

Sibilance

Definition of Sibilance

Sibilance is a literary device where strongly stressed consonants are created deliberately by producing air from vocal tracts through the use of lips and tongue. Such consonants produce hissing sounds. However, in poetry, it is used as a stylistic device, and sibilants are used more than twice in quick succession. Most of the times, the “s” sound is the sibilant.

Difference Between Alliteration and Sibilance

[Alliteration](#) is produced by the [repetition](#) of first consonant sounds in the words, generally the first one or two letters, such as in “A **big** **bully** **beats** a **baby** **boy**.” However, sibilance is also a specific type of alliteration that uses the soft consonants. In sibilance, hissing sounds are created. These soft consonants are s, with *sh*, *ch*, and *th*, including three others such as z, x, f and soft c. For instance, “**S**ing a **S**ong of **S**ixpence” is the title of a famous nursery [rhyme](#), which can be considered as a good example of sibilance.

Examples of Sibilance in Literature

Example #1: *A Cradle Song* (By William Blake)

“Sweet dreams, form a **shade**
O’er my lovely infants head.
Sweet dreams of pleasant **streams**
By happy **silent** moony beams
Sweet sleep with soft down.
Weave thy brows an infant crown.
Sweet sleep Angel mild,
Hover o’er my happy **child**.”

Sweet smiles in the night,
Hover over my delight.
Sweet smiles Mothers **smiles**...

Sweet moans, dovelike sighs,
Chase not slumber from **thy** eyes,
Sweet moans, sweeter smiles.”

The poem has a simple aabb [rhyme scheme](#). Blake makes heavy use of sibilance in this poem, especially the “s” sound, as in the bold words. In a similar way, the use of “sh” and “ch” sounds in the words “shade” and “chase” gives softer effects.

Example #2: *Ode to Autumn* (By John Keats)

“**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;
To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To **swell** the gourd, and plump the hazel **shells**
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And **still** more, later flowers for the **bees**,
For **Summer** has o’er-brimm’d their clammy **cells**.”

This is the first [stanza](#) of the poem, which is filled with music and sibilance. The words noted in bold are all are sibilance examples. These are voiced with hissing sounds.

Example #3: *Macbeth* (By William Shakespeare)

“As whence the **sun** ‘gins his reflection
Shipwracking storms and direful thunders break,
So from that spring whence comfort **seemed** to come

No **sooner** justice had, with valor armed...
But the Norwegian lord, **surveying** vantage,
With **furbished** arms and new **supplies** of men...
Till **seven** at night. To make **society**
The **sweeter** welcome, we will keep ourselves
Till **suppertime** alone. While then, God be with you!"

Here we can clearly see the softer consonants of sibilance, such as "s" sounds in the words noted in bold.

Example #4: *Prelude 3* (By T. S. Eliot)

"THE WINTER evening **settles** down
With **smell** of **steaks** in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty **shower** wraps
The grimy **scraps**
Of withered leaves about your feet...

The showers beat
On broken blinds and **chimney**-pots,
And at the **corner** of the **street**
A lonely **cab**-horse steams and stamps.
And then the lighting of the lamps."

In this excerpt, the repetition of the "s" sound (sibilance) is used throughout the poem. It emphasizes the [atmosphere](#) of dirty lives. In addition, the continuous use of the "s" sound gives an example of [onomatopoeia](#), as the "scraping" sounds of leaves.

Function of Sibilance

An atmosphere can be created through sibilance, which helps in drawing the attention of readers, painting a more colorful picture of the idea or the event. With the help of sibilance, descriptive scenes can be explained more carefully by laying stress on the specific letters. In fact, the sense of

repeated sounds, and then the making up of different [literary devices](#) through sibilance creates further musical effect for the readers.