

## Glossary of Literary Terms

**Accent** The emphasis, or stress, given a syllable in pronunciation. We say "syllable" not "syllable," "emphasis" not "emphasis." Accents can also be used to emphasize a particular word in a sentence: Is she content with the contents of the yellow package? See also meter.

**Act** A major division in the action of a play. The ends of acts are typically indicated by lowering the curtain or turning up the houselights. Playwrights frequently employ acts to accommodate changes in time, setting, characters onstage, or mood. In many full-length plays, acts are further divided into scenes, which often mark a point in the action when the location changes or when a new character enters. See also scene.

**Allegory** A narration or description usually restricted to a single meaning because its events, actions, characters, settings, and objects represent specific abstractions or ideas. Although the elements in an allegory may be interesting in themselves, the emphasis tends to be on what they ultimately mean. Characters may be given names such as Hope, Pride, Youth, and Charity; they have few if any personal qualities beyond their abstract meanings. These personifications are not symbols because, for instance, the meaning of a character named Charity is precisely that virtue. See also symbol.

**Alliteration** The repetition of the same consonant sounds in a sequence of words, usually at the beginning of a word or stressed syllable: "descending dew drops"; "luscious lemons." Alliteration is based on the sounds of letters, rather than the spelling of words; for example, "keen" and "car" alliterate, but "car" and "cite" do not. Used sparingly, alliteration can intensify ideas by emphasizing key words, but when used too self-consciously, it can be distracting, even ridiculous, rather than effective. See also assonance, consonance.

**Allusion** A brief reference to a person, place, thing, event, or idea in history or literature. Allusions conjure up biblical authority, scenes from Shakespeare's plays, historic figures, wars, great love stories, and anything else that might enrich an author's work. Allusions imply reading and cultural experiences shared by the writer and reader, functioning as a kind of shorthand whereby the recalling of something outside the work supplies an emotional or intellectual context, such as a poem about current racial struggles calling up the memory of Abraham Lincoln.

**Ambiguity** Allows for two or more simultaneous interpretations of a word, phrase, action, or situation, all of which can be supported by the context of a work. Deliberate ambiguity can contribute to the effectiveness and richness of a work, for example, in the open-ended conclusion to Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." However, unintentional ambiguity obscures meaning and can confuse readers.

**Anagram** A word or phrase made from the letters of another word or phrase, as "heart" is an anagram of "earth." Anagrams have often been considered merely an exercise of one's ingenuity, but sometimes writers use anagrams to conceal proper names or veiled messages, or to suggest important connections between words, as in "hated" and "death."

**Anapestic meter** See foot.

**Antagonist** The character, force, or collection of forces in fiction or drama that opposes the protagonist and gives rise to the conflict of the story; an opponent of the protagonist, such as Claudius in Shakespeare's play Hamlet. See also character, conflict.

**Antihero** A protagonist who has the opposite of most of the traditional attributes of a hero. He or she may be bewildered, ineffectual, deluded, or merely pathetic. Often what antiheroes learn, if they learn anything at all, is that the world isolates them in an existence devoid of God and absolute values. Yossarian from Joseph Heller's Catch-22 is an example of an antihero. See also character.

**Apostrophe** An address, either to someone who is absent and therefore cannot hear the speaker or to something nonhuman that cannot comprehend. Apostrophe often provides a speaker the opportunity to think aloud.

**Approximate rhyme** See rhyme.

**Archetype** A term used to describe universal symbols that evoke deep and sometimes unconscious responses in a reader. In literature, characters, images, and themes that symbolically embody universal meanings and basic human experiences, regardless of when or where they live, are considered archetypes. Common literary archetypes include stories of quests, initiations, scapegoats, descents to the underworld, and ascents to heaven. See also mythological criticism.

**Aside** In drama, a speech directed to the audience that supposedly is not audible to the other characters onstage at the time. When Hamlet first appears onstage, for example, his aside "A little more than kin, and less than kind!" gives the audience a strong sense of his alienation from King Claudius. See also soliloquy.

**Assonance** The repetition of internal vowel sounds in nearby words that do not end the same, for example, "asleep under a tree," or "each evening." Similar endings result in rhyme, as in "asleep in the deep." Assonance is a strong means of emphasizing important words in a line. See also alliteration, consonance.

**Ballad** Traditionally, a ballad is a song, transmitted orally from generation to generation, that tells a story and that eventually is written down. As such, ballads usually cannot be traced to a particular author or group of authors. Typically, ballads are dramatic, condensed, and impersonal narratives, such as "Bonny Barbara Allan." A literary ballad is a narrative poem that is written in deliberate imitation of the language, form, and spirit of the traditional ballad, such as Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci." See also ballad stanza, quatrain.

**Ballad stanza** A four-line stanza, known as a quatrain, consisting of alternating eight- and six-syllable lines. Usually only the second and fourth lines rhyme (an abcb pattern). Coleridge adopted the ballad stanza in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

All in a hot and copper sky  
The bloody Sun, at noon,  
Right up above the mast did stand,  
No bigger than the Moon.  
See also ballad, quatrain.

**Biographical criticism** An approach to literature which suggests that knowledge of the author's life experiences can aid in the understanding of his or her work. While biographical information can sometimes complicate one's interpretation of a work, and some formalist critics (such as the New Critics) disparage the use of the author's biography as a tool for textual interpretation, learning about the life of the author can often enrich a reader's appreciation for that author's work. See also cultural criticism, formalist criticism, new criticism.

**Blank verse** Unrhymed iambic pentameter. Blank verse is the English verse form closest to the natural rhythms of English speech and therefore is the most common pattern found in traditional English narrative and dramatic poetry from Shakespeare to the early twentieth century. Shakespeare's plays use blank verse extensively. See also iambic pentameter.

**Cacophony** Language that is discordant and difficult to pronounce, such as this line from John Updike's "Player Piano": "never my numb plunker fumbles." Cacophony ("bad sound") may be unintentional in the writer's sense of music, or it may be used consciously for deliberate dramatic effect. See also euphony.

**Caesura** A pause within a line of poetry that contributes to the rhythm of the line. A caesura can occur anywhere within a line and need not be indicated by punctuation. In scanning a line, caesuras are indicated by a double vertical line (||). See also meter, rhythm, scansion.

**Canon** Those works generally considered by scholars, critics, and teachers to be the most important to read and study, which collectively constitute the "masterpieces" of literature. Since the 1960s, the traditional English and American literary canon, consisting mostly of works by white male writers, has been rapidly expanding to include many female writers and writers of varying ethnic backgrounds.

**Carpe diem** The Latin phrase meaning "seize the day." This is a very common literary theme, especially in lyric poetry, which emphasizes that life is short, time is fleeting, and that one should make the most of present pleasures. Robert Herrick's poem "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" employs the carpe diem theme.

**Catharsis** Meaning "purgation," catharsis describes the release of the emotions of pity and fear by the audience at the end of a tragedy. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the importance of catharsis. The audience faces the misfortunes of the protagonist, which elicit pity and compassion. Simultaneously, the audience also confronts the failure of the protagonist, thus receiving a frightening reminder of human limitations and frailties. Ultimately, however, both these negative emotions are purged, because the tragic protagonist's suffering is an affirmation of human values rather than a despairing denial of them. See also tragedy.

