

AP English Poetry Terms

(Presented by Dennis Carroll of High Point University at AP Workshop)

Listed and defined below are literary terms that you will need to know in order to discuss and write about works of poetry. You are already familiar with many of these.

1. **alliteration**- the repetition of identical or similar consonant sounds, normally at the beginnings of words. "Gnus never know pneumonia" is an example of alliteration since, despite the spellings, all four words begin with the "n" sound.
2. **allusion**- a reference in a work of literature to something outside the work, especially to a well-known historical or literary event, person, or work. When T.S. Eliot writes, "To have squeezed the universe into a ball" in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he is alluding to the lines "Let us roll our strength and all/ Our sweetness up into one ball" in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress."
3. **antithesis**- a figure of speech characterized by strongly contrasting words, clauses, sentences, or ideas, as in "Man proposes; God disposes." Antithesis is a balancing of one term against another for emphasis or stylistic effectiveness. The second line of the following couplet by Alexander Pope is an example of antithesis:

The hungry judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jury-men may dine.
4. **apostrophe**- a figure of speech in which someone (usually, but not always absent), some abstract quality, or a nonexistent personage is directly addressed as though present. Following are two examples of apostrophe:

Papa Above!
Regard a Mouse.
-Emily Dickinson

Milton! Thou shouldst be living in this hour;
England hath need of thee . . .
-William Wordsworth
5. **assonance**- the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds. "A land laid waste with all its young men slain" repeats the same "a" sound in "laid," "waste," and "slain."
6. **ballad meter**- a four-line stanza rhymed *abcd* with four feet in lines one and three and three feet in lines two and four.

O mother, mother make my bed.
O make it soft and narrow.
Since my love died for me today,
I'll die for him tomorrow.
7. **blank verse**- unrhymed iambic pentameter. Blank verse is the meter of most of Shakespeare's plays, as well as that of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

8. **cacophony**- a harsh, unpleasant combination of sounds or tones. It may be an unconscious flaw in the poet's music, resulting in harshness of sound or difficulty of articulation, or it may be used consciously for effect, as Browning and Eliot often use it. See, for example, the following line from Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra":

Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

9. **caesura**- a pause, usually near the middle of a line of verse, usually indicated by the sense of the line, and often greater than the normal pause. For example, one would naturally pause after "human" in the following line from Alexander Pope:

To err is human, to forgive divine.

10. **conceit**- an ingenious and fanciful notion or conception, usually expressed through an elaborate analogy, and pointing to a striking parallel between two seemingly dissimilar things. A conceit may be a **brief metaphor**, but it also may form the framework of an entire poem. A famous example of a conceit occurs in John Donne's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," in which he compares his soul and his wife's to legs of a mathematical compass.

11. **consonance**- the repetition of similar consonant sounds in a group of words. The term usually refers to words in which the ending consonants are the same but the vowels that precede them are different. Consonance is found in the following pairs of words: "add" and "read," "bill and ball," and "born" and "burn."

12. **couplet**- a two-line stanza, usually with end-rhymes the same.

13. **devices of sound**- the techniques of deploying the sound of words, especially in poetry. Among devices of sound are **rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and onomatopoeia**. The devices are used for many reasons, including to create a general effect of pleasant or of discordant sound, to imitate another sound, or to reflect a meaning.

14. **diction**- the use of words in a literary work. Diction may be described as formal (the level of usage common in serious books and formal discourse), informal (the level of usage found in the relaxed but polite conversation of cultivated people), colloquial (the everyday usage of a group, possibly including terms and constructions accepted in that group but not universally acceptable), or slang (a group of newly coined words which are not acceptable for formal usage as yet).

15. **didactic poem**- a poem which is intended primarily to teach a lesson. The distinction between didactic poetry and non-didactic poetry is difficult to make and usually involves a subjective judgement of the author's purpose on the part of the critic or the reader. Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is a good example of didactic poetry.

16. **dramatic poem**- a poem which employs a dramatic form or some element or elements of dramatic techniques as a means of achieving poetic ends. The **dramatic monologue** is an example.

17. **elegy**- a sustained and formal poem setting forth the poet's meditations upon death or another solemn theme. Examples include Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"; Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam*; and Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

18. **end-stopped**- a line with a pause at the end. Lines that end with a period, a comma, a colon, a semicolon, an exclamation point, or a question mark are end-stopped lines.

