

## Literary Terms and Devices

**Abstract:** Used as a noun, the term refers to a short summary or outline of a longer work. As an adjective applied to writing or literary works, abstract refers to words or phrases that name things not knowable through the five senses.

**Allegory:** A narrative technique in which characters representing objects or abstract ideas are used to convey a message or teach a lesson. Allegory is typically used to teach moral, ethical, or religious lessons but is sometimes used for satiric or political purposes.

Examples of allegorical works include Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

**Alliteration:** The repetition of a speech sound in a sequence of nearby words. The term is usually applied only to consonants, and only when the recurrent sound begins a word or a stressed syllable in a word.

An example from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,  
The furrow followed free.

**Allusion:** A passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place or event, or to another literary work or passage. Most allusions serve to illustrate or expand upon or enhance a subject, but some are used in order to undercut it ironically by the discrepancy between the subject and the allusion. Since allusions are not explicitly identified, they imply a fund of knowledge that is shared by an author and the audience for whom the author writes.

**Analogy:** A comparison of two things made to explain something unfamiliar through its similarities to something familiar, or to prove a point about one thing based upon its similarity to another. Similes and metaphors are types of analogies.

**Antagonist:** The major character in a narrative or drama who works against the hero or protagonist. An example of an evil antagonist is Grendel in *Beowulf* while a virtuous antagonist is Macduff in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

**Anthropomorphism:** Where animals or inanimate objects are portrayed in a story as people, such as by walking, talking, or being given arms, legs and/or facial features.

**Anti-hero:** A central character in a work of literature who lacks traditional heroic qualities such as courage, physical prowess, and fortitude. Anti-heroes typically distrust conventional values and are unable to commit themselves to any ideals. They generally feel helpless in a world over which they have no control. Anti-heroes usually accept, and often celebrate, their positions as social outcasts. A well-known anti-hero is Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

**Apostrophe:** A statement, question, or request addressed to an inanimate object or concept or to a nonexistent or absent person.

An example is William Wordsworth's lines:  
"Milton! Thou should be living at this hour:  
England hath need of thee..."

**Archetype:** An image, a descriptive detail, a plot pattern, or a character type that occurs frequently in literature, myth, religion, or folklore and is, therefore, believed to evoke profound emotions because it touches the unconscious memory and thus calls into play illogical but strong responses. This term was introduced to literary criticism from the psychology of Carl Jung. It expresses Jung's theory that behind every person's "unconscious," or repressed memories of the past, lies the "collective unconscious" of the human race: memories of the countless typical experiences of our ancestors. These memories are said to prompt illogical associations that trigger powerful emotions in the reader. Examples of literary archetypes include subjects or motifs such as birth, death and the search for the father and characters such as the Earth Mother, the trickster, the scapegoat and the rebel hero.

**Aside:** A comment made by a stage performer that is intended to be heard by the audience or by select other characters, but not by the characters that are present.

**Assonance:** The same or similar vowel sounds in stressed syllables that end with different consonants. Assonance differs from rhyme in that rhyme is a similarity of vowel and consonant.

An example from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Bells* is  
"m<sup>o</sup>lten g<sup>o</sup>lden n<sup>o</sup>tes"

**Atmosphere:** The prevailing tone or mood of a literary work, particularly, but not exclusively, when that mood is established in part by setting or landscape. It is, however, not simply setting but rather an emotional aura that helps to establish the reader's expectations and attitudes.

An example appears at the beginning of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* when thunder and lightning set the atmosphere for the entrance of the witches and the evil in the play.

**Bildungsroman:** (Also known as Coming of Age Novel) A German word meaning "novel of development." A type of novel in which the protagonist is initiated into adulthood through knowledge, experience, or both, often by a process of disillusionment. Understanding comes after the dropping of preconceptions, a destruction of a false sense of security, or in some way the loss of innocence. Some of the shifts that take place are ignorance to knowledge, innocence to experience, false world view to correct view, idealism to realism and immature responses to mature responses. Well-known bildungsromans include J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*.

**Blank Verse:** Unrhymed iambic pentameter. Blank verse has been used by poets since the Renaissance for its flexibility, its graceful, dignified tone and resemblance to common speech rhythms.

