

Devices of Poetry

Every poem is unique and has special qualities of its own. Some of these are properties common to all poetry. In order to appreciate poetry, it is necessary to learn how to recognize these “special qualities.” They are called devices and can be found when we analyze a poem. However, these devices may be divided into three groups: structural, sense, and sound.

Structural Devices

1. Contrast

Contrast is a rhetorical device through which writers identify differences between two subjects, places, persons, things, or ideas. Simply, it is a type of opposition between two objects, highlighted to emphasize their differences. Sometimes the contrast is immediately obvious and sometimes implied. For instance, in the lines from *The Ancient Mariner* there is an **obvious contrast** between the motion of the ship which was travelling so quickly that it ‘burst into the silent sea’ and the complete lack of motion which immediately follows: ‘Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down.’ On the other hand, in the two poems *Break, Break, Break* and *Lucy*, the contrast between life and death is **implied**. In the former poem, the speaker describes that everything is well for the fisherman’s boy and his sister, the sailor who sings in his boat, and the stately ships which go on to their harbor. All these indicate that life goes on. The speaker implicitly laments the death (loss) of his friend (the absence of the ‘touch’ of a hand and the ‘sound’ of a voice). Similarly the contrast between life and death is expressed in *Lucy*. In the last stanza, the speaker states that though Lucy’s death does not bring any change to other’s life, a big difference is made in his life as he passionately loves her.

2. Illustration

Illustration is a decoration or interpretation which usually takes the form of a vivid picture by which a poet may make an idea clear. For example, in *Break, Break, Break* the speaker uses pictures of the fisherman’s boy, the sailor lad, and the stately ships to stress the fact that life goes on even if someone dies or suffers. Moreover, in *The Ancient Mariner*, the poet uses pictures to illustrate that the ship is motionless: the sails dropt down, the sun stands directly above the mast, and that the sailors stuck for several days. In *Lucy*, the poet illustrates the unrecognized beauty of Lucy by comparing her to a hidden violet and the first star to shine in the sky.

3. Repetition

Repetition is a literary device that repeats the same words or phrases a few times to make an idea clearer and more memorable. In poetry, repetition is repeating words, phrases, lines, or stanzas. Repetition is used to emphasize a feeling or idea, create rhythm, and/or develop a sense of urgency. For example, the word 'water' is repeated several times in *The Ancient Mariner*. The poet makes the readers feel how vast the ocean is by repeating the word 'water' over and over again. At the same time he helps the readers to understand how thirsty the sailors are. For the sailors, water is something that is everywhere and at the same moment nowhere.

Sense Devices

1. Simile

Simile is a direct comparison between two different things and can be recognized by the use of the words 'like' and 'as.' For instance, in *The Ancient Mariner*, by comparing the real ship to a painted one (as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean), Coleridge enables us to imagine just how still the ship was. We immediately see it like a ship in the middle of a painted picture, unmoving, unchanging, destined to stay in the same place for ever. Also, in *Lucy*, Wordsworth compares the girl to a star (fair as a star...). By bringing together the girl and the star (and making it the very fast star of the evening), the poet helps us to understand that Lucy had the sort of beauty one could easily fail to notice.

2. Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech that makes an implicit, implied, or hidden comparison between two things that are unrelated, but which share something in common. A metaphor is a comparison between two things that states one thing is another in order to help explain an idea or show hidden similarities. In the poem *Lucy*, Wordsworth does not say that the girl was like a violet. He writes 'A violet by a mossy stone/ Half hidden from the eye.) In this poem, Lucy is a violet. The metaphor vividly represents a girl of rare beauty who lived unknown similar to a violet that is half hidden by a mossy stone. Another striking example of metaphor is found in the line 'the furrow followed free' from *The Ancient Mariner* because a furrow, when taken literally is only to be found in a ploughed field. In this context it is used to describe the speed of the ship.

3. Personification

Personification is a figure of speech in which inanimate or non-human object is given human attributes. This device is often used in poetry to enhance the meaning and beauty of poems. For example, in William Blake's *The Sick Rose*, the worm's 'dark secret love' kills the rose. A worm does not literally possess any "love," so this is an example of personification, where human characteristics or emotions (love) are attributed to non-human things (worm). In Tennyson's *Break, Break, Break*, the day is given a living attribute 'a day that is dead.' The speaker here wants to express his longing to the lost old days that are never going to return back to him.

Sound Devices

1. Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of a speech sound in a sequence of nearby words. Usually the term is applied only to consonants. Alliterative sounds create rhythm and mood and can have particular connotations. An obvious example occurs in *The Ancient Mariner*:

The **f**air **b**reeze **b**lew, the white **f**oam **f**lew,

The **f**urrow **f**ollowed **f**ree.

The repeated 'b' and 'f' sounds here make the lines run quickly and give the impression of a ship travelling at high speed. Further on, the line 'Day after **d**ay, **d**ay after **d**ay', the repeated 'd' sound suggests both monotony and immobility.

2. Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is a word whose sound hints at its meaning, such as bang, buzz, cuckoo, crash, and hiss. The term is also used to describe a group of words in which sound and sense reinforce each other.

3. Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of identical or similar vowels—especially in stressed syllables—in a sequence of nearby words. For example, in *The Sick Rose*, the repetition of the vowel sound /o/ in the first line 'O Rose thou art sick', sets the melancholic tone for the rest of the entire poem. In *Break, Break, Break*, the repetition of that long /o/ vowel sound ("cold," "stones," and "O") besides

adding sadness, helps to slow the reader down. In *Lucy* poem, the repetition of the sound /i:/ in “When Lucy ceased to be” draws the reader’s attention to the beautiful girl who is no longer alive.

4. Rhyme

Rhyme is the repetition of final sounds of words, particularly words appearing at the ends of lines. Skillful rhyming can be very effective. So many rhymes in rapid succession quicken the pace of the poem as in the first stanza of *The Ancient Mariner*. Besides the rhymes at the end of each line, the internal rhymes “blew, flew, free, first, burst, and sea” add very much to the high speed of the ship. When the ship stops, Coleridge does not use internal rhymes and the pace becomes much slower in the next stanza, only two rhymes “noon and moon.”