True ease in writing comes from Art, not Chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.

19. **enjambment**- the continuation of the sense and grammatical construction from one line of poetry to the next. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is notable for its use of enjambment, as seen in the following lines:

. . . .Or if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flow'd
Fast by the oracle of God,

20. **extended metaphor**- an implied analogy, or comparison, which is carried throughout a stanza or an entire poem. In "The Bait," John Donne compares a beautiful woman to fish bait and men to fish who want to be caught by the woman. Since he carries these comparisons all the way through the poem, these are considered "extended metaphors."

21. **euphony**- a style in which combinations of words pleasant to the ear predominate. Its opposite is **cacophony**. The following lines from John Keats' *Endymion* are euphonic:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

22. **eye rhyme**- rhyme that appears correct from spelling, but is half-rhyme or slant rhyme from the pronunciation. Examples include "watch" and "match," and "love" and "move."

23. **feminine rhyme**- a rhyme of two syllables, one stressed and one unstressed, as "waken" and "forsaken" and "audition" and "rendition." Feminine rhyme is sometimes called double rhyme.

24. **figurative language**- writing that uses figures of speech (as opposed to literal language or that which is actual or specifically denoted) such as **metaphor, irony, and simile**. Figurative language uses words to mean something other than their literal meaning. "The black bat night has flown" is figurative, with the **metaphor** comparing night and bat. "Night is over" says the same thing without figurative language.

25. **free verse**- poetry which is not written in a traditional meter but is still rhythmical. The poetry of Walt Whitman is perhaps the best-known example of free verse.


26. **heroic couplet**- two end-stopped iambic pentameter lines rhymed aa, bb, cc with the thought usually completed in the two-line unit. See the following example from Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock*:

But when to mischief mortals bend their will,
How soon they find fit instruments of ill!

27. **hyperbole**- a deliberate, extravagant, and often outrageous exaggeration. It may be used for either serious or comic effect. Macbeth is using hyperbole in the following lines:

. . . .No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

28. **imagery**- the images of a literary work; the sensory details of a work; the figurative language of a work. Imagery has several definitions, but the two that are paramount are the visual auditory, or tactile

images evoked by the words of a literary work or the images that figurative language evokes.  **When an AP question asks you to discuss imagery, you should look especially carefully at the sensory details and the metaphors and similes of a passage. Some diction is also imagery, but not all diction evokes sensory responses.**

29. **irony**- the contrast between actual meaning and the suggestion of another meaning. **Verbal irony** is a figure of speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words which carry the opposite meaning. Irony is likely to be confused with **sarcasm**, but it differs from sarcasm in that it is usually lighter, less harsh in its wording though in effect probably more cutting because of its indirectness. The ability to recognize irony is one of the surer tests of intelligence and sophistication. Among the devices by which irony is achieved are hyperbole and understatement.

30. **internal rhyme**- rhyme that occurs within a line, rather than at the end. The following lines contain internal rhyme:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping. . . suddenly there came a tapping. . . .

31. **lyric poem**- any short poem that presents a single speaker who expresses thoughts and feelings. Love lyrics are common, but lyric poems have also been written on subjects as different as religion and reading. **Sonnets and odes** are lyric poems.

32. **masculine rhyme**- rhyme that falls on the stressed and concluding syllables of the rhyme-words. Examples include “keep” and “sleep,” “glow” and “no,” and “spell” and “impel.”

33. **metaphor**- a figurative use of language in which a comparison is expressed without the use of a comparative term like “as,” “like,” or “than.” A **simile** would say, “night is like a black bat”; a metaphor would say, “the black bat night.”

34. **meter**- the repetition of a regular rhythmic unit in a line of poetry. The meter of a poem emphasizes the musical quality of the language and often relates directly to the subject matter of the poem. Each unit of meter is known as a foot.

35. **metonymy**- a figure of speech which is characterized by the substitution of a term naming an object closely associated with the word in mind for the word itself. In this way we commonly speak of the king as the “crown,” an object closely associated with kingship.

36. **mixed metaphors**- the mingling of one metaphor with another immediately following with which the first is incongruous. Lloyd George is reported to have said, “I smell a rat. I see it floating in the air. I shall nip it in the bud.”