**Burlesque:** A work designed to ridicule a style, literary form, or subject matter either by treating the exalted in a trivial way or by discussing the trivial in exalted terms (that is, with mock dignity). Burlesque concentrates on derisive imitation, usually in exaggerated terms.

**Cacophony:** A harsh, unpleasant combination of sounds. This is also known as dissonance and is the opposite of euphony. An example from Winston Churchill is "We want no parlay with you and your grisly gang who work your wicked will."

**Caesura:** A pause in a line of poetry, usually occurring near the middle. It typically corresponds to a break in the natural rhythm or sense of the line but is sometimes shifted to create special meanings or rhythmic effects. The pause may or may not be typographically indicated. The opening line of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" contains a caesura following "dreary": "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary...."

**Carpe Diem:** A Latin term meaning "seize the day." This is a traditional theme of poetry, especially lyrics. A *carpe diem* poem advises the reader or the person it addresses to live for today and enjoy the

pleasures of the moment.

Two celebrated *carpe diem* poems are Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and Robert Herrick's poem beginning "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may...."

**Catharsis:** The release or purging of unwanted emotions brought about when the hero reaches an epiphany.

A famous example of catharsis is realized in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, when Oedipus discovers that his wife, Jocasta, is his own mother and that the stranger he killed on the road was his own father.

**Characterization:** The author's means of conveying to the reader a character's personality, life history, values, physical attributes, etc. Also refers directly to a description thereof.

**Climax:** The turning point in a narrative, the moment when the conflict is at its most intense. Typically, the structure of stories, novels, and plays is one of rising action, in which tension builds to the climax, followed by falling action, in which tension lessens as the story moves to its conclusion.

**Colloquialism:** A word, phrase, or form of pronunciation that is acceptable in casual conversation but not in formal, written communication. It is considered more acceptable than slang. Contractions are examples of colloquialism.

**Comic Relief:** The use of humor to lighten the mood of a serious or tragic story, especially in plays. The technique is very common in Elizabethan works, and can be an integral part of the plot or simply a brief event designed to break the tension of the scene. The Gravediggers' scene in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a frequently cited example of comic relief.

**Conceit:** A clever and fanciful metaphor, usually expressed through elaborate and extended comparison, which presents a striking parallel between two seemingly dissimilar things, for example, elaborately comparing a beautiful woman to an object like a garden or the sun. The conceit figures prominently in the works of John Donne, Emily Dickinson, and T. S. Eliot.

**Conflict:** The conflict in a work of fiction is the issue to be resolved in the story. It usually occurs between two characters, the protagonist and the antagonist, or between the protagonist and society (external conflicts) or the protagonist and himself or

herself (internal conflict).

**Connotation:** The impression that a word gives beyond its defined meaning. Connotations may be universally understood or may be significant only to a certain group.

Both "horse" and "steed" denote the same animal, but "steed" has a different connotation, deriving from the chivalrous or romantic narratives in which the word was once often used.

**Consonance:** (Also known as half rhyme or slant rhyme.) A repetition of a sequence of two or more consonants, but with a change in the intervening vowel: live-love; lean –alone; pitter-patter. Some scholars have refined the word to mean shared consonants whether in sequence (bud-bad) or reversed (bud –dab).

**Couplet:** Two consecutive lines of poetry with the same end rhyme and meter, often expressing a complete and self-contained thought. Shakespeare's lines "Be not self-will'd, for thou art much too fair/ To be death's conquest and make worms thine heir."

**Criticism:** The systematic study and evaluation of literary works, usually based on a specific method or set of principles. An important part of literary studies since ancient times, the practice of criticism has given rise to numerous theories, methods, and "schools," sometimes producing conflicting, even contradictory, interpretations of literature in general, as well as of individual works. Contemporary schools of criticism include deconstruction, feminist, psychoanalytic, new historicist, post colonialist, new critical, Marxist, cultural studies, and reader-response.

**Dialogue:** Where characters speak to one another; may often be used to substitute for exposition.

**Denotation:** The definition of a word, apart from the impressions or feelings it creates in the reader. The word "apartheid" denotes a political and economic policy of segregation by race, but its connotations (oppression, slavery, inequality) are numerous.

