. Bishop’s villanelle uses anaphora-by-refrain: “The art of losing isn’t hard to master” returns five times, each time slightly modulated.

Apostrophe. A direct address to an absent person, an abstraction, or the reader.

Example. Oliver: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” — the reader is addressed directly and asked to answer.

Ars poetica. A poem about the art of poetry itself.

Example. Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” is a covert ars poetica: it argues, simply by existing, that perception is the foundation of poetry.

Assonance. Repetition of vowel sounds in nearby words.

Example. Williams: “glazed with rain / water.” The long /ā/ sound carries the line across the break.

B

Blank verse. Unrhymed iambic pentameter — the dominant meter of serious English poetry from Marlowe through Milton, Wordsworth, and Frost.

Example. Frost’s “Birches” is fifty-nine lines of blank verse, varied with metrical substitutions for emphasis.

C

Cadence. The natural rhythm of a line, with or without regular meter.

Example. Oliver’s long, sentence-shaped lines have a calm, breath-paced cadence; Williams’s short broken lines have a halting, looking-paced cadence.

Caesura. A pause within a line, usually marked by punctuation.

Example. Frost: “So was I once myself a swinger of birches. // And so I dream of going back to be.” The strong end-stop after “birches” acts as a caesural rest before the dream begins.

Catalogue. A list, deliberately ordered, used as a structural device.

Example. Bishop catalogues her losses in escalating scale: keys, an hour, names, places, a mother’s watch, three loved houses, two cities, two rivers, a continent, “you.”

Conceit. An extended, often surprising metaphor sustained across multiple lines or stanzas.

Example. Frost’s ice-storm becomes “heaven’s inner dome” cracked into “heaps of broken glass” — a conceit that turns weather into theology.

Confessional poetry. A mid-twentieth-century mode (Lowell, Plath, Sexton) that draws openly on the poet’s private biographical material.

Example. Bishop sits at the edge of confessional poetry but mostly resists it; “One Art” is one of her rare deliberately personal works.

Consonance. Repetition of consonant sounds anywhere in nearby words.

Example. Bishop: “fluster ... faster ... vaster ... disaster.” The hardening rhyme sounds tighten as the losses grow.

Couplet. A two-line stanza (or a pair of rhymed lines).

Example. Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” is built from four couplets — a three-word line over a one- or two-word line.

D

Dactyl. A metrical foot of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed (“MERrily”).

Diction. Word choice. May be high (formal, Latinate) or low (plain, Anglo-Saxon).

Example. Williams’s diction is plain and Anglo-Saxon (“red,” “wheel,” “rain,” “chickens”); Frost’s is similarly plain but set inside high blank verse.

Dramatic irony. When the reader knows something the speaker or subject does not.

Example. Frost’s narrator dreams of “going back” to swinging birches; the reader hears the adult’s awareness that the boy cannot, in fact, return.

E

Ecopoetics. Poetry that engages the natural world and the human relationship with it as a subject of attention and ethics.

Example. Oliver’s “The Summer Day”, with its grasshopper and its closing moral demand, sits squarely in the late-twentieth-century ecopoetic tradition.

Elegy. A poem of mourning, often for a person but sometimes for a place, a self, or a way of being.

Example. Bishop’s “One Art” is a half-disguised elegy for a love affair — a villanelle that becomes the elegy it pretends to refuse.

End-stopped line. A line that ends with a syntactic pause (period, comma, semicolon, the end of a clause).

Example. Oliver: “I do know how to pay attention...” — a complete clause whose end-stop lets the reader rest before the next move.

Enjambment. A line that runs over into the next without a syntactic break, so the syntax “steps over” the line ending.

Example. Williams: “a red wheel / barrow” — the compound noun is broken across the line ending, slowing perception itself.

Eye rhyme. Words that look alike on the page but sound different (“love” / “move”).

F

Figurative language. Umbrella term for non-literal language — metaphor, simile, personification, metonymy, synecdoche, and others.

Foot. A unit of metrical measurement, usually made of two or three syllables (iamb, trochee, anapest, dactyl, spondee).

Example. Iamb: “when I.” Trochee: “LOADed.”
Spondee: “ice-storms.”

Frame / ring composition. A structure that returns at the end to the opening image, often with one telling change.

Example. Frost closes “Birches” by returning to the swinger’s gesture from a wiser, sadder distance — a small ring around the whole meditation.

Free verse. Verse without regular meter or rhyme, organized instead by phrasing, breath, and the deliberate placement of line breaks.

Example. Williams and Oliver both write free verse, but their lines feel entirely different: Williams’s breath is short and broken, Oliver’s long and sentence-shaped.