37. **narrative poem**- a non-dramatic poem which tells a story or presents a narrative, whether simple or complex, long or short. **Epics and ballads** are examples of narrative poems.

38. **octave**- an eight-line stanza. Most commonly, octave refers to the first division of an Italian sonnet.

39. **onomatopoeia**- the use of words whose sound suggests their meaning. Examples are “buzz,” “hiss,” or “honk.”

40. **oxymoron**- a form of paradox that combines a pair of contrary terms into a single expression. This combination usually serves the purpose of shocking the reader into awareness. Examples include “wise fool,” “sad joy,” and “eloquent silence.”

41. **paradox**- a situation or action or feeling that appears to be contradictory but on inspection turns out to be true or at least to make sense. The following lines from one of John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* include paradoxes:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I
 Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

42. **parallelism**- a similar grammatical structure within a line or lines of poetry. Parallelism is characteristic of Asian poetry, being notably present in the Psalms, and it seems to be the controlling principle of the poetry of Walt Whitman, as in the following lines:

...Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to
 connect them.
 Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,
 Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

43. **paraphrase**- a restatement of an ideas in such a way as to retain the meaning while changing the diction and form. A paraphrase is often an amplification of the original for the purpose of clarity.

44. **personification**- a kind of **metaphor** that gives inanimate objects or abstract ideas human characteristics.

45. **poetic foot**- a group of syllables in verse usually consisting of one accented syllable and one or two unaccented syllables associated with it. The most common type of feet are as follows:

iambic u /
 trochaic / u
 anapestic u u /
 dactylic / u u
 pyrrhic u u
 spondaic //

The following poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge illustrates all of these feet except the pyrrhic foot:

Trochee trips from long to short.
 From long to long in solemn sort
 Slow Spondee stalks; strong foot! yet ill able
 Ever to come up with Dactyl trisyllable.
 Iambics march from short to long;
 With a leap and a bound the swift Anapests throng.

46. **pun**- a play on words that are identical or similar in sound but have sharply diverse meanings. Puns can have serious as well as humorous uses. An example is Thomas Hood’s: “They went and told the sexton and the sexton tolled the bell.”


47. **quatrain**- a four-line stanza with any combination of rhymes.
48. **refrain**- a group of words forming a phrase or sentence and consisting of one or more lines repeated at intervals in a poem, usually at the end of a stanza.
49. **rhyme**- close similarity or identity of sound between accented syllables occupying corresponding positions in two or more lines of verse. For a true rhyme, the vowels in the accented syllables must be preceded by different consonants, such as “fan” and “ran.”
50. **rhyme royal**- a seven-line stanza of iambic pentameter rhymed *ababbcc*, used by Chaucer and other medieval poets.
51. **rhythm**- the recurrence of stressed and unstressed syllables. The presence of rhythmic patterns lends both pleasure and heightened emotional response to the listener or reader.
52. **sarcasm**- a type of irony in which a person appears to be praising something but is actually insulting it. Its purpose is to injure or to hurt.
53. **satire**- writing that seeks to arouse a reader’s disapproval of an object by ridicule. Satire is usually comedy that exposes errors with an eye to correct vice and folly. Satire is often found in the poetry of Alexander Pope.
54. **scansion**- a system for describing the meter of a poem by identifying the number and the type(s) of feet per line. Following are the most common types of meter:
- | | |
|------------|---------------------|
| monometer | one foot per line |
| dimeter | two feet per line |
| trimeter | three feet per line |
| tetrameter | four feet per line |
| pentameter | five feet per line |
| hexameter | six feet per line |
| heptameter | seven feet per line |
| octameter | eight feet per line |

Using these terms, then, a line consisting of five iambic feet is called “iambic pentameter,” while a line consisting of four anapestic feet is called “anapestic tetrameter.”

In order to determine the meter of a poem, the lines are “scanned,” or marked to indicate stressed and unstressed syllables which are then divided into feet. The following line has been scanned:

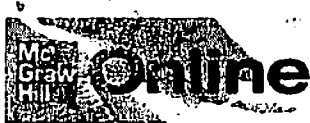
u / u / u / u / u /
 And still she slept an az ure- lid ded sleep

55. **sestet**- a six-line stanza. Most commonly, sestet refers to the second division of an Italian sonnet.
56. **simile**- a directly expressed comparison; a figure of speech comparing two objects, usually with “like,” “as,” or “than.” It is easier to recognize a **simile** than a **metaphor** because the comparison is explicit: my love is like a fever; my love is deeper than a well. (The plural of “simile” is “similes” not “similies.”)