**Denouement:** A French word meaning "the unknotting." In literary criticism, it denotes the resolution of conflict in fiction or drama. The denouement follows the climax and provides an outcome to the primary plot situation as well as an explanation of secondary plot complications. The

denouement often involves a character's recognition of his or her state of mind or moral condition.

A well-known example of denouement is the last scene of the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, in which the true identity of Algernon Moncrieff is revealed and the love conflicts are resolved happily. The denouement is not necessarily happy.

**Diction:** The selection and arrangement of words in a literary work. Either or both may vary depending on the desired effect. There are four general types of diction: "formal," used in scholarly or lofty writing; "informal," used in relaxed but educated conversation; "colloquial," used in everyday speech; and "slang," containing newly coined words and other terms not accepted in formal usage.

**Doppelgänger:** (Also known as The Double.) A literary technique by which a character is duplicated (usually in the form of an alter ego, though sometimes as a ghostly counterpart) or divided into two distinct, usually opposite personalities. The use of this character device is widespread in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, and indicates a growing awareness among authors that the "self" is really a composite of many "selves."

A well-known story containing a doppelgänger character is Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which dramatizes an internal struggle between good and evil.

**Dramatic Irony:** Occurs when the audience of a play or the reader of a work of literature knows something that a character in the work itself does not know. The irony is in the contrast between the intended meaning of the statements or actions of a character and the additional information understood by the audience.

**Dystopian novel:** An anti-utopian novel in which, instead of a paradise, everything has gone wrong in the attempt to create a perfect society. Examples include George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*.

**Elegy:** A lyric poem that laments the death of a person or the eventual death of all people. In a conventional elegy, set in a classical world, the poet and subject are spoken of as shepherds. In modern criticism, the word elegy is often used to refer to a poem that is melancholy or mournfully contemplative.

An example is *The Seafarer*.

**End-stopped:** A line of poetry that has a natural pause at the end (period, comma, etc.). For example, these lines from William Shakespeare are end stopped:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun.  
Coral is far more red than her lips red.

**Enjambment:** In poetry, the continuation of the sense and grammatical construction of a line onto the next line or stanza. For example, these lines are enjambed:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds  
Or bends with the remover to remove. Shakespeare

**Epic:** A long narrative poem about the adventures of a hero of great historic or legendary importance. The setting is vast and the action is often given cosmic significance through the intervention of supernatural forces such as gods, angels, or demons. Epics are typically written in a classical style of grand simplicity with elaborate metaphors and allusions that enhance the symbolic importance of a hero's adventures.

Some well-known epics are *Beowulf*, Homer's *The Odyssey*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Gilgamesh*. Characteristics of the classical epic include these:

- The main character or protagonist is heroically larger than life, often the source and subject of legend or a national hero
- The action, often in battle, reveals the more-than-human strength of the heroes as they engage in acts of heroism and courage
- The setting covers several nations, the whole world, or even the universe
- The episodes, even though they may be fictional, provide an explanation for some of the circumstances or events in the history of a nation or people
- The gods and lesser divinities play an active role in the outcome of actions
- All of the various adventures form an organic whole, where each event relates in some way to the central theme

**Epiphany:** An intuitive grasp of reality achieved in a quick flash of recognition in which something, usually simple and commonplace is seen in a new light.

**Epithet:** A combination of a descriptive phrase and a noun. An epithet presents a miniature portrait that identifies a person or thing by highlighting a prominent characteristic of that person or thing. In

English, the Homeric epithet usually consists of a noun modified by a compound adjective, such as the following: *fleet-footed Achilles*, *rosy-fingered dawn*, *wine-dark sea*, *earth-shaking Poseidon*, and *gray-eyed Athena*. The Homeric epithet is an ancient relative of such later epithets as *Richard the Lion-Hearted*, *Ivan the Terrible*, and *America the Beautiful*.