**Character, characterization** A character is a person presented in a dramatic or narrative work, and characterization is the process by which a writer makes that character seem real to the reader. A hero or heroine, often called the protagonist, is the central character who engages the reader's interest and empathy. The antagonist is the character, force, or collection of forces that stands directly opposed to the protagonist and gives rise to the conflict of the story. A static character does not change throughout the work, and the reader's knowledge of that character does not grow, whereas a dynamic character undergoes some kind of change because of the

action in the plot. A flat character embodies one or two qualities, ideas, or traits that can be readily described in a brief summary. They are not psychologically complex characters and therefore are readily accessible to readers. Some flat characters are recognized as stock characters; they embody stereotypes such as the "dumb blonde" or the "mean stepfather." They become types rather than individuals. Round characters are more complex than flat or stock characters, and often display the inconsistencies and internal conflicts found in most real people. They are more fully developed, and therefore are harder to summarize. Authors have two major methods of presenting characters: showing and telling. Showing allows the author to present a character talking and acting, and lets the reader infer what kind of person the character is. In telling, the author intervenes to describe and sometimes evaluate the character for the reader. Characters can be convincing whether they are presented by showing or by telling, as long as their actions are motivated. Motivated action by the characters occurs when the reader or audience is offered reasons for how the characters behave, what they say, and the decisions they make. Plausible action is action by a character in a story that seems reasonable, given the motivations presented. See also plot.

**Chorus** In Greek tragedies (especially those of Aeschylus and Sophocles), a group of people who serve mainly as commentators on the characters and events. They add to the audience's understanding of the play by expressing traditional moral, religious, and social attitudes. The role of the chorus in dramatic works evolved through the sixteenth century, and the chorus occasionally is still used by modern playwrights such as T. S. Eliot in *Murder in the Cathedral*. See also drama.

**Cliché** An idea or expression that has become tired and trite from overuse, its freshness and clarity having worn off. Clichés often anesthetize readers, and are usually a sign of weak writing. See also sentimentality, stock responses.

**Climax** See plot.

**Closet drama** A play that is written to be read rather than performed onstage. In this kind of drama, literary art outweighs all other considerations. See also drama.

**Colloquial** Refers to a type of informal diction that reflects casual, conversational language and often includes slang expressions. See also diction.

**Comedy** A work intended to interest, involve, and amuse the reader or audience, in which no terrible disaster occurs and that ends happily for the main characters. High comedy refers to verbal wit, such as puns, whereas low comedy is generally associated with physical action and is less intellectual. Romantic comedy involves a love affair that meets with various obstacles (like disapproving parents, mistaken identities, deceptions, or other sorts of misunderstandings) but overcomes them to end in a blissful union. Shakespeare's comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are considered romantic comedies.

**Comic relief** A humorous scene or incident that alleviates tension in an otherwise serious work. In many instances these moments enhance the thematic significance of the story in addition to providing laughter. When Hamlet jokes with the gravediggers we laugh, but something hauntingly serious about the humor also intensifies our more serious emotions.

**Conflict** The struggle within the plot between opposing forces. The protagonist engages in the conflict with the antagonist, which may take the form of a character, society, nature, or an aspect of the protagonist's personality. See also character, plot.

**Connotation** Associations and implications that go beyond the literal meaning of a word, which derive from how the word has been commonly used and the associations people make with it. For example, the word eagle connotes ideas of liberty and freedom that have little to do with the word's literal meaning. See also denotation.

**Consonance** A common type of near rhyme that consists of identical consonant sounds preceded by different vowel sounds: home, same; worth, breath. See also rhyme.

**Contextual symbol** See symbol.

**Controlling metaphor** See metaphor.

**Convention** A characteristic of a literary genre (often unrealistic) that is understood and accepted by audiences because it has come, through usage and time, to be recognized as a familiar technique. For example, the division of a play into acts and scenes is a dramatic convention, as are soliloquies and asides. flashbacks and foreshadowing are examples of literary conventions.

**Conventional symbol** See symbol.

**Cosmic irony** See irony.

**Couplet** Two consecutive lines of poetry that usually rhyme and have the same meter. A heroic couplet is a couplet written in rhymed iambic pentameter.

**Crisis** A turning point in the action of a story that has a powerful effect on the protagonist. Opposing forces come together decisively to lead to the climax of the plot. See also plot.

**Cultural criticism** An approach to literature that focuses on the historical as well as social, political, and economic contexts of a work. Popular culture—mass produced and consumed cultural artifacts ranging from advertising to popular fiction to television to rock music—is given equal emphasis as "high culture." Cultural critics use widely eclectic strategies such as new historicism, psychology, gender studies, and deconstructionism to analyze not only literary texts but everything from radio talk shows, comic strips, calendar art, commercials, to travel guides and baseball cards. See also historical criticism, marxist criticism, postcolonial criticism.

**Dactylic meter** See foot.

**Deconstructionism** An approach to literature which suggests that literary works do not yield fixed, single meanings, because language can never say exactly what we intend it to mean. Deconstructionism seeks to destabilize meaning by examining the gaps and ambiguities of the language of a text. Deconstructionists pay close

attention to language in order to discover and describe how a variety of possible readings are generated by the elements of a text. See also new criticism.

**Denotation** The dictionary meaning of a word. See also connotation.

**Dénouement** A French term meaning "unraveling" or "unknotting," used to describe the resolution of the plot following the climax. See also plot, resolution.

**Dialect** A type of informational diction. Dialects are spoken by definable groups of people from a particular geographic region, economic group, or social class. Writers use dialect to contrast and express differences in educational, class, social, and regional backgrounds of their characters. See also diction.

**Dialogue** The verbal exchanges between characters. Dialogue makes the characters seem real to the reader or audience by revealing firsthand their thoughts, responses, and emotional states. See also diction.

**Diction** A writer's choice of words, phrases, sentence structures, and figurative language, which combine to help create meaning. Formal diction consists of a dignified, impersonal, and elevated use of language; it follows the rules of syntax exactly and is often characterized by complex words and lofty tone. Middle diction maintains correct language usage, but is less elevated than formal diction; it reflects the way most educated people speak. Informal diction represents the plain language of everyday use, and often includes idiomatic expressions, slang, contractions, and many simple, common words. Poetic diction refers to the way poets sometimes employ an elevated diction that deviates significantly from the common speech and writing of their time, choosing words for their supposedly inherent poetic qualities. Since the eighteenth century, however, poets have been incorporating all kinds of diction in their work and so there is no longer an automatic distinction between the language of a poet and the language of everyday speech. See also dialect.

**Didactic poetry** Poetry designed to teach an ethical, moral, or religious lesson. Michael Wigglesworth's Puritan poem *Day of Doom* is an example of didactic poetry.

**Doggerel** A derogatory term used to describe poetry whose subject is trite and whose rhythm and sounds are monotonously heavy-handed.