57. **sonnet**- normally a fourteen-line iambic pentameter poem. The conventional Italian, or Petrarchan sonnet is rhymed *abba, abba, cde, cde*; the English, or Shakespearean, sonnet is rhymed *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*.
58. **stanza**- usually a repeated grouping of three or more lines with the same meter and rhyme scheme.
59. **strategy (or rhetorical strategy)**- the management of language for a specific effect. The strategy or rhetorical strategy of a poem is the planned placing of elements to achieve an effect. The rhetorical strategy of most love poems is deployed to convince the loved one to return to the speaker's love. By appealing to the loved one's sympathy, or by flattery, or by threat, the lover attempts to persuade the loved one to love in return.
60. **structure**- the arrangement of materials within a work; the relationship of the parts of a work to the whole; the logical divisions of a work. The most common units of structure in a poem are the line and stanza.
61. **style**- the mode of expression in language; the characteristic manner of expression of an author. Many elements contribute to style, and  if a question calls for a discussion of style or of "stylistic techniques," you can discuss diction, syntax, figurative language, imagery, selection of detail, sound effects, and tone, using the ones that are appropriate.
62. **symbol**- something that is simultaneously itself and a sign of something else. For example, winter, darkness, and cold are real things, but in literature they are also likely to be used as symbols of death.
63. **synecdoche**- a form of metaphor which in mentioning a part signifies the whole. For example, we refer to "foot soldiers" for infantry and "field hands" for manual laborers who work in agriculture.
64. **syntax**- the ordering of words into patterns or sentences. If a poet shifts words from the usual word order, you know you are dealing with an older style of poetry or a poet who wants to shift emphasis onto a particular word.
65. **tercet**- a stanza of three lines in which each line ends with the same rhyme.
66. **terza rima**- a three-line stanza rhymed *aba, bcb, cdc*, etc. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is written in terza rima.
67. **theme**- the main thought expressed by a work. In poetry, it is the abstract concept which is made concrete through its representation in person, action, and image in the work.
68. **tone**- the manner in which an author expresses his or her attitude; the intonation of the voice that expresses meaning. (Remember that the "voice" need not be that of the poet.) Tone is described by adjectives, and the possibilities are nearly endless. Often a single adjective will be enough, and tone may change from stanza to stanza or even line to line. Tone is the result of **allusion, diction, figurative language, imagery, irony, symbol, syntax, and style**.
69. **understatement**- the opposite of hyperbole. It is a kind of irony that deliberately represents something as being much less than it really is. For example, Macbeth, having been nearly hysterical after killing

Duncan, tells Lenox, "'Twas a rough night."

70. **villanelle**- a nineteen-line poem divided into five tercets and a final quatrain. The villanelle uses only two rhymes which are repeated as follows: *aba, aba, aba, aba, aba, abaa*. Line 1 is repeated entirely to form lines 6, 12, and 18, and line 3 is repeated entirely to form lines 9, 15, and 19; thus, eight of the nineteen lines are refrain. Dylan Thomas's poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" is an example of a villanelle.



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Glossary of Poetic Terms

Allegory

A symbolic narrative in which the surface details imply a secondary meaning. Allegory often takes the form of a story in which the characters represent moral qualities. The most famous example in English is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the name of the central character, Pilgrim, epitomizes the book's allegorical nature. Kay Boyle's story "Astronomer's Wife" and Christina Rossetti's poem "Up-Hill" both contain allegorical elements.

Alliteration

The repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words. Example: "Fetched fresh, as I suppose, off some sweet wood." Hopkins, "In the Valley of the Elwy."

Anapest

Two unaccented syllables followed by an accented one, as in *com-pre-HEND* or *in-ter-VENE*. An anapestic meter rises to the accented beat as in Byron's lines from "The Destruction of Sennacherib": "And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea, / When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee."

Antagonist

A character or force against which another character struggles. Creon is Antigone's antagonist in Sophocles' play *Antigone*; Teiresias is the antagonist of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

Assonance

The repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sentence or a line of poetry or prose, as in "I rose and told him of my woe." Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" contains assonantal "I's" in the following lines: "How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick, / Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself."