**Epistolary novel:** A novel consisting of letters written by a character or several characters. The form allows for the use of multiple points of view toward the story and the ability to dispense with an omniscient narrator. Examples are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

**Euphemism:** The substitution of a mild or less negative word or phrase for a harsh or blunt one, as in the use of "pass away" instead of "die." The basic psychology of euphemistic language is the desire to put something bad or embarrassing in a positive (or at least neutral light). Thus many terms referring to death, sex, crime, and excremental functions are euphemisms. Since the euphemism is often chosen to disguise something horrifying, it can be exploited by the satirist through the use of irony and exaggeration.

**Euphony:** A combination of sounds that creates a harmony pleasing to the ear. Most often used in poetry, this quality is achieved through the use of poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, etc.

**Explication de texte:** An approach to literary criticism involving close examination, analysis, and exposition of the text of a work, and concentrating on language, style, content, and the interrelations of the parts to the whole in regard to meaning and symbolism.

**Exposition:** Where an author interrupts a story in order to explain something, usually to provide important background information. In drama, the presentation of essential information regarding what has occurred prior to the beginning of the play.

**Falling Action:** The series of events which take place after the climax. In drama, falling action leads to the conclusion.

**Figurative Language and Figures of Speech:** A technique in writing in which the author temporarily interrupts the order, construction, or meaning of the

writing for a particular effect. This interruption takes the form of one or more figures of speech such as hyperbole, irony, or simile. Figurative language is the opposite of literal language, in which every word is truthful, accurate, and free of exaggeration or embellishment.

Examples of figurative language are tropes such as metaphor and rhetorical figures such as apostrophe.

**Flashback:** A device that allows the writer to present events that happened before the time of the current narration or the current events in the fiction. Flashbacks entail detailed reconstruction of past events. Flashback is useful for exposition, to fill in the reader about a character or place, or about the background to a conflict.

**Foil:** A character in a work of literature whose physical or psychological qualities contrast strongly with, and therefore highlight, the corresponding qualities of another character.

In his Sherlock Holmes stories, Arthur Conan Doyle portrayed Dr. Watson as a man of normal habits and intelligence, making him a foil for the eccentric and wonderfully perceptive Sherlock Holmes. In *Hamlet*, Laertes and Fortinbras serve as foils for Hamlet.

**Foreshadowing:** Clues that hint at what is going to happen later in the plot.

**Frame story:** A narrative structure that provides a setting and exposition for the main narrative in a novel. Often, a narrator will describe where he found the manuscript of the novel or where he heard someone tell the story he is about to relate. The frame helps control the reader's perception of the work, and has been used in the past to help give credibility to the main section of the novel.

Examples of novels with frame stories include: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

**Free verse:** Verse that has neither regular rhyme nor regular meter. Free verse often uses cadences rather than uniform metrical feet.

**Genre:** A category of literary work. In critical theory, genre may refer to both the content of a given work (tragedy, comedy, pastoral) and to its form, such as poetry, novel, or drama. This term also refers to types of popular literature, as in the genres of science fiction or the detective story.

**Gothic novel:** A novel in which supernatural horrors and an atmosphere of unknown terror pervade the action. The setting is often a dark, mysterious castle, where ghosts and sinister humans roam menacingly. Gothic elements include:

- Ancient prophecy, especially mysterious, obscure, or hard to understand.
- Mystery and suspense
- High emotion, sentimentalism, but also pronounced anger, surprise, and especially terror
- Supernatural events
- Omens, portents, dream visions
- Fainting, frightened, screaming women
- Women threatened by a powerful, impetuous male
- Setting in a castle, especially with secret passages
- The metonymy of gloom and horror (wind, rain, doors grating on rusty hinges, howls in the distance, distant sighs, footsteps approaching, lights in abandoned rooms, lights suddenly blowing out, characters trapped in rooms or imprisoned)
- The vocabulary of the gothic (use of words indicating fear, mystery, etc.: apparition, devil, ghost, haunted, terror, fright)

Example:

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

**Humours:** In medieval physiology, four liquids in the human body affecting behavior. Each humour was associated with one of the four elements of nature. In a balanced personality, no humour predominated. When a humour did predominate, it caused a particular personality.