**Drama** Derived from the Greek word *dram*, meaning "to do" or "to perform," the term drama may refer to a single play, a group of plays ("Jacobean drama"), or to all plays ("world drama"). Drama is designed for performance in a theater; actors take on the roles of characters, perform indicated actions, and speak the dialogue written in the script. Play is a general term for a work of dramatic literature, and a playwright is a writer who makes plays.

**Dramatic irony** See irony.

**Dramatic monologue** A type of lyric poem in which a character (the speaker) addresses a distinct but silent audience imagined to be present in the poem in such a way as to reveal a dramatic situation and, often unintentionally, some aspect of his or her temperament or personality. See also lyric.

**Dynamic character** See character.

**Editorial omniscience** See narrator.

**Electra complex** The female version of the Oedipus complex. Electra complex is a term used to describe the psychological conflict of a daughter's unconscious rivalry with her mother for her father's attention. The name comes from the Greek legend of Electra, who avenged the death of her father, Agamemnon, by plotting the death of her mother. See also oedipus complex, psychological criticism.

**Elegy** A mournful, contemplative lyric poem written to commemorate someone who is dead, often ending in a consolation. Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, written on the death of Arthur Hallam, is an elegy. Elegy may also refer to a serious meditative poem produced to express the speaker's melancholy thoughts. See also lyric.

**End rhyme** See rhyme.

**End-stopped line** A poetic line that has a pause at the end. End-stopped lines reflect normal speech patterns and are often marked by punctuation. The first line of Keats's "Endymion" is an example of an end-stopped line; the natural pause coincides with the end of the line, and is marked by a period:

A thing of beauty is a joy forever.  
English sonnet See sonnet.

**Enjambment** In poetry, when one line ends without a pause and continues into the next line for its meaning. This is also called a run-on line. The transition between the first two lines of Wordsworth's poem "My Heart Leaps Up" demonstrates enjambment:

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
Envoy See sestina.

**Epic** A long narrative poem, told in a formal, elevated style, that focuses on a serious subject and chronicles heroic deeds and events important to a culture or nation. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which attempts to "justify the ways of God to man," is an epic. See also narrative poem.

**Epigram** A brief, pointed, and witty poem that usually makes a satiric or humorous point. Epigrams are most often written in couplets, but take no prescribed form.

**Epiphany** In fiction, when a character suddenly experiences a deep realization about himself or herself; a truth which is grasped in an ordinary rather than a melodramatic moment.

**Escape literature** See formula literature.

**Euphony** Euphony ("good sound") refers to

**Falling action** See plot.

**Falling meter** See meter.

**Farce** A form of humor based on exaggerated, improbable incongruities. Farce involves rapid shifts in action and emotion, as well as slapstick comedy and extravagant dialogue. Malvolio, in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, is a farcical character.

**Feminine rhyme** See rhyme.

**Feminist criticism** An approach to literature that seeks to correct or supplement what may be regarded as a predominantly male-dominated critical perspective with a feminist consciousness. Feminist criticism places literature in a social context and uses a broad range of disciplines, including history, sociology, psychology, and linguistics, to provide a perspective sensitive to feminist issues. Feminist theories also attempt to understand representation from a woman's point of view and to explain women's writing strategies as specific to their social conditions. See also gay and lesbian criticism, gender criticism, sociological criticism.

**Figures of speech** Ways of using language that deviate from the literal, denotative meanings of words in order to suggest additional meanings or effects. Figures of speech say one thing in terms of something else, such as when an eager funeral director is described as a vulture. See also metaphor, simile.

**First-person narrator** See narrator.

**Fixed form** A poem that may be categorized by the pattern of its lines, meter, rhythm, or stanzas. A sonnet is a fixed form of poetry because by definition it must have fourteen lines. Other fixed forms include limerick, sestina, and villanelle. However, poems written in a fixed form may not always fit into categories precisely, because writers sometimes vary traditional forms to create innovative effects. See also open form.

**Flashback** A narrated scene that marks a break in the narrative in order to inform the reader or audience member about events that took place before the opening scene of a work. See also exposition.

**Flat character** See character.

**Foil** A character in a work whose behavior and values contrast with those of another character in order to highlight the distinctive temperament of that character (usually the protagonist). In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Laertes acts as a foil to Hamlet, because his willingness to act underscores Hamlet's inability to do so.

**Foot** The metrical unit by which a line of poetry is measured. A foot usually consists of one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables. An iambic foot, which consists of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable ("away"), is the most common metrical foot in English poetry. A trochaic foot consists of one stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable ("lovely"). An anapestic foot is two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed one ("understand"). A dactylic foot is one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones ("desperate"). A spondee is a foot consisting of two stressed syllables ("dead set"), but is not a sustained metrical

foot and is used mainly for variety or emphasis. See also iambic pentameter, line, meter.

**Foreshadowing** The introduction early in a story of verbal and dramatic hints that suggest what is to come later.

**Form** The overall structure or shape of a work, which frequently follows an established design. Forms may refer to a literary type (narrative form, short story form) or to patterns of meter, lines, and rhymes (stanza form, verse form). See also fixed form, open form.

**Formal diction** See diction.

**Formalist criticism** An approach to literature that focuses on the formal elements of a work, such as its language, structure, and tone. Formalist critics offer intense examinations of the relationship between form and meaning in a work, emphasizing the subtle complexity in how a work is arranged. Formalists pay special attention to diction, irony, paradox, metaphor, and symbol, as well as larger elements such as plot, characterization, and narrative technique. Formalist critics read literature as an independent work of art rather than as a reflection of the author's state of mind or as a representation of a moment in history. Therefore, anything outside of the work, including historical influences and authorial intent, is generally not examined by formalist critics. See also new criticism.

**Formula literature** Often characterized as "escape literature," formula literature follows a pattern of conventional reader expectations. Romance novels, westerns, science fiction, and detective stories are all examples of formula literature; while the details of individual stories vary, the basic ingredients of each kind of story are the same. Formula literature offers happy endings (the hero "gets the girl," the detective cracks the case), entertains wide audiences, and sells tremendously well.

**Found poem** An unintentional poem discovered in a nonpoetic context, such as a conversation, news story, or advertisement. Found poems serve as reminders that everyday language often contains what can be considered poetry, or that poetry is definable as any text read as a poem.

**Free verse** Also called open form poetry, free verse refers to poems characterized by their nonconformity to established patterns of meter, rhyme, and stanza. Free verse uses elements such as speech patterns, grammar, emphasis, and breath pauses to decide line breaks, and usually does not rhyme. See open form.

**Gay and lesbian criticism** An approach to literature that focuses on how homosexuals are represented in literature, how they read literature, and whether sexuality, as well as gender, is culturally constructed or innate. See also feminist criticism, gender criticism.

**Gender criticism** An approach to literature that explores how ideas about men and women—what is masculine and feminine—can be regarded as socially constructed by particular cultures. Gender criticism expands categories and definitions of what is masculine or feminine and tends to regard sexuality as more complex than merely

masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual. See also feminist criticism, gay and lesbian criticism.

**Genre** A French word meaning kind or type. The major genres in literature are poetry, fiction, drama, and essays. Genre can also refer to more specific types of literature such as comedy, tragedy, epic poetry, or science fiction.