Aubade

A love lyric in which the speaker complains about the arrival of the dawn, when he must part from his lover. John Donne's "The Sun Rising" exemplifies this poetic genre.

Ballad

A narrative poem written in four-line stanzas, characterized by swift action and narrated in a direct style. The Anonymous medieval ballad, "Barbara Allan," exemplifies the genre.

Blank verse

A line of poetry or prose in unrhymed iambic pentameter. Shakespeare's sonnets, Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, and Robert Frost's meditative poems such as "Birches" include many lines of blank verse. Here are the opening blank verse lines of "Birches": When I see birches bend to left and right / Across the lines of straighter darker trees, / I like to think some boy's been swinging them.

Caesura

A strong pause within a line of verse. The following stanza from Hardy's "The Man He Killed" contains caesuras in the middle two lines:

He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand-like--just as I--
Was out of work-had sold his traps--
No other reason why.

Character

An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change). In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona is a major character, but one who is static, like the minor character Bianca. Othello is a major character who is dynamic, exhibiting an ability to change.

Characterization

The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions. Readers come to understand the character Miss Emily in Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" through what she says, how she lives, and what she does.

Climax

The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work. The climax of John Updike's "A&P," for example, occurs when Sammy quits his job as a cashier.

Closed form

A type of form or structure in poetry characterized by regularity and consistency in such elements as rhyme, line length, and metrical pattern. Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" provides one of many examples. A single stanza illustrates some of the features of closed form:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though.
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

Complication

An intensification of the conflict in a story or play. Complication builds up, accumulates, and develops the primary or central conflict in a literary work. Frank O'Connor's story "Guests of the Nation" provides a striking example, as does Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal."

Conflict

A struggle between opposing forces in a story or play, usually resolved by the end of the work. The conflict may occur within a character as well as between characters. Lady Gregory's one-act play *The Rising of the Moon* exemplifies both types of conflict as the Policeman wrestles with his conscience in an inner conflict and confronts an antagonist in the person of the ballad singer.

Connotation

The associations called up by a word that goes beyond its dictionary meaning. Poets, especially, tend to use words rich in connotation. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" includes intensely connotative language, as in these lines: "Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright / Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay, / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Convention

A customary feature of a literary work, such as the use of a chorus in Greek tragedy, the inclusion of an explicit moral in a fable, or the use of a particular rhyme scheme in a villanelle. Literary conventions are defining features of particular literary genres, such as novel, short story, ballad, sonnet, and play.

Couplet

A pair of rhymed lines that may or may not constitute a separate stanza in a poem. Shakespeare's sonnets end in rhymed couplets, as in "For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

Dactyl

A stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones, as in *FLUT-ter-ing* or *BLUE-ber-ry*. The following playful lines illustrate double dactyls, two dactyls per line:

Higgledy, piggledy,
Emily Dickinson
Gibbering, jabbering.

Denotation

The dictionary meaning of a word. Writers typically play off a word's denotative meaning against its connotations, or suggested and implied associational implications. In the following lines from Peter Meinke's "Advice to My Son" the references to flowers and fruit, bread and wine denote specific things, but also suggest something beyond the literal, dictionary meanings of the words:

To be specific, between the peony and rose
Plant squash and spinach, turnips and tomatoes;
Beauty is nectar and nectar, in a desert, saves--
...
and always serve bread with your wine.
But, son,
always serve wine.

Denouement

The resolution of the plot of a literary work. The denouement of *Hamlet* takes place after the catastrophe, with the stage littered with corpses. During the denouement Fortinbras makes an entrance and a speech, and Horatio speaks his sweet lines in praise of Hamlet.

Dialogue

The conversation of characters in a literary work. In fiction, dialogue is typically enclosed within quotation marks. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names.

Diction

The selection of words in a literary work. A work's diction forms one of its centrally important literary elements, as writers use words to convey action, reveal character, imply attitudes, identify themes, and suggest values. We can speak of the diction particular to a character, as in Iago's and Desdemona's very different ways of speaking in *Othello*. We can also refer to a poet's diction as represented over the body of his or her work, as in Donne's or Hughes's diction.

Elegy

A lyric poem that laments the dead. Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" is elegiac in tone. A more explicitly identified elegy is W.H. Auden's "In Memory of William Butler Yeats" and his "Funeral Blues."