*blood...air...hot and moist:* sanguine, kind, happy, romantic

*phlegm...water...cold and moist:* phlegmatic, sedentary, sickly, fearful

*yellow bile...fire...hot and dry:* choleric, ill-tempered, impatient, stubborn

*black bile...earth...cold and dry:* melancholy, gluttonous, lazy, contemplative

The Renaissance took the doctrine of humours quite seriously--it was their model of psychology--so knowing that can help us understand the characters in the literature. Falstaff, for example, has a dominance of blood, while Hamlet seems to have an excess of black bile.

**Hyperbole:** A literary device that is a deliberate exaggeration used to achieve an effect.

In William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth hyperbolizes when she says, "All the perfumes of Arabia could not sweeten this little hand."

**Idiom:** a construction or expression in one language that cannot be matched or directly translated word-for-word in another language. For example, calling an easy task a “piece of cake” would be using an idiom.

**Imagery:** Imagery is writing that appeals to the senses whether by literal description, by allusion or in the vehicles of its similes and metaphors. Types of imagery include visual (sight), auditory (hearing), tactile (touch), gustatory (taste) olfactory (smell), thermal (heat and cold) and kinesthetic (movement).

**Inference:** A judgement based on reasoning rather than on direct or explicit statement.

**In medias res:** A Latin term meaning “in the middle of things.” It refers to the technique of beginning a story at its midpoint and then using various flashback devices to reveal previous action. This technique is used in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

**Inversion:** The placing of a sentence element out of its normal position. Inversion changes the usual syntax of a sentence.

An example appears in Coleridge:

“A damsel with a dulcimer

In a vision once I saw.”

This might more usually be written, “I saw a vision of a damsel with a dulcimer.”

**Irony.** A mode of expression, through words (verbal irony) or events (situational irony), conveying a reality different from and usually opposite to appearance or expectation. **Verbal irony** is a figure of speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words that carry the opposite meaning.

Characteristically, it speaks words of praise to imply blame and words of blame to imply praise.

**Situational irony** is a figure of speech in which an outcome or event is the opposite of that which is expected. The irony is generated by the surprise recognition by the audience of a reality in contrast with expectation or appearance. The surprise recognition by the audience often produces a comic effect, making irony often funny. Irony is the most common and most efficient technique of the satirist, because it is an instrument of truth, provides wit and humor, and is usually at least obliquely critical, in that it deflates, scorns, or attacks.

An example of this is Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal.”

(See also **Dramatic Irony**)

**Kenning:** In Anglo-Saxon poetry, a metaphorical phrase or compound word used to name a person, place, thing or event indirectly. Examples abound in *Beowulf* such as “whale-road” for the sea and “shepherd of evil” for Grendel.

**Lyric Poetry:** A poem expressing the subjective feelings and personal emotions of the poet. Such poetry is melodic, since it was originally accompanied by a lyre in recitals. Most Western poetry in the twentieth century may be classified as lyrical.

Examples of lyric poetry include A. E. Housman's elegy "To an Athlete Dying Young," Thomas Gray, the sonnets of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Sir Philip Sidney, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and a host of other forms in the poetry of William Blake among many others.

**Malapropism:** An inappropriateness of speech resulting from the use of one word for another, which resembles it.

Examples abound in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* such as “Yea, or else it were pity but they should suffer salvation, body and soul.” (He is mistaking salvation for damnation.)

**Metaphor:** A figure of speech comparing two seemingly unlike things, without asserting a comparison. An example from Shelley is, “My soul is an enchanted boat.” An **extended metaphor** is one that is extended, or developed, over several lines of poetry or even throughout an entire poem. A **dead metaphor** is one that has become so common that we no longer notice that it is a figure of speech. Everyday language is filled with dead metaphors such as “foot of the bed,” “bone of contention,” and “mouth of the river.” A **mixed metaphor** is the incongruous mixture of two or more metaphors. Mixed metaphors are often unintentional and often call up ludicrous images: “if you put your money on that horse, you’ll be barking up the wrong tree.”

**Meter:** In literary criticism, the repetition of sound patterns that creates a rhythm in poetry. The patterns are based on the number of syllables and the presence and absence of accents. The unit of rhythm in a line is called a foot. A foot is the basic unit of meter consisting of a group of two or three syllables. Scanning or scansion is the process of determining the prevailing foot in a line of poetry, of determining the types and sequence of different feet.

