

Resources 2: Poetic Devices (Australian poetry context)

(Note: This glossary of poetic devices and list of poems by indigenous authors and by non-indigenous authors with indigenous content were developed as a resource for this WebQuest.)

The examples following the definitions below are mainly drawn from poems or songs either written by indigenous writers or by non-indigenous writers on indigenous themes, even though many of these poems are not looked at in this WebQuest. Where devices could not be illustrated using Australian poems or songs, an example has been selected from another text selected for this WebQuest. (The poem title and poet's name are given in brackets.)

alliteration: the deliberate repetition of consonant sounds:

- 'The boundaries are broken', 'Hold back the hate/ And hasten the dying' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation'),
- 'The warrior wake/Under the bridge at Wilcannia.' (David Campbell, 'Mootwingee'),
- 'What killed the kangaroo-doe, slender skeleton...?' (Judith Wright, 'River Bend')

antithesis: balanced contrast for special effect

apostrophe: an address to a person absent or dead or to an abstract entity:

- 'White Lady Methylate!' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation')

archaism: old-fashioned word or saying:

- 'Harried we were, and spent... Ere as the cranes we went' (Mary Gilmore, 'The Waradgergy Tribe')

assonance: deliberate repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds, e.g. the 'a' sound in the following:

- 'at Wilcannia/ and hand around the flagon' (David Campbell, 'Mootwingee')

cadence: a sequence of sounds achieving a falling effect:

- 'hasten the dying' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation') 'We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon' (Oodgeroo, 'We Are Going')

contrast (definition):

- 'We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon' (Oodgeroo, 'We Are Going')

diction: poet's distinctive choices in vocabulary as in the phrases, 'archaic diction' ('merry') and 'diction drawn from another culture or context' ('tomahawk') in the following lines:

- 'look in vain for the gleam of the *tomahawk*/ That but yesterday was *merry* in the tree-tops' (Charles Harpur, 'Aboriginal Death Song')
- 'They can laugh at me, old Maggie, old *Jilligan* -/ *Numbagina* skin woman belong *Mirriwung* tribe.' (Mary Durack, 'Lament for the Drowned Country' (extract))

echo: repetition of key word or idea for effect (example here shows variation):

- 'The tribes are all gone/The boundaries are broken... The tribes are all gone,/The spears are all broken.' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation')

ellipsis: a circumlocution, a round-about way of expressing something:

- 'White Lady Methylate!/Keep us warm and from crying./Hold back the hate/And hasten the dying.' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation')

epigram, aphorism: pithy or witty saying.

euphemism: more favourable alternative name for an unpleasant or ugly thing or event.

hyperbole: exaggeration for dramatic effect:

- 'The tribes are all gone,/The spears are all broken' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation'),
- 'Across the mirage and the centuries/Pool wanders there with Mr Burke.' (David Campbell, 'Mootwingee')

juxtaposition

litotes: saying something positive by using two negatives.

metaphor: a comparison (without using 'as' or 'like') when one thing is said to *be*, or described as *being*, another:

- 'We stumble along with a half-white mind.' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation'),
- 'These pillow-case warriors/Arms stretched wide in sleep.' (David Campbell, 'Mootwingee'),
- 'We are the corroboree and the bora ground...' (Oodgeroo, 'We Are Going'),
- 'Last night a dog howled somewhere,/a hungry ghost in need of sacrifice' (Judith Wright, 'River Bend')

onomatopoeia: "sound echoing sense"; use of words resembling the sounds they mean.

oxymoron: a seeming contradiction in two words put together.

paradox: seeming contradiction that surprises by its pithiness:

- 'Pecked out of dream/Out of rock' (David Campbell, 'Mootwingee')

pathetic fallacy: a transfer of human feelings onto impersonal agencies; taking advantage of coincidence to suggest causal link between feeling and event.

personification: attribution of human motives or behaviours to impersonal agencies or objects:

- 'White Lady Methylate! Keep us warm and from crying' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation'),
- 'The swollen winter river/curves over stone, a wild perpetual voice.' (Judith Wright, 'River Bend')

poetic prose: prose which contains the cadence, rhythm and inflection of poetry, and may also contain poetic devices such as repetition, rhetorical questions, and sound patterning. e.g.

Keating's Redfern speech.

prose poetry: poems or parts of poems which may have the layout of poetry, or be published as a 'poem', but which contains few poetic devices and would not be out of place in prose. e.g. Roland Robinson's 'poem' '[The Star Tribes](#)'.

rhyme: repetition of same sounds.

rhyming couplet: a pair of lines which end-rhyme expressing one clear thought:

- 'We are tired of the benches, our beds in the park,/We welcome the sundown that heralds the dark' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation').

rhythm: internal 'feel' of beat and metre perceived when poetry is read aloud.

self-referentiality: where the text refers to its own means of production, making it obvious it *is* a text:

- 'This poem is not about houses' (Judith Rodriguez, 'Black and White, Mostly White')

sibilance: the repetition of an 's' sound:

- 'What killed the kangaroo-doe, slender skeleton...?' (Judith Wright, 'River Bend')

simile: a comparison using "as" or "like":

- 'Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.' (Oodgeroo, 'We Are Going'),
- 'We are the lost who went/Like the cranes, crying.' (Mary Gilmore, 'The Waradgery Tribe')

symbol: something that stands for something else, often a concrete word standing for an abstract concept. e.g. in Davis's line, the 'desert' comes to symbolise desolation; in Oodgeroo's line, the sign comes to symbolise white attitudes to the Aborigines.

- 'There is desert ahead and desert behind.' (Jack Davis, 'Desolation')
- 'Notice of estate agent reads: "Rubbish May Be Tipped Here", ' (Oodgeroo, 'We Are Going')

synecdoche: a part that is used to signify a whole:

- the Uniforms are finding the dead: young hunters/ who have lost their hunting' (Robert Adamson, 'Canticle for The Bicentennial Dead')

syntactic inversion: when the word order in the sentence is different from usual spoken or written English (e.g. nouns coming *after* the verb instead of before):

- 'The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.' (Oodgeroo, 'We Are Going'),
- 'Harried we were, and spent' (Mary Gilmore, 'The Waradgery Tribe')

tone, mood, atmosphere: feelings or meanings conveyed in the poem; dominant feeling.

transferred epithet: surprising association of adjective and noun ([see more here](#)). In the following line, it is the persona of the poem who reacts to his dream with wonder ('marvel'), not the 'error' of dreaming that a spring is breaking out in his heart.

'Last night as I was sleeping,/ I dreamt—marvelous error!— /that a spring was breaking/ out
in my heart.' (Antonio Machado, trans. Robert Bly, '[Last Night as I was Sleeping](#)')

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