



# Glossary of literary terms

## A

**Addressee:** the person to whom a message is addressed (reader or audience).

**Addresser:** the person who sends a message, i.e. the writer.

**Aestheticism:** the cult of beauty in art. It is also a movement rejecting Victorian materialism. The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is its artistic manifesto.

**Allegory:** usually a story in verse or prose with a double meaning: a surface one and a deeper, symbolic one. Its characters and events are, in fact, interpreted as representation of another reality, like *Animal Farm* by G. Orwell.

**Alliteration:** the repetition of the same consonant sounds at the beginning of successive words like in 'Five miles meandering with a mazy motion' (S.T. Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*) or inside words (internal alliteration).

**Anaphora:** repetition of a word or group of words in successive clauses ('It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief', from C. Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*).

**Anastrophe:** the inversion of the normal order of words ('Us he devours', from T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*).

**Antagonist:** the character, characters, circumstances or things opposing the protagonist.

**Anticlimax:** part following a climax when the tension drops.

**Antithesis:** opposition.

**Apostrophe:** when a person or a thing are directly addressed.

**Aside:** device of a play by which a character speaks to the audience and no one else on stage is meant to hear it.

**Assonance:** the repetition of the same vowel sound. Initial assonance: 'all the awful auguries.' Internal assonance: 'holy smoke.'

**Autobiographical novel:** a novel focussed on the author's life experience, like James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

## B

**Ballad:** a popular narrative poem originally accompanied by music and dance. It is characterised by a tragic content developed through dialogue with a simple language, repetitions, and a fixed stanza form.

**Bildungsroman:** a novel which records the development of a hero/ine from his/her childhood till his/her maturity. e.g. Dickens's *David Copperfield*.

**Blank verse:** unrhymed iambic pentameter. The most common metrical pattern.

## C

- Caesura:** a pause in a line of poetry. It can occur at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a line.
- Central idea:** the thesis of an essay or the theme of a literary work.
- Character:** a fictional person of a narrative/dramatic text or a film. They can be classified as **main characters** if they have a main role in the story or else they are **minor characters**. E.M. Forster also divided them into **round characters**, which fully develop through the story and act unpredictably in a realistic way, or **flat characters**, which do not change.
- Chiasmus:** a figure of speech in which the main elements are inverted. e.g. 'Down dropped the breeze, the sails dropped down' from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.
- Classicism:** the styles, rules, conventions and themes of classical authors as well as their influence on later writers. It is an attitude exalting balance, proportion, decorum and restraint.
- Climax:** the point of highest tension in a literary work.
- Comedy:** a play or a film characterised by comic situations, funny characters and a happy ending. Many types of comedy exist: the comedy of **humours** featuring characters dominated by a particular humour; comedy of **manners** dealing with the manners, i.e. the habits and moral behaviour of middle/upper classes, like the Restoration Drama; **sentimental** comedy appealing to good, tender feelings.
- Conceit:** a striking comparison between objects that belong to different semantic fields. For example, John Donne compares the love of two lovers to the two feet of a compass.
- Connotation:** the emotional, psychological, or social implications that a word carry in addition to its denotative meaning.
- Consonance:** the repetition of the same consonant sound with a different vowel sound, usually at the end of a word like *great/meat*. e.g. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'Or, if there were a sympathy in choice/War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it...' with the repetition of 'r' and 's' sounds.
- Couplet:** two successive lines that rhyme with each other.
- Crisis:** the turning point. Usually, it is marked by a decision or action taken in an attempt to resolve the work's conflict.

## D

- Decadentism:** literary period questioning the utilitarian values of the Victorian Age. (Aestheticism is the word English critics prefer.)
- Denotation:** the literal meaning of a word.
- Detective novel:** a novel based on the unravelling of a mysterious crime, by a detective. e.g. Agatha Christie's stories.
- Dialogue:** the conversation between two or more characters in fiction, poetry or drama.
- Diction:** a set of rules defining the word choice and the level of language (formal, informal, neutral).
- Drama:** a literary work aimed at being presented on a stage by actors.
- Dramatic monologue:** a type of poem in which a speaker speaks to an internal listener (a silent character in the poem), or to the reader.
- Dystopian novel:** a novel about a future world represented in pessimistic terms. It is a warning against certain current habits. e.g. G. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