Elision

The omission of an unstressed vowel or syllable to preserve the meter of a line of poetry. Alexander uses elision in "Sound and Sense": "Flies o'er th' unbending corn...."

Enjambment

A run-on line of poetry in which logical and grammatical sense carries over from one line into the next. An enjambed line differs from an end-stopped line in which the grammatical and logical sense is completed within the line. In the opening lines of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," for example, the first line is end-stopped and the second enjambed:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now....

Epic

A long narrative poem that records the adventures of a hero. Epics typically chronicle the origins of a civilization and embody its central values. Examples from western literature include Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Epigram

A brief witty poem, often satirical. Alexander Pope's "Epigram Engraved on the Collar of a Dog" exemplifies the genre:

I am his Highness' dog at Kew;
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

Exposition

The first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot, in which necessary background information is provided. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, for instance, begins with a conversation between the two central characters, a dialogue that fills the audience in on events that occurred before the action of the play begins, but which are important in the development of its plot.

Falling action

In the plot of a story or play, the action following the climax of the work that moves it towards its denouement or resolution. The falling action of *Othello* begins after Othello realizes that Iago is responsible for plotting against him by spurring him on to murder his wife, Desdemona.

Falling meter

Poetic meters such as trochaic and dactylic that move or fall from a stressed to an unstressed syllable. The nonsense line, "Higgledy, piggledy," is dactylic, with the accent on the first syllable and the two syllables following falling off from that accent in each word. Trochaic meter is represented by this line: "Hip-hop, be-bop, treetop--freedom."

Fiction

An imagined story, whether in prose, poetry, or drama. Ibsen's Nora is fictional, a "make-believe" character in a play, as are Hamlet and Othello. Characters like Robert Browning's Duke and Duchess from his poem "My Last Duchess" are fictional as well, though they may be based on actual historical individuals. And, of course,

characters in stories and novels are fictional, though they, too, may be based, in some way, on real people. The important thing to remember is that writers embellish and embroider and alter actual life when they use real life as the basis for their work. They fictionalize facts, and deviate from real-life situations as they "make things up."

Figurative language

A form of language use in which writers and speakers convey something other than the literal meaning of their words. Examples include hyperbole or exaggeration, litotes or understatement, simile and metaphor, which employ comparison, and synecdoche and metonymy, in which a part of a thing stands for the whole.

Flashback

An interruption of a work's chronology to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time frame of a work's action. Writers use flashbacks to complicate the sense of chronology in the plot of their works and to convey the richness of the experience of human time. Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" includes flashbacks.

Foil

A character who contrasts and parallels the main character in a play or story. Laertes, in *Hamlet*, is a foil for the main character; in *Othello*, Emilia and Bianca are foils for Desdemona.

Foot

A metrical unit composed of stressed and unstressed syllables. For example, an iamb or iambic foot is represented by ' ', that is, an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. Frost's line "Whose woods these are I think I know" contains four iambs, and is thus an iambic foot.

Foreshadowing

Hints of what is to come in the action of a play or a story. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* includes foreshadowing as does Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. So, too, do Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" and Chopin's "Story of an Hour."

Free verse

Poetry without a regular pattern of meter or rhyme. The verse is "free" in not being bound by earlier poetic conventions requiring poems to adhere to an explicit and identifiable meter and rhyme scheme in a form such as the sonnet or ballad. Modern and contemporary poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries often employ free verse. Williams's "This Is Just to Say" is one of many examples.

Hyperbole

A figure of speech involving exaggeration. John Donne uses hyperbole in his poem: "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star."

Iamb

An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, as in *to-DAY*. See Foot.

Image

A concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea. Imagery refers to the pattern of related details in a work. In some works one image predominates either by recurring throughout the work or by appearing at a critical point in the plot. Often writers use multiple images throughout a work to suggest states of feeling and to convey implications of thought and action. Some modern poets, such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, write poems that lack discursive explanation entirely and include only images. Among the most famous examples is Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

Imagery

The pattern of related comparative aspects of language, particularly of images, in a literary work. Imagery of light and darkness pervade James Joyce's stories "Araby," "The Boarding House," and "The Dead." So, too, does religious imagery.