Types of feet: U (unstressed); / (stressed syllable)

Iamb: U /

Trochee: / U

Anapest: U U /

Dactyl: / U U

Spondee: //

Pyrrhic: U U

Types of meter are classified according to the number of feet in a line. These are the standard English lines: Monometer, one foot; Dimeter, two feet; Trimeter, three feet; Tetrameter, four feet; Pentameter, five feet; Hexameter, six feet (also called the Alexandrine); Heptameter, seven feet (also called the "Fourteener" when the feet are iambic). The most common English meter is iambic pentameter which consists of five iambic feet per line which when unrhymed is also known as blank verse.

**Metonymy:** A figure of speech in which the poet substitutes a word normally associated with something for the usual term.

An example is the use of "The White House" in place of the President or "The crown" in place of the monarch.

**Mock Epic:** Treating a frivolous or minor subject seriously, especially by using the machinery and devices of the epic (invocations, descriptions of armor, battles, extended similes, etc.). An example is Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock*

**Mood:** The atmosphere or emotional condition created by the piece, within the setting.

**Motif:** (Also known as *motiv*) A theme, character type, image, metaphor, or other verbal element that recurs throughout a single work of literature or occurs in a number of different works over a period of time. For example, the recurrence of the color red in *The Scarlet Letter* is a "specific," while the trials of star-crossed lovers is a "conventional" *motif* from the literature of all periods.

**Narrative Poetry:** A nondramatic poem in which the author tells a story. Such poems may be of any length or level of complexity. Epics, such as *Beowulf*, and ballads are forms of narrative poetry.

**Narrator:** The teller of a story. The narrator may be the author or a character in the story through whom the author speaks.

**Novella:** A work of prose fiction longer than a short story but shorter than a novel. There is no standard definition of length, but since rules of thumb are sometimes handy, one might say that the short story ends at about 20,000 words, while the novel begins

at about 50,000. Thus, the novella is a fictional work of about 20,000 to 50,000 words. Examples are Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

**Novel of manners:** A novel focusing on and describing in detail the social customs and habits of a particular social group. Usually these conventions function as shaping or even stifling controls over the behavior of the characters. An example is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

**Ode:** Name given to an extended lyric poem characterized by exalted emotion and dignified style. An ode usually concerns a single, serious theme. Most odes, but not all, are addressed to an object or individual. Odes are distinguished from other lyric poetic forms by their complex rhythmic and stanzaic patterns.

An example of this form is John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale."

**Onomatopoeia:** The use of words whose sounds express or suggest their meaning. In its simplest sense, onomatopoeia may be represented by words that mimic the sounds they denote such as "hiss" or "meow."

**Ottava Rima:** An eight-line stanza of poetry composed in iambic pentameter, following the abababcc rhyme scheme. This form has been prominently used by such important English writers as Lord Byron, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and W. B. Yeats.

**Oxymoron:** A phrase combining two contradictory terms. Oxymora may be intentional or unintentional. The following speech from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* uses several oxymora:

Why, then, O brawling love! O loving hate!  
O anything, of nothing first create!  
O heavy lightness! serious vanity!  
Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms!  
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health!  
This love feel I, that feel no love in this.

**Paradox:** A statement that appears illogical or contradictory at first, but may actually point to an underlying truth.

"Less is more" is an example of a paradox. Literary examples include Francis Bacon's statement, "The most corrected copies are commonly the least correct," and "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

**Parallelism:** Such an arrangement that one element of equal importance to another is similarly developed and phrased. The principle of parallelism dictates that coordinate ideas should have coordinate presentation. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Civilization" contains this example of parallelism: Raphael paints wisdom; Handel sings it, Phidias carves it, Shakespeare writes it, Wren builds it, Columbus sails it, Luther preaches it, Washington arms it, Watt mechanizes it.

**Parody:** In literary criticism, this term refers to an imitation of a serious literary work or the signature style of a particular author in a ridiculous manner. A typical parody adopts the style of the original and applies it to an inappropriate subject for humorous effect. Parody is a form of satire and could be considered the literary equivalent of a caricature or cartoon.