**Haiku** A style of lyric poetry borrowed from the Japanese that typically presents an intense emotion or vivid image of nature, which, traditionally, is designed to lead to a spiritual insight. Haiku is a fixed poetic form, consisting of seventeen syllables organized into three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables. Today, however, many poets vary the syllabic count in their haiku. See also fixed form.

**Hamartia** A term coined by Aristotle to describe "some error or frailty" that brings about misfortune for a tragic hero. The concept of hamartia is closely related to that of the tragic flaw: both lead to the downfall of the protagonist in a tragedy. Hamartia may be interpreted as an internal weakness in a character (like greed or passion or hubris); however, it may also refer to a mistake that a character makes that is based not on a personal failure, but on circumstances outside the protagonist's personality and control. See also tragedy.

**Hero, heroine** See character.

**Heroic couplet** See couplet.

**High comedy** See comedy.

**Historical criticism** An approach to literature that uses history as a means of understanding a literary work more clearly. Such criticism moves beyond both the facts of an author's personal life and the text itself in order to examine the social and intellectual currents in which the author composed the work. See also cultural criticism, marxist criticism, new historicism, postcolonial criticism.

**Hubris or Hybris** Excessive pride or self-confidence that leads a protagonist to disregard a divine warning or to violate an important moral law. In tragedies, hubris is a very common form of hamartia. See also hamartia, tragedy.

**Hyperbole** A boldly exaggerated statement that adds emphasis without intending to be literally true, as in the statement "He ate everything in the house." Hyperbole (also called overstatement) may be used for serious, comic, or ironic effect. See also figures of speech.

**Iambic meter** See foot.

**Iambic pentameter** A metrical pattern in poetry which consists of five iambic feet per line. (An iamb, or iambic foot, consists of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.) See also foot, meter.

**Image** A word, phrase, or figure of speech (especially a simile or a metaphor) that addresses the senses, suggesting mental pictures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes,

feelings, or actions. Images offer sensory impressions to the reader and also convey emotions and moods through their verbal pictures. See also figures of speech.

**Implied metaphor** See metaphor.

**In medias res** See plot.

**Informal diction** See diction.

**Internal rhyme** See rhyme.

**Irony** A literary device that uses contradictory statements or situations to reveal a reality different from what appears to be true. It is ironic for a firehouse to burn down, or for a police station to be burglarized. Verbal irony is a figure of speech that occurs when a person says one thing but means the opposite. Sarcasm is a strong form of verbal irony that is calculated to hurt someone through, for example, false praise. Dramatic irony creates a discrepancy between what a character believes or says and what the reader or audience member knows to be true. Tragic irony is a form of dramatic irony found in tragedies such as *Oedipus the King*, in which Oedipus searches for the person responsible for the plague that ravishes his city and ironically ends up hunting himself. Situational irony exists when there is an incongruity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens due to forces beyond human comprehension or control. The suicide of the seemingly successful main character in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Richard Cory" is an example of situational irony. Cosmic irony occurs when a writer uses God, destiny, or fate to dash the hopes and expectations of a character or of humankind in general. In cosmic irony, a discrepancy exists between what a character aspires to and what universal forces provide. Stephen Crane's poem "A Man Said to the Universe" is a good example of cosmic irony, because the universe acknowledges no obligation to the man's assertion of his own existence.

**Italian sonnet** See sonnet.

**Limerick** A light, humorous style of fixed form poetry. Its usual form consists of five lines with the rhyme scheme aabba; lines 1, 2, and 5 contain three feet, while lines 3 and 4 usually contain two feet. Limericks range in subject matter from the silly to the obscene, and since Edward Lear popularized them in the nineteenth century, children and adults have enjoyed these comic poems. See also fixed form.

**Limited omniscience** See point of view.

**Line** A sequence of words printed as a separate entity on the page. In poetry, lines are usually measured by the number of feet they contain. The names for various line lengths are as follows:

monometer: one foot  
dimeter: two feet  
trimeter: three feet

pentameter: five feet  
hexameter: six feet  
et

tetrameter: four feet

octameter: eight feet

The number of feet in a line, coupled with the name of the foot, describes the metrical qualities of that line. See also end-stopped line, enjambment, foot, meter.

**Literary ballad** See ballad.

**Literary symbol** See symbol.

**Low comedy** See comedy.

**Lyric** A type of brief poem that expresses the personal emotions and thoughts of a single speaker. It is important to realize, however, that although the lyric is uttered in the first person, the speaker is not necessarily the poet. There are many varieties of lyric poetry, including the dramatic monologue, elegy, haiku, ode, and sonnet forms.

**Marxist criticism** An approach to literature that focuses on the ideological content of a work—its explicit and implicit assumptions and values about matters such as culture, race, class, and power. Marxist criticism, based largely on the writings of Karl Marx, typically aims at not only revealing and clarifying ideological issues but also correcting social injustices. Some Marxist critics use literature to describe the competing socioeconomic interests that too often advance capitalist interests such as money and power rather than socialist interests such as morality and justice. They argue that literature and literary criticism are essentially political because they either challenge or support economic oppression. Because of this strong emphasis on the political aspects of texts, Marxist criticism focuses more on the content and themes of literature than on its form. See also cultural criticism, historical criticism, sociological criticism.

**Masculine rhyme** See rhyme.

**Melodrama** A term applied to any literary work that relies on implausible events and sensational action for its effect. The conflicts in melodramas typically arise out of plot rather than characterization; often a virtuous individual must somehow confront and overcome a wicked oppressor. Usually, a melodramatic story ends happily, with the protagonist defeating the antagonist at the last possible moment. Thus, melodramas entertain the reader or audience with exciting action while still conforming to a traditional sense of justice. See sentimentality.

**Metaphor** A metaphor is a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unlike things, without using the word like or as. Metaphors assert the identity of dissimilar things, as when Macbeth asserts that life is a "brief candle." Metaphors can be subtle and powerful, and can transform people, places, objects, and ideas into whatever the writer imagines them to be. An implied metaphor is a more subtle comparison; the terms being compared are not so specifically explained. For example, to describe a stubborn man unwilling to leave, one could say that he was "a mule standing his ground." This is a fairly explicit metaphor; the man is being compared to a mule. But to say that the man "brayed his refusal to leave" is to create an implied metaphor, because the subject (the man) is never overtly identified as a mule. Braying is associated with the mule, a notoriously stubborn creature, and so the comparison between the stubborn man and the mule is sustained. Implied metaphors can slip by inattentive readers who are not sensitive to such carefully chosen, highly concentrated language. An extended metaphor is a

sustained comparison in which part or all of a poem consists of a series of related metaphors. Robert Francis's poem "Catch" relies on an extended metaphor that compares poetry to playing catch. A controlling metaphor runs through an entire work and determines the form or nature of that work. The controlling metaphor in Anne Bradstreet's poem "The Author to Her Book" likens her book to a child. Synecdoche is a kind of metaphor in which a part of something is used to signify the whole, as when a gossip is called a "wagging tongue," or when ten ships are called "ten sails." Sometimes, synecdoche refers to the whole being used to signify the part, as in the phrase "Boston won the baseball game." Clearly, the entire city of Boston did not participate in the game; the whole of Boston is being used to signify the individuals who played and won the game. Metonymy is a type of metaphor in which something closely associated with a subject is substituted for it. In this way, we speak of the "silver screen" to mean motion pictures, "the crown" to stand for the king, "the White House" to stand for the activities of the president. See also figures of speech, personification, simile.