Irony

A contrast or discrepancy between what is said and what is meant or between what happens and what is expected to happen in life and in literature. In verbal irony, characters say the opposite of what they mean. In irony of circumstance or situation, the opposite of what is expected occurs. In dramatic irony, a character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or to the other characters. Flannery O'Connor's short stories employ all these forms of irony, as does Poe's "Cask of Amontillado."

Literal language

A form of language in which writers and speakers mean exactly what their words denote. See *Figurative language*, *Denotation*, and *Connotation*.

Lyric poem

A type of poem characterized by brevity, compression, and the expression of feeling. Most of the poems in this book are lyrics. The anonymous "Western Wind" epitomizes the genre:

Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again!

Metaphor

A comparison between essentially unlike things without an explicitly comparative word such as *like* or *as*. An example is "My love is a red, red rose,"

From Burns's "A Red, Red Rose." Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" is built entirely of metaphors. Metaphor is one of the most important of literary uses of language. Shakespeare employs a wide range of metaphor in his sonnets and his plays, often in such density and profusion that readers are kept busy analyzing and interpreting and unraveling them. Compare *Simile*.

Meter

The measured pattern of rhythmic accents in poems. See *Foot* and *Iamb*.

Metonymy

A figure of speech in which a closely related term is substituted for an object or idea. An example: "We have always remained loyal to the crown." See *Synecdoche*.

Narrative poem

A poem that tells a story. See *Ballad*.

Narrator

The voice and implied speaker of a fictional work, to be distinguished from the actual living author. For example, the narrator of Joyce's "Araby" is not James Joyce himself, but a literary fictional character created expressly to tell the story. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" contains a communal narrator, identified only as "we." See *Point of view*.

Octave

An eight-line unit, which may constitute a *stanza*; or a section of a poem, as in the

octave of a sonnet.

Ode

A long, stately poem in stanzas of varied length, meter, and form. Usually a serious poem on an exalted subject, such as Horace's "Eheu fugaces," but sometimes a more lighthearted work, such as Neruda's "Ode to My Socks."

Onomatopoeia

The use of words to imitate the sounds they describe. Words such as *buzz* and *crack* are onomatopoeic. The following line from Pope's "Sound and Sense" onomatopoeically imitates in sound what it describes:

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow.

Most often, however, onomatopoeia refers to words and groups of words, such as Tennyson's description of the "murmur of innumerable bees," which attempts to capture the sound of a swarm of bees buzzing.

Open form

A type of structure or form in poetry characterized by freedom from regularity and consistency in such elements as rhyme, line length, metrical pattern, and overall poetic structure. E.E. Cummings's "[Buffalo Bill's]" is one example. See also Free verse.

Parody

A humorous, mocking imitation of a literary work, sometimes sarcastic, but often playful and even respectful in its playful imitation. Examples include Bob McKenty's parody of Frost's "Dust of Snow" and Kenneth Koch's parody of Williams's "This is Just to Say."

Personification

The endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities. An example: "The yellow leaves flaunted their color gaily in the breeze." Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" includes personification.

Plot

The unified structure of incidents in a literary work. See Conflict, Climax, Denouement, and Flashback.

Point of view

The angle of vision from which a story is narrated. See Narrator. A work's point of view can be: first person, in which the narrator is a character or an observer, respectively; objective, in which the narrator knows or appears to know no more than the reader; omniscient, in which the narrator knows everything about the characters; and limited omniscient, which allows the narrator to know some things about the characters but not everything.

Protagonist

The main character of a literary work--Hamlet and Othello in the plays named after them, Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Paul in Lawrence's "Rocking-Horse Winner."

Pyrrhic

A metrical foot with two unstressed syllables ("of the").

Quatrain

A four-line stanza in a poem, the first four lines and the second four lines in a Petrarchan sonnet. A Shakespearean sonnet contains three quatrains followed by a

couplet.

Recognition

The point at which a character understands his or her situation as it really is. Sophocles' Oedipus comes to this point near the end of *Oedipus the King*; Othello comes to a similar understanding of his situation in Act V of *Othello*.

Resolution

The sorting out or unraveling of a plot at the end of a play, novel, or story. See *Plot*.

Reversal

The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the protagonist. Oedipus's and Othello's recognitions are also reversals. They learn what they did not expect to learn. See *Recognition* and also *Irony*.