*The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope is a parody of more serious poetry of the time.

**Pastoral:** A term derived from the Latin word "pastor," meaning shepherd. A pastoral is a literary composition on a rural theme. In a pastoral, characters and language of a courtly nature are often placed in a simple setting. The term pastoral is also used to classify dramas, elegies, and lyrics that exhibit the use of country settings and shepherd characters.

*The Passionate Shepherd to his Love* by Christopher Marlowe is a pastoral.

**Personification:** A kind of metaphor in which a nonhuman thing or quality is talked about as if it were human.

"Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme" is an example of personification from John Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

**Plagiarism:** Claiming another person's written material as one's own. Plagiarism can take the form of direct, word-for-word copying or the theft of the substance or idea of the work.

**Plot:** The structure and relationship of actions and events in a work of fiction. While plot and story line do overlap, plot also involves how the events of the work are organized, depicted and related to each other.

**Poetic License:** Distortions of fact and literary convention, such as departing from normal order, diction, rhyme, or pronunciation, made by a writer (not always a poet) for the sake of the effect gained.

In a broader sense poetic license is applied not only to language, but also to all the ways in which poets and other literary authors are held to be free to violate, for special effect, the ordinary norms not only of common discourse but also of literal and historical truth.

**Point of View:** The narrative perspective from which a literary work is presented to the reader. There are four traditional points of view. The "third person omniscient" gives the reader a "godlike" perspective, unrestricted by time or place, from which to see actions and look into the minds of characters. This allows the author to comment openly on characters and events in the work. The "third person" point of view presents the events of the story from outside of any single character's perception, much like the omniscient point of view, but the reader must understand the action as it takes place. This type excludes special insight into characters' minds or motivations. The "first person" or "personal" point of view relates events as they are perceived by a single character. The main character "tells" the story and may offer opinions about the action and characters which differ from those of the author. Much less common than omniscient, third person, and first person is the "second person" point of view, wherein the author tells the story as if it is happening to the reader.

James Thurber employs the omniscient point of view in his short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is a short story told from the third person point of view. Mark Twain's novel *Huck Finn* is presented from the first person viewpoint. Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* is an example of a novel which uses the second person point of view

**Protagonist:** Considered to be the main character or lead figure in a novel, story, play or poem.

**Pun:** A play on words that have similar sounds but different meanings.

"They went and told the sexton, and the sexton tolled the bell." John Donne

**Refrain:** A phrase repeated at intervals throughout a poem. A refrain may appear at the end of each stanza or at less regular intervals. It may be altered slightly at each appearance.

Some refrains are nonsense expressions, as with "Nevermore" in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," that seem to take on a different significance with each use. Another example is "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the

light." From Dylan Thomas' *Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night*.

**Regional novel:** A novel faithful to a particular geographic region and its people, including behavior, customs, speech, and history. Examples are Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

**Rhyme:** The similarity between syllable sounds at the end of two or more lines. Some kinds of rhyme (also spelled rime) include

*End rhyme:* rhyme occurring at the end of lines of poetry

*Couplet:* a pair of lines rhyming consecutively

*Eye rhyme:* (also Sight rhyme) words whose spellings would lead one to think that they rhymed (slough, tough, cough, bough, though, hiccough; love, move, prove; daughter, laughter.)

*Slant/Off/Approximate Rhyme:* when words sound similar but do not rhyme exactly (lark, lurk)

*Internal Rhyme:* rhyme that occurs within a single line of poetry. An example is in the opening line of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven": "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary." Here, "dreary" and "weary" make an internal rhyme.

**Rhythm:** A regular pattern of sound, time intervals, or events occurring in writing, most often and most discernibly in poetry. Regular, reliable rhythm is known to be soothing to humans, while interrupted, unpredictable, or rapidly changing rhythm is disturbing. These effects are known to authors, who use them to produce a desired reaction in the reader.

**Romance:** An extended fictional prose narrative about improbable events involving characters who are quite different from ordinary people. Knights on a quest for a magic sword and aided by characters like fairies and trolls would be examples of elements found in romance fiction. An example is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

**Rising Action:** The events in a story that move the plot forward. Rising action involves conflicts and complications, and builds toward the climax of the story.