H

Haiku. A three-line Japanese form, traditionally 5–7–5 syllables, focused on a single image, often with a seasonal reference.

High Modernism. The 1920s literary moment of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), and Williams’s *Spring and All* (1923). Williams writes inside this moment and against its European bent.

Example. Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” appears in *Spring and All* (1923) as a small American counter-statement to Eliot’s European collage.

Hyperbole. Deliberate exaggeration for effect.

I

Iamb. A metrical foot of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed (“toDAY”).

Example. Frost: “when I / see BIRCH / es BEND / to LEFT / and RIGHT” — five iambs in a row.

Iambic pentameter. A line of five iambs (ten syllables, alternating unstress/stress).

Example. The dominant line of “Birches,” and of most of Shakespeare and Milton.

Idiom. A phrase whose meaning is not literal (“spilling the beans”).

Example. Frost: “One could do worse than be a swinger of birches” adopts a rural conversational idiom inside a high-form blank-verse line.

Image. A sensory detail rendered in language — sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, motion. The basic unit of poetic meaning.

Example. Williams: a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside white chickens. The whole poem is image; nothing is said about it directly.

Imagism. An early-twentieth-century movement (Pound, H.D., Williams) insisting on direct treatment of “the thing” and the rejection of abstraction.

Example. “The Red Wheelbarrow” is the most-taught imagist poem in American literature.

Internal rhyme. A rhyme between a word inside a line and one at the end of the same line, or between two words inside a line.

Irony. A gap between what is said and what is meant, or between expectation and outcome.

Example. Bishop’s refrain “The art of losing isn’t hard to master” is ironic by the end: the poem has demonstrated the opposite.

L

Lineation. The act of breaking a sentence or thought into poetic lines. The poet’s most distinctive tool, the one prose does not possess.

Example. Williams's entire poem is a single sentence broken across eight lines. The line breaks are the poem.

Litotes (understatement). Deliberate restraint that achieves emphasis through indirection.

Example. Bishop: "The art of losing isn't hard to master." The whole poem proves the opposite — which is the point of the understatement.

Lyric "I". The first-person speaker of a poem; a position constructed for the poem, not a biographical confession.

Example. Bishop's "I" in "One Art" is closer to autobiography than most of her lyric "I"s, but it is still a constructed voice on the page.

M

Metaphor. A figure equating two unlike things, asserting that one IS the other, without "like" or "as."

Example. Frost: ice-storms are "heaps of broken glass" and "heaven's inner dome" — weather becomes architecture, then theology.

Meter. A regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line.

Example. Frost works mainly in iambic pentameter; Williams and Oliver use no regular meter; Bishop's villanelle is loosely iambic pentameter.

Metonymy. A closely associated thing standing for another ("the pen" for writing, "the crown" for the monarchy).

Example. In "Birches", "the truth broke in" personifies and metonymizes Truth as a domestic interrupter.

Modernism. A broad early-twentieth-century literary movement that broke with traditional form and embraced fragmentation, allusion, and the urban present.

Example. Williams is an American modernist who pushes against Eliot's European, allusion-soaked

modernism. Frost is sometimes read as a counter-modernist.

Mood. What the reader feels while reading. Distinct from tone, which is the speaker's attitude.

Example. Oliver's "The Summer Day" establishes a mood of quiet reverence even before the closing question lands.

O

Octave. An eight-line stanza, or the opening eight lines of an Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet.

Ode. A formal, elevated address to a person, thing, or idea.

Onomatopoeia. A word that sounds like what it means.

Example. Frost: "they **click** upon themselves / As the breeze rises" — the word names the sound it makes.

P

Paradox. A statement that seems contradictory but reveals a deeper truth.

Example. Bishop's closing parenthetical "(Write it!)" is a small paradox: the poem about not being able to bear the loss insists, in real time, on being written.

Pastoral. A poem set in or evoking the rural world.

Example. "Birches" is a New England pastoral — a working farm setting elevated by blank verse and philosophical meditation.

Persona. A speaker explicitly different from the poet, as in a dramatic monologue.

Personification. Giving human attributes to non-human things.

Example. Frost: “Truth broke in / With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm.” Truth is given a body and an attitude.

Plain style. A deliberately stripped-down diction. Williams, Kenyon, and Oliver are modern masters.

Example. Oliver: “I do know how to pay attention.” Anglo-Saxon, monosyllabic, conversational — and unmistakable.

Q

Quatrain. A four-line stanza.

Example. Bishop’s villanelle closes with a quatrain (lines 16–19), where both refrains return together.

R

Refrain. A repeated line, phrase, or word that returns at fixed intervals.

Example. Bishop’s villanelle has two refrains — “The art of losing isn’t hard to master” and “to be a disaster” — which alternate and finally join in the closing quatrain.