Rhyme

The matching of final vowel or consonant sounds in two or more words. The following stanza of "Richard Cory" employs alternate rhyme, with the third line rhyming with the first and the fourth with the second:

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him;
He was a gentleman from sole to crown
Clean favored and imperially slim.

Rhythm

The recurrence of accent or stress in lines of verse. In the following lines from "Same In Blues" by Langston Hughes, the accented words and syllables are underlined:

I said to my baby,
Baby take it slow....
Lulu said to Leonard
I want a diamond ring

Rising action

A set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a play's or story's plot leading up to the climax. See *Climax*, *Denouement*, and *Plot*.

Rising meter

Poetic meters such as iambic and anapestic that move or ascend from an unstressed to a stressed syllable. See *Anapest*, *Iamb*, and *Falling meter*.

Satire

A literary work that criticizes human misconduct and ridicules vices, stupidities, and follies. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a famous example. Chekhov's *Marriage Proposal* and O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," have strong satirical elements.

Sestet

A six-line unit of verse constituting a stanza or section of a poem; the last six lines of an Italian sonnet. Examples: Petrarch's "If it is not love, then what is it that I feel," and Frost's "Design."

Sestina

A poem of thirty-nine lines and written in iambic pentameter. Its six-line stanza repeat in an intricate and prescribed order the final word in each of the first six lines. After the sixth stanza, there is a three-line envoi, which uses the six repeating words, two per line.

Setting

The time and place of a literary work that establish its context. The stories of Sandra Cisneros are set in the American southwest in the mid to late 20th century, those of James Joyce in Dublin, Ireland in the early 20th century.

Simile

A figure of speech involving a comparison between unlike things using *like*, *as*, or *as though*. An example: "My love is like a red, red rose."

Sonnet

A fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter. The Shakespearean or English sonnet is arranged as three quatrains and a final couplet, rhyming abab cdcd efef gg. The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet divides into two parts: an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet, rhyming abba abba cde cde or abba abba cd cd cd.

Spondee

A metrical foot represented by two stressed syllables, such as *KNICK-KNACK*.

Stanza

A division or unit of a poem that is repeated in the same form--either with similar or identical patterns or rhyme and meter, or with variations from one stanza to another. The stanzas of Gertrude Schnackenberg's "Signs" are regular; those of Rita Dove's "Canary" are irregular.

Style

The way an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences or in lines of dialogue or verse, and develops ideas and actions with description, imagery, and other literary techniques. See Connotation, Denotation, Diction, Figurative language, Image, Imagery, Irony, Metaphor, Narrator, Point of view, Syntax, and Tone.

Subject

What a story or play is about; to be distinguished from plot and theme. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is about the decline of a particular way of life endemic to the American south before the civil war. Its plot concerns how Faulkner describes and organizes the actions of the story's characters. Its theme is the overall meaning Faulkner conveys.

Subplot

A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel plot in a play or story that coexists with the main plot. The story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forms a subplot with the overall plot of *Hamlet*.

Symbol

An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself. The glass unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie*, the rocking horse in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the road in Frost's "The Road Not Taken"--all are symbols in this sense.

Synecdoche

A figure of speech in which a part is substituted for the whole. An example: "Lend me a hand." See Metonymy.

Syntax

The grammatical order of words in a sentence or line of verse or dialogue. The organization of words and phrases and clauses in sentences of prose, verse, and dialogue. In the following example, normal syntax (subject, verb, object order) is inverted:

"Whose woods these are I think I know."

Tercet

A three-line stanza, as the stanzas in Frost's "Acquainted With the Night" and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." The three-line stanzas or sections that together constitute the sestet of a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet.

Theme

The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. See discussion of Dickinson's "Crumbling is not an Instant's Act."

Tone

The implied attitude of a writer toward the subject and characters of a work, as, for example, Flannery O'Connor's ironic tone in her "Good Country People." See Irony.

Trochee

An accented syllable followed by an unaccented one, as in *FOOT-ball*.

Understatement

A figure of speech in which a writer or speaker says less than what he or she means; the opposite of exaggeration. The last line of Frost's "Birches" illustrates this literary device: "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches."

Villanelle

A nineteen-line lyric poem that relies heavily on repetition. The first and third lines alternate throughout the poem, which is structured in six stanzas -- five tercets and a concluding quatrain. Examples include Bishop's "One Art," Roethke's "The Waking," and Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

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