**Meter** When a rhythmic pattern of stresses recurs in a poem, it is called meter. Metrical patterns are determined by the type and number of feet in a line of verse; combining the name of a line length with the name of a foot concisely describes the meter of the line. Rising meter refers to metrical feet which move from unstressed to stressed sounds, such as the iambic foot and the anapestic foot. Falling meter refers to metrical feet which move from stressed to unstressed sounds, such as the trochaic foot and the dactylic foot. See also accent, foot, iambic pentameter, line.

**Metonymy** See metaphor.

**Middle diction** See diction.

**Motivated action** See character.

**Mythological criticism** An approach to literature that seeks to identify what in a work creates deep universal responses in readers, by paying close attention to the hopes, fears, and expectations of entire cultures. Mythological critics (sometimes called archetypal critics) look for underlying, recurrent patterns in literature that reveal universal meanings and basic human experiences for readers regardless of when and where they live. These critics attempt to explain how archetypes (the characters, images, and themes that symbolically embody universal meanings and experiences) are embodied in literary works in order to make larger connections that explain a particular work's lasting appeal. Mythological critics may specialize in areas such as classical literature, philology, anthropology, psychology, and cultural history, but they all emphasize the assumptions and values of various cultures. See also archetype.

**Naive narrator** See narrator.

**Narrative poem** A poem that tells a story. A narrative poem may be short or long, and the story it relates may be simple or complex. See also ballad, epic.

**Narrator** The voice of the person telling the story, not to be confused with the author's voice. With a first-person narrator, the I in the story presents the point of view of only one character. The reader is restricted to the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of that single character. For example, in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener,"

the lawyer is the first-person narrator of the story. First-person narrators can play either a major or a minor role in the story they are telling. An unreliable narrator reveals an interpretation of events that is somehow different from the author's own interpretation of those events. Often, the unreliable narrator's perception of plot, characters, and setting becomes the actual subject of the story, as in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Narrators can be unreliable for a number of reasons: they might lack self-knowledge (like Melville's lawyer), they might be inexperienced, they might even be insane. Naive narrators are usually characterized by youthful innocence, such as Mark Twain's Huck Finn or J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield. An omniscient narrator is an all-knowing narrator who is not a character in the story and who can move from place to place and pass back and forth through time, slipping into and out of characters as no human being possibly could in real life. Omniscient narrators can report the thoughts and feelings of the characters, as well as their words and actions. The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* is an omniscient narrator. Editorial omniscience refers to an intrusion by the narrator in order to evaluate a character for a reader, as when the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* describes Hester's relationship to the Puritan community. Narration that allows the characters' actions and thoughts to speak for themselves is called neutral omniscience. Most modern writers use neutral omniscience so that readers can reach their own conclusions. Limited omniscience occurs when an author restricts a narrator to the single perspective of either a major or minor character. The way people, places, and events appear to that character is the way they appear to the reader. Sometimes a limited omniscient narrator can see into more than one character, particularly in a work that focuses on two characters alternately from one chapter to the next. Short stories, however, are frequently limited to a single character's point of view. See also persona, point of view, stream-of-consciousness technique.

**Near rhyme** See rhyme.

**Neutral omniscience** See narrator.

**New Criticism** An approach to literature made popular between the 1940s and the 1960s that evolved out of formalist criticism. New Critics suggest that detailed analysis of the language of a literary text can uncover important layers of meaning in that work. New Criticism consciously downplays the historical influences, authorial intentions, and social contexts that surround texts in order to focus on explication—extremely close textual analysis. Critics such as John Crowe Ransom, I. A. Richards, and Robert Penn Warren are commonly associated with New Criticism. See also formalist criticism.

**New historicism** An approach to literature that emphasizes the interaction between the historic context of the work and a modern reader's understanding and interpretation of the work. New historicists attempt to describe the culture of a period by reading many different kinds of texts and paying close attention to many different dimensions of a culture, including political, economic, social, and aesthetic concerns. They regard texts not simply as a reflection of the culture that produced them but also as productive of that culture playing an active role in the social and political conflicts of an age. New historicism acknowledges and then explores various versions of "history," sensitizing us to the fact that the history on which we choose to focus is colored by being reconstructed from our present circumstances. See also historical criticism.

**Objective point of view** See point of view.

**Octave** A poetic stanza of eight lines, usually forming one part of a sonnet. See also sonnet, stanza.

**Ode** A relatively lengthy lyric poem that often expresses lofty emotions in a dignified style. Odes are characterized by a serious topic, such as truth, art, freedom, justice, or the meaning of life; their tone tends to be formal. There is no prescribed pattern that defines an ode; some odes repeat the same pattern in each stanza, while others introduce a new pattern in each stanza. See also lyric.

**Oedipus complex** A Freudian term derived from Sophocles' tragedy Oedipus the King. It describes a psychological complex that is predicated on a boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for his mother's love and his desire to eliminate his father in order to take his father's place with his mother. The female equivalent of this complex is called the Electra complex. See also electra complex, psychological criticism.

**Off rhyme** See rhyme.

**Omniscient narrator** See narrator.

**One-act play** A play that takes place in a single location and unfolds as one continuous action. The characters in a one-act play are presented economically and the action is sharply focused. See also drama.

**Onomatopoeia** A term referring to the use of a word that resembles the sound it denotes. Buzz, rattle, bang, and sizzle all reflect onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia can also consist of more than one word; writers sometimes create lines or whole passages in which the sound of the words helps to convey their meanings.

**Open form** Sometimes called "free verse," open form poetry does not conform to established patterns of meter, rhyme, and stanza. Such poetry derives its rhythmic qualities from the repetition of words, phrases, or grammatical structures, the arrangement of words on the printed page, or by some other means. The poet E. E. Cummings wrote open form poetry; his poems do not have measurable meters, but they do have rhythm. See also fixed form.

**Organic form** Refers to works whose formal characteristics are not rigidly predetermined but follow the movement of thought or emotion being expressed. Such works are said to grow like living organisms, following their own individual patterns rather than external fixed rules that govern, for example, the form of a sonnet.

**Overstatement** See hyperbole.

**Oxymoron** A condensed form of paradox in which two contradictory words are used together, as in "sweet sorrow" or "original copy." See also paradox.

**Paradox** A statement that initially appears to be contradictory but then, on closer inspection, turns out to make sense. For example, John Donne ends his sonnet

"Death, Be Not Proud" with the paradoxical statement "Death, thou shalt die." To solve the paradox, it is necessary to discover the sense that underlies the statement. Paradox is useful in poetry because it arrests a reader's attention by its seemingly stubborn refusal to make sense.