**Saga:** A story of the exploits of a hero, or the story of a family told through several generations.

**Satire:** A kind of writing that ridicules human weakness, vices, or folly in order to bring about social reform. Ridicule, irony, exaggeration, and several other techniques are almost always present.

Examples of satire are both *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift.

**Setting:** The total environment for the action of a fictional work. Setting includes time period (such as the 1890's), the place (such as downtown Warsaw), the historical milieu (such as during the Crimean War), as well as the social, political, and perhaps even spiritual realities. The setting is usually established primarily through description, though narration is used also.

**Simile:** A common figure of speech that makes an explicit comparison between two unlike things by using words such as like, as, than, appears, and seems.

**Soliloquy:** In drama, a moment when a character is alone and speaks his or her thoughts aloud.

**Sonnet:** A fourteen-line poem, usually in iambic pentameter, with a varied rhyme scheme. The two main types of sonnet are the Petrarchan (or Italian) and the Shakespearean. The Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two main sections, the octave (first eight lines) and the sestet (last six lines). The octave presents a problem or situation that is then resolved or commented on in the sestet. The most common rhyme scheme is A-B-B-A A-B-B-A C-D-E C-D-E, though there is flexibility in the sestet, such as C-D-C D-C-D.

The Shakespearean sonnet, (perfected though not invented by Shakespeare), contains three quatrains and a couplet, with more rhymes (because of the greater difficulty finding rhymes in English). The most common rhyme scheme is A-B-A-B C-D-C-D E-F-E-F G-G. In Shakespeare, the couplet often undercuts the thought created in the rest of the poem.

**Stream of consciousness:** A narrative technique developed by modernist writers to present the flow of a character's seemingly unconnected thoughts, responses, and sensations. Instead of being arranged in chronological order, the events of the story are presented from a character's point of view, mixed in with the character's feelings and memories just as they might spontaneously occur in a real person's mind. Katherine Anne Porter and James Joyce are two authors who use this technique.

**Style:** The manner of expression of a particular writer, produced by choice of words, grammatical structures, use of literary devices, and all the possible parts of language use. Some general styles might include scientific, ornate, plain, or emotive. Most writers have their own particular styles.

**Subplot:** A subordinate or minor collection of events in a novel or drama. Most subplots have some connection with the main plot, acting as foils to, commentary on, complications of, or support to the theme of, the main plot. Sometimes two opening subplots merge into a main plot.

**Symbol:** Something that on the surface is its literal self but which also has another meaning or even several meanings. For example, a sword may be a sword and also symbolize justice. A symbol may be said to embody an idea. There are two general types of symbols: universal symbols that embody universally recognizable meanings wherever used, such as light to symbolize knowledge, and a skull to symbolize death and constructed symbols that are given symbolic meaning by the way an author uses them in a literary work, as the white whale becomes a symbol of evil in *Moby Dick*.

**Synecdoche:** A literary device in which a part is used to represent the whole or the whole to represent a part. "Give me a hand" or "I just got a new set of wheels" are examples using a part to represent the whole.

**Terza Rima:** A three line stanza with the rhyme scheme *aba bcb cdc ded* and so forth. One rhyme sound is used for the first and third lines of each stanza, and a new rhyme introduced for the second line, this new rhyme, in turn being used for the first and third line of the next stanza.

**Theme:** The central idea or insight of a work of literature. The theme is not the same as the subject of a work, which can usually be expressed by a word or two: love, death or old age. Theme is the idea the writer wishes to convey about the subject.

**Tone:** The writer's attitude toward his readers and his subject; his mood or moral view. A writer can be formal, informal, playful, ironic, and especially, optimistic or pessimistic. While both Swift and Pope are satirizing much the same subjects, there is a profound difference in their tone.

**Understatement:** A description of a person, an event, or an idea from a perspective that greatly plays down the importance of the subject, often to add humor or to make a point ironically.

**Utopian novel:** A novel that presents an ideal society in which the problems of poverty, greed, crime, and so forth have been eliminated. An example is Thomas More's *Utopia*.