Register. The level of formality or social context of language — biblical, conversational, technical, colloquial.

Example. Frost mixes high (Miltonic blank verse) and low (rural saying) registers in a single poem.

Rhetorical question. A question asked for effect, not for an answer.

Example. Oliver opens with three: “Who made the world? / Who made the swan, and the black bear? / Who made the grasshopper?”

Rhyme. Identity of sound between two words, usually at line ends. Perfect rhyme matches both vowel and final consonant; slant rhyme matches only one.

Example. Bishop’s villanelle uses perfect end-rhyme throughout (master / fluster / disaster).

S

Scansion. The process of marking the metrical pattern of a line — the working tool for hearing meter.

Sestet. A six-line stanza, or the closing six lines of an Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet.

Sestina. A 39-line form (six sestets + a closing tercet) in which six end-words rotate through six positions, then all appear in the closing tercet.

Example. Bishop’s “Sestina” (1965) is the most famous twentieth-century American example.

Sibilance. Repetition of /s/ or /sh/ sounds.

Example. Frost: “So low for long, they never right themselves.”

Simile. A metaphor using “like” or “as” to make the comparison explicit.

Example. Frost: “You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen ... such heaps of broken glass to sweep away.” The dome-of-heaven simile compresses theology into weather.

Slant rhyme. A near-rhyme in which the vowel or final consonant matches but not both (“prove” / “love”).

Sonnet. A 14-line poem, traditionally in iambic pentameter, with a defined rhyme scheme. Italian (Petrarchan) sonnets divide into octave + sestet; English (Shakespearean) sonnets into three quatrains + couplet.

Example. Bishop’s “One Art” is a villanelle, not a sonnet, but compare it with Clifton’s 14-line “won’t you celebrate with me” in Session 6 — the same sonnet count, used very differently.

Sound of sense. Frost’s craft doctrine: that the rhythm of a natural human sentence, set against a regular meter, is the deepest music available to English-language poetry.

Example. “When I see birches bend to left and right” scans as iambic pentameter but sounds like ordinary speech.

Speaker. The voice doing the talking in a poem. Not necessarily the poet.

Example. In “The Summer Day,” the speaker is closer to Oliver than not — but the position is still a construction for the page.

Spondee. A metrical foot of two stressed syllables (“ice-storms”).

Example. Frost: “**LOAD**ed with **ICE**” begins the line with a trochee + spondee, weighing the line down the way ice weighs the branch.

Stanza. A grouped set of lines, separated from the next group by white space — the poem’s paragraph.

Example. Bishop’s villanelle has six stanzas: five tercets and a closing quatrain.

Substitution (metrical). Replacing one foot with another (trochee for iamb, spondee for iamb) to create local emphasis inside a regular meter.

Example. Frost substitutes trochees and spondees freely in “Birches” — “**LOAD**ed with **ICE**” weighs the line; “**SO LOW** for **LONG**” sustains the burdened image.

Symbol. An image that points to a meaning beyond itself, while the literal image remains fully present.

Example. The birch in Frost’s poem is a literal birch and also a symbol for the imagination’s reach upward.

Synecdoche. A part standing for the whole (“all hands on deck” — “hands” for sailors).

Example. Williams’s “white chickens” could be read as synecdoche for the whole working yard — the chickens stand for the farmstead.

T

Tercet. A three-line stanza.

Example. Bishop’s villanelle is built mostly of tercets — five of them, before the closing quatrain.

Tone. The speaker’s attitude toward the subject and the reader. Distinct from mood, which is what the reader feels.

Example. Oliver’s tone is reverent without being religious; Bishop’s is wry on the surface and devastated underneath.

Trochee. A metrical foot of one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed (“ga-ther”).

Example. Frost begins his line “**LOAD**ed with ice” with a trochee, breaking the iambic contract at the precise moment the ice arrives.

V

Verse. Either poetry in general or a single line of poetry. Context decides which.

Villanelle. A 19-line French form: five tercets plus a closing quatrain, with two refrains alternating across the tercets and joining in the final quatrain. Rhyme scheme ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA.

Example. Bishop’s “One Art” is the most-taught twentieth-century English-language villanelle.

Voice. The recognizable habits of diction, syntax, rhythm, and stance that make a writer’s work identifiable.

Example. Each of the four Session 5 poets has a wholly distinct voice: Williams’s clipped breath; Frost’s plainspoken meditation; Bishop’s wry control; Oliver’s reverent attention.

Volta. The “turn” of a poem — the point where the argument, feeling, or distance pivots.

Example. Bishop’s volta lives in the parenthetical “(Write it!)” of the last line — the form audibly cracks open.

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