**Paraphrase** A prose restatement of the central ideas of a poem, in your own language.

**Parody** A humorous imitation of another, usually serious, work. It can take any fixed or open form, because parodists imitate the tone, language, and shape of the original in order to deflate the subject matter, making the original work seem absurd. Anthony Hecht's poem "Dover Bitch" is a famous parody of Matthew Arnold's well-known "Dover Beach." Parody may also be used as a form of literary criticism to expose the defects in a work. But sometimes parody becomes an affectionate acknowledgment that a well-known work has become both institutionalized in our culture and fair game for some fun. For example, Peter De Vries's "To His Importunate Mistress" gently mocks Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress."

**Persona Literally**, a persona is a mask. In literature, a persona is a speaker created by a writer to tell a story or to speak in a poem. A persona is not a character in a story or narrative, nor does a persona necessarily directly reflect the author's personal voice. A persona is a separate self, created by and distinct from the author, through which he or she speaks. See also narrator.

**Personification** A form of metaphor in which human characteristics are attributed to nonhuman things. Personification offers the writer a way to give the world life and motion by assigning familiar human behaviors and emotions to animals, inanimate objects, and abstract ideas. For example, in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the speaker refers to the urn as an "unravished bride of quietness." See also metaphor.

**Petrarchan sonnet** See also sonnet.

**Picture poem** A type of open form poetry in which the poet arranges the lines of the poem so as to create a particular shape on the page. The shape of the poem embodies its subject; the poem becomes a picture of what the poem is describing. Michael McFee's "In Medias Res" is an example of a picture poem. See also open form.

**Plausible action** See character.

**Play** See drama.

**Playwright** See drama.

**Plot** An author's selection and arrangement of incidents in a story to shape the action and give the story a particular focus. Discussions of plot include not just what happens, but also how and why things happen the way they do. Stories that are written in a pyramidal pattern divide the plot into three essential parts. The first part is the rising action, in which complication creates some sort of conflict for the protagonist. The second part is the climax, the moment of greatest emotional tension in a narrative, usually marking a turning point in the plot at which the rising

action reverses to become the falling action. The third part, the falling action (or resolution) is characterized by diminishing tensions and the resolution of the plot's conflicts and complications. *In medias res* is a term used to describe the common strategy of beginning a story in the middle of the action. In this type of plot, we enter the story on the verge of some important moment. See also character, crisis, resolution, subplot.

**Poetic diction** See diction.

**Point of view** Refers to who tells us a story and how it is told. What we know and how we feel about the events in a work are shaped by the author's choice of point of view. The teller of the story, the narrator, inevitably affects our understanding of the characters' actions by filtering what is told through his or her own perspective. The various points of view that writers draw upon can be grouped into two broad categories: (1) the third-person narrator uses he, she, or they to tell the story and does not participate in the action; and (2) the first-person narrator uses I and is a major or minor participant in the action. In addition, a second-person narrator, you, is also possible, but is rarely used because of the awkwardness of thrusting the reader into the story, as in "You are minding your own business on a park bench when a drunk steps out and demands your lunch bag." An objective point of view employs a third-person narrator who does not see into the mind of any character. From this detached and impersonal perspective, the narrator reports action and dialogue without telling us directly what the characters think and feel. Since no analysis or interpretation is provided by the narrator, this point of view places a premium on dialogue, actions, and details to reveal character to the reader. See also narrator, stream-of-consciousness technique.

**Postcolonial criticism** An approach to literature that focuses on the study of cultural behavior and expression in relationship to the colonized world. Postcolonial criticism refers to the analysis of literary works written by writers from countries and cultures that at one time have been controlled by colonizing powers—such as Indian writers during or after British colonial rule. Postcolonial criticism also refers to the analysis of literary works written about colonial cultures by writers from the colonizing country. Many of these kinds of analyses point out how writers from colonial powers sometimes misrepresent colonized cultures by reflecting more their own values. See also cultural criticism, historical criticism, marxist criticism.

**Problem play** Popularized by Henrik Ibsen, a problem play is a type of drama that presents a social issue in order to awaken the audience to it. These plays usually reject romantic plots in favor of holding up a mirror that reflects not simply what the audience wants to see but what the playwright sees in them. Often, a problem play will propose a solution to the problem that does not coincide with prevailing opinion. The term is also used to refer to certain Shakespeare plays that do not fit the categories of tragedy, comedy, or romance. See also drama.

**Prologue** The opening speech or dialogue of a play, especially a classic Greek play, that usually gives the exposition necessary to follow the subsequent action. Today the term also refers to the introduction to any literary work. See also drama, exposition.

**Prose poem** A kind of open form poetry that is printed as prose and represents the most clear opposite of fixed form poetry. Prose poems are densely compact and

often make use of striking imagery and figures of speech. See also fixed form, open form.

**Prosody** The overall metrical structure of a poem. See also meter.

**Protagonist** The main character of a narrative; its central character who engages the reader's interest and empathy. See also character.

**Psychological criticism** An approach to literature that draws upon psychoanalytic theories, especially those of Sigmund Freud or Jacques Lacan to understand more fully the text, the writer, and the reader. The basis of this approach is the idea of the existence of a human unconscious—those impulses, desires, and feelings about which a person is unaware but which influence emotions and behavior. Critics use psychological approaches to explore the motivations of characters and the symbolic meanings of events, while biographers speculate about a writer's own motivations—conscious or unconscious—in a literary work. Psychological approaches are also used to describe and analyze the reader's personal responses to a text.

**Pun** A play on words that relies on a word's having more than one meaning or sounding like another word. Shakespeare and other writers use puns extensively, for serious and comic purposes; in *Romeo and Juliet* (III.i.101), the dying Mercutio puns, "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man." Puns have serious literary uses, but since the eighteenth century, puns have been used almost purely for humorous effect. See also comedy.

**Pyramidal pattern** See plot.

**Quatrain** A four-line stanza. Quatrains are the most common stanzaic form in the English language; they can have various meters and rhyme schemes. See also meter, rhyme, stanza.

**Reader-response criticism** An approach to literature that focuses on the reader rather than the work itself, by attempting to describe what goes on in the reader's mind during the reading of a text. Hence, the consciousness of the reader—produced by reading the work—is the actual subject of reader-response criticism. These critics are not after a "correct" reading of the text or what the author presumably intended; instead, they are interested in the reader's individual experience with the text. Thus, there is no single definitive reading of a work, because readers create rather than discover absolute meanings in texts. However, this approach is not a rationale for mistaken or bizarre readings, but an exploration of the possibilities for a plurality of readings. This kind of strategy calls attention to how we read and what influences our readings, and what that reveals about ourselves.

**Recognition** The moment in a story when previously unknown or withheld information is revealed to the protagonist, resulting in the discovery of the truth of his or her situation and, usually, a decisive change in course for that character. In *Oedipus the King*, the moment of recognition comes when Oedipus finally realizes that he has killed his father and married his mother.

**Resolution** The conclusion of a plot's conflicts and complications. The resolution, also known as the falling action, follows the climax in the plot. See also dénouement, plot.

**Revenge tragedy** See tragedy.

**Reversal** The point in a story when the protagonist's fortunes turn in an unexpected direction. See also plot.

**Rhyme** The repetition of identical or similar concluding syllables in different words, most often at the ends of lines. Rhyme is predominantly a function of sound rather than spelling; thus, words that end with the same vowel sounds rhyme, for instance, day, prey, bouquet, weigh, and words with the same consonant ending rhyme, for instance vain, feign, rein, lane. Words do not have to be spelled the same way or look alike to rhyme. In fact, words may look alike but not rhyme at all. This is called eye rhyme, as with bough and cough, or brow and blow.

End rhyme is the most common form of rhyme in poetry; the rhyme comes at the end of the lines.

It runs through the reeds  
And away it proceeds,  
Through meadow and glade,  
In sun and in shade.

The rhyme scheme of a poem describes the pattern of end rhymes. Rhyme schemes are mapped out by noting patterns of rhyme with small letters: the first rhyme sound is designated a, the second becomes b, the third c, and so on. Thus, the rhyme scheme of the stanza above is aabb. Internal rhyme places at least one of the rhymed words within the line, as in "Dividing and gliding and sliding" or "In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud." Masculine rhyme describes the rhyming of single-syllable words, such as grade or shade. Masculine rhyme also occurs where rhyming words of more than one syllable, when the same sound occurs in a final stressed syllable, as in defend and contend, betray and away. Feminine rhyme consists of a rhymed stressed syllable followed by one or more identical unstressed syllables, as in butter, clutter; gratitude, attitude; quivering, shivering. All the examples so far have illustrated exact rhymes, because they share the same stressed vowel sounds as well as sharing sounds that follow the vowel. In near rhyme (also called off rhyme, slant rhyme, and approximate rhyme), the sounds are almost but not exactly alike. A common form of near rhyme is consonance, which consists of identical consonant sounds preceded by different vowel sounds: home, same; worth, breath.

**Rhyme scheme** See rhyme.

**Rhythm** A term used to refer to the recurrence of stressed and unstressed sounds in poetry. Depending on how sounds are arranged, the rhythm of a poem may be fast or slow, choppy or smooth. Poets use rhythm to create pleasurable sound patterns and to reinforce meanings. Rhythm in prose arises from pattern repetitions of sounds and pauses that create looser rhythmic effects. See also meter.

**Rising action** See plot.

**Rising meter** See meter.

**Romantic comedy** See comedy.

**Round character** See character.

**Run-on line** See enjambment.

**Sarcasm** See irony.

**Satire** The literary art of ridiculing a folly or vice in order to expose or correct it. The object of satire is usually some human frailty; people, institutions, ideas, and things are all fair game for satirists. Satire evokes attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation toward its faulty subject in the hope of somehow improving it. See also irony, parody.

**Scansion** The process of measuring the stresses in a line of verse in order to determine the metrical pattern of the line. See also line, meter.

**Scene** In drama, a scene is a subdivision of an act. In modern plays, scenes usually consist of units of action in which there are no changes in the setting or breaks in the continuity of time. According to traditional conventions, a scene changes when the location of the action shifts or when a new character enters. See also act, convention, drama.

**Script** The written text of a play, which includes the dialogue between characters, stage directions, and often other expository information. See also drama, exposition, prologue, stage directions.

**Sentimentality** A pejorative term used to describe the effort by an author to induce emotional responses in the reader that exceed what the situation warrants. Sentimentality especially pertains to such emotions as pathos and sympathy; it cons readers into falling for the mass murderer who is devoted to stray cats, and it requires that readers do not examine such illogical responses. Clichés and stock responses are the key ingredients of sentimentality in literature. See also cliché, stock responses.

**Sestet** A stanza consisting of exactly six lines. See also stanza.

**Sestina** A type of fixed form poetry consisting of thirty-six lines of any length divided into six sestets and a three-line concluding stanza called an envoy. The six words at the end of the first sestet's lines must also appear at the ends of the other five sestets, in varying order. These six words must also appear in the envoy, where they often resonate important themes. An example of this highly demanding form of poetry is Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina." See also sestet.

**Setting** The physical and social context in which the action of a story occurs. The major elements of setting are the time, the place, and the social environment that frames the characters. Setting can be used to evoke a mood or atmosphere that will prepare the reader for what is to come, as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown." Sometimes, writers choose a particular setting because of

traditional associations with that setting that are closely related to the action of a story. For example, stories filled with adventure or romance often take place in exotic locales.

**Shakespearean sonnet** See sonnet.

**Showing** See character.

**Simile** A common figure of speech that makes an explicit comparison between two things by using words such as like, as, than, appears, and seems: "A sip of Mrs. Cook's coffee is like a punch in the stomach." The effectiveness of this simile is created by the differences between the two things compared. There would be no simile if the comparison were stated this way: "Mrs. Cook's coffee is as strong as the cafeteria's coffee." This is a literal translation because Mrs. Cook's coffee is compared with something like it—another kind of coffee. See also figures of speech, metaphor.

**Situational irony** See irony.

**Slant rhyme** See rhyme.

**Sociological criticism** An approach to literature that examines social groups, relationships, and values as they are manifested in literature. Sociological approaches emphasize the nature and effect of the social forces that shape power relationships between groups or classes of people. Such readings treat literature as either a document reflecting social conditions or a product of those conditions. The former view brings into focus the social milieu; the latter emphasizes the work. Two important forms of sociological criticism are Marxist and feminist approaches. See also feminist criticism, marxist criticism.

**Soliloquy** A dramatic convention by means of which a character, alone onstage, utters his or her thoughts aloud. Playwrights use soliloquies as a convenient way to inform the audience about a character's motivations and state of mind. Shakespeare's Hamlet delivers perhaps the best known of all soliloquies, which begins: "To be or not to be." See also aside, convention.

**Sonnet** A fixed form of lyric poetry that consists of fourteen lines, usually written in iambic pentameter. There are two basic types of sonnets, the Italian and the English. The Italian sonnet, also known as the Petrarchan sonnet, is divided into an octave, which typically rhymes abbaabba, and a sestet, which may have varying rhyme schemes. Common rhyme patterns in the sestet are cdecde, cdcdcd, and cdccdc. Very often the octave presents a situation, attitude, or problem that the sestet comments upon or resolves, as in John Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." The English sonnet, also known as the Shakespearean sonnet, is organized into three quatrains and a couplet, which typically rhyme abab cdcd efef gg. This rhyme scheme is more suited to English poetry because English has fewer rhyming words than Italian. English sonnets, because of their four-part organization, also have more flexibility with respect to where thematic breaks can occur. Frequently, however, the most pronounced break or turn comes with the concluding couplet, as in Shakespeare's "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" See also couplet, iambic pentameter, line, octave, quatrain, sestet.

**Speaker** The voice used by an author to tell a story or speak a poem. The speaker is often a created identity, and should not automatically be equated with the author's self. See also narrator, persona, point of view.

**Spondee** See foot.

**Stage directions** A playwright's written instructions about how the actors are to move and behave in a play. They explain in which direction characters should move, what facial expressions they should assume, and so on. See also drama, script.

**Stanza** In poetry, stanza refers to a grouping of lines, set off by a space, that usually has a set pattern of meter and rhyme. See also line, meter, rhyme.

**Static character** See character.

**Stock character** See character.

**Stock responses** Predictable, conventional reactions to language, characters, symbols, or situations. The flag, motherhood, puppies, God, and peace are common objects used to elicit stock responses from unsophisticated audiences. See also cliché, sentimentality.

**Stream-of-consciousness technique** The most intense use of a central consciousness in narration. The stream-of-consciousness technique takes a reader inside a character's mind to reveal perceptions, thoughts, and feelings on a conscious or unconscious level. This technique suggests the flow of thought as well as its content; hence, complete sentences may give way to fragments as the character's mind makes rapid associations free of conventional logic or transitions. James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* makes extensive use of this narrative technique. See also narrator, point of view.

**Stress** The emphasis, or accent, given a syllable in pronunciation. See also accent.

**Style** The distinctive and unique manner in which a writer arranges words to achieve particular effects. Style essentially combines the idea to be expressed with the individuality of the author. These arrangements include individual word choices as well as matters such as the length of sentences, their structure, tone, and use of irony. See also diction, irony, tone.

**Subplot** The secondary action of a story, complete and interesting in its own right, that reinforces or contrasts with the main plot. There may be more than one subplot, and sometimes as many as three, four, or even more, running through a piece of fiction. Subplots are generally either analogous to the main plot, thereby enhancing our understanding of it, or extraneous to the main plot, to provide relief from it. See also plot.

**Suspense** The anxious anticipation of a reader or an audience as to the outcome of a story, especially concerning the character or characters with whom sympathetic attachments are formed. Suspense helps to secure and sustain the interest of the reader or audience throughout a work.

**Symbol** A person, object, image, word, or event that evokes a range of additional meaning beyond and usually more abstract than its literal significance. Symbols are educational devices for evoking complex ideas without having to resort to painstaking explanations that would make a story more like an essay than an experience. Conventional symbols have meanings that are widely recognized by a society or culture. Some conventional symbols are the Christian cross, the Star of David, a swastika, or a nation's flag. Writers use conventional symbols to reinforce meanings. Kate Chopin, for example, emphasizes the spring setting in "The Story of an Hour" as a way of suggesting the renewed sense of life that Mrs. Mallard feels when she thinks herself free from her husband. A literary or contextual symbol can be a setting, character, action, object, name, or anything else in a work that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meanings. Such symbols go beyond conventional symbols; they gain their symbolic meaning within the context of a specific story. For example, the white whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick* takes on multiple symbolic meanings in the work, but these meanings do not automatically carry over into other stories about whales. The meanings suggested by Melville's whale are specific to that text; therefore, it becomes a contextual symbol. See also allegory.

**Synecdoche** See metaphor.

**Syntax** The ordering of words into meaningful verbal patterns such as phrases, clauses, and sentences. Poets often manipulate syntax, changing conventional word order, to place certain emphasis on particular words. Emily Dickinson, for instance, writes about being surprised by a snake in her poem "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," and includes this line: "His notice sudden is." In addition to the alliterative hissing s-sounds here, Dickinson also effectively manipulates the line's syntax so that the verb is appears unexpectedly at the end, making the snake's hissing presence all the more "sudden."

**Telling** See character.

**Tercet** A three-line stanza. See also stanza, triplet.

**Terza rima** An interlocking three-line rhyme scheme: aba, bcb, cdc, ded, and so on. Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Frost's "Acquainted with the Night" are written in terza rima. See also rhyme, tercet.

**Theme** The central meaning or dominant idea in a literary work. A theme provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbols, and other elements of a work are organized. It is important not to mistake the theme for the actual subject of the work; the theme refers to the abstract concept that is made concrete through the images, characterization, and action of the text. In nonfiction, however, the theme generally refers to the main topic of the discourse.

**Thesis** The central idea of an essay. The thesis is a complete sentence (although sometimes it may require more than one sentence) that establishes the topic of the essay in clear, unambiguous language.

**Tone** The author's implicit attitude toward the reader or the people, places, and events in a work as revealed by the elements of the author's style. Tone may be characterized as serious or ironic, sad or happy, private or public, angry or

affectionate, bitter or nostalgic, or any other attitudes and feelings that human beings experience. See also style.

**Tragedy** A story that presents courageous individuals who confront powerful forces within or outside themselves with a dignity that reveals the breadth and depth of the human spirit in the face of failure, defeat, and even death. Tragedies recount an individual's downfall; they usually begin high and end low. Shakespeare is known for his tragedies, including *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*. The revenge tragedy is a well-established type of drama that can be traced back to Greek and Roman plays, particularly through the Roman playwright Seneca (c. 3 b.c.–a.d. 63). Revenge tragedies basically consist of a murder that has to be avenged by a relative of the victim. Typically, the victim's ghost appears to demand revenge, and invariably madness of some sort is worked into subsequent events, which ultimately end in the deaths of the murderer, the avenger, and a number of other characters. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* subscribes to the basic ingredients of revenge tragedy, but it also transcends these conventions because *Hamlet* contemplates not merely revenge but suicide and the meaning of life itself. A tragic flaw is an error or defect in the tragic hero that leads to his downfall, such as greed, pride, or ambition. This flaw may be a result of bad character, bad judgment, an inherited weakness, or any other defect of character. Tragic irony is a form of dramatic irony found in tragedies such as *Oedipus the King*, in which *Oedipus* ironically ends up hunting himself. See also comedy, drama.

**Tragic flaw** See tragedy.

**Tragic irony** See irony, tragedy.

**Tragicomedy** A type of drama that combines certain elements of both tragedy and comedy. The play's plot tends to be serious, leading to a terrible catastrophe, until an unexpected turn in events leads to a reversal of circumstance, and the story ends happily. Tragicomedy often employs a romantic, fast-moving plot dealing with love, jealousy, disguises, treachery, intrigue, and surprises, all moving toward a melodramatic resolution. Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* is a tragicomedy. See also comedy, drama, melodrama, tragedy.

**Triplet** A tercet in which all three lines rhyme. See also tercet.

**Trochaic meter** See foot.

**Understatement** The opposite of hyperbole, understatement (or litotes) refers to a figure of speech that says less than is intended. Understatement usually has an ironic effect, and sometimes may be used for comic purposes, as in Mark Twain's statement, "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." See also hyperbole, irony.

**Unreliable narrator** See narrator.

**Verbal irony** See irony.

**Verse** A generic term used to describe poetic lines composed in a measured rhythmical pattern, that are often, but not necessarily, rhymed. See also line, meter, rhyme, rhythm.

**Villanelle** A type of fixed form poetry consisting of nineteen lines of any length divided into six stanzas: five tercets and a concluding quatrain. The first and third lines of the initial tercet rhyme; these rhymes are repeated in each subsequent tercet (aba) and in the final two lines of the quatrain (abaa). Line 1 appears in its entirety as lines 6, 12, and 18, while line 3 reappears as lines 9, 15, and 19. Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" is a villanelle. See also fixed form, quatrain, rhyme, tercet.

**Well-made play** A realistic style of play that employs conventions including plenty of suspense created by meticulous plotting. Well-made plays are tightly and logically constructed, and lead to a logical resolution that is favorable to the protagonist. This dramatic structure was popularized in France by Eugène Scribe (1791–1861) and Victorien Sardou (1831–1908) and was adopted by Henrik Ibsen. See also character, plot.

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