## E

- Elegy:** a lyric poem reflecting over someone's death or solemn topics.
- Ellipsis:** a device by which one or more words are left out so as to reach a more compact meaning.
- End-stopped:** a poetic line that finishes with the end of the line itself. e.g. *My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun. / Coral is far more red than her lips red.* (Shakespeare)
- Enjambement:** a poetic device by which a sentence continues from one line to the next. Also called 'run-on-line'. e.g. *Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments.* (Shakespeare)
- Epic:** a long narrative poem aimed at celebrating the history and culture of a nation. It is characterised by the use of a high style and a series of conventions relevant to the characters and episodes narrated. e.g. Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid*.
- Epigrammatic:** a concise but effective language typical of classical, short poems that were often humorous or satirical.
- Epigraph:** an inscription on a stone or a tomb or a quotation at the beginning of a novel dealing with its content.
- Epilogue:** the conclusion of a literary work.
- Epiphany:** term used in modernist fiction to define a moment of sudden revelation of the truth of life.

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**Epistolary novel:** a novel made up of letters among the characters, like Richardson's *Pamela*.

**Essay:** a piece of prose dealing with an argument on a certain topic.

### F

**Fable:** a short tale with marvellous or mythical characters aiming at teaching a moral lesson.

**Fantasy fiction:** adventure novels adopting the conventions of medieval romance like fantastic worlds and heroes. Unlike science-fiction it does not deal with science and technology. An example is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

**Feminine rhyme:** a rhyme in which the stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed one (e.g. fashion/passion).

**Fiction:** a narrative work of various length (short story, novel, etc.) representing invented characters and events.

**Figurative language:** language containing figures of speech.

**Figures of speech:** technical devices making the style more vivid: similes, metaphors, personifications, etc.

**Flashback:** literary device by which the reader is moved from the present of the story to the past. It may include memories, stories of the past narrated by the characters themselves and dreams.

**Flat character:** a character that does not develop in the story but is rather characterised by only one feature.

**Focalisation:** in fiction, focalisation answers the questions 'Who sees?' and 'Who speaks?' It is a synonym for 'point of view'.

**Foot:** a group of two or three syllables that form the basic unit of a meter. They are stressed or unstressed and their combination creates the following feet:

- **Iamb:** unstressed/stressed;
- **Trochee:** stressed/unstressed;
- **Dactyl:** stressed, unstressed, unstressed.

**Frame:** a narrative structure that offers a basis for the main story. For example, the pilgrimage of *The Canterbury Tales* supplies the justification for the narration of the various stories.

**Free direct speech/thought:** the quotation of a character's thoughts or speech without introductory verb or/nor quotation marks.

**Free indirect speech /thought:** a speech/thought that is reported without introductory verb, without direct question forms nor quotation marks, but with the third person pronouns.

**Free verse:** a verse without any forms of fixed rhyme or rhythm.

### G

**Genre:** a broad category of literary groups. e.g. drama, novel, etc.

**Gothic novel:** a type of fiction characterised by supernatural elements, an atmosphere of horror and mysterious, medieval settings inhabited by terrifying human beings. It developed in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to classical ideals. e.g. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

### H

**Haiku:** a Japanese poem of 17 syllables divided into three lines and focussing on a single image.

**Hero/ine:** the main character of a literary work, also called 'protagonist'. In modern works the hero has turned into an anti-hero, usually an inept one.

**Heroic couplet:** a couplet in iambic pentameters. This verse was used in mock-heroic poems.

**Historical novel:** a novel set in the past and containing historical events/characters.

**Humanism:** the Renaissance emphasis on man and its qualities triggered by the renewed interest in classical cultures.

**Hyperbole:** a figure of speech aiming at exaggeration in order to emphasise an image/a concept.

**Hypertext novel:** a novel that does not follow a strict time sequence but rather offers the possibility to move from one point to another in the text.

### I

**Iamb:** a metrical foot made up of two syllables: unstressed, stressed.

**Iambic pentameter:** popular English verse made up of five iambic feet. Unrhymed iambic pentameters are called **blank verses**.

**Idea:** the theme of a fictional, dramatic or poetic work.

**Imagery:** the figurative language used to evoke mental pictures or sensory experiences.

**Imagism:** 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry characterised by the use of clear images put together without any intervening explanations.

**Imperfect rhymes:** rhyme that do not rhyme perfectly (room/Rome).

**Incremental repetition:** the repetition of certain parts of a poem with the aim of increasing tension. Typical of ballads.

**Interactive novel:** a fictional work offering more than one endings. The reader can choose the development of the story.

**Interior monologue:** a technical device by which a character's thoughts are reported in a more or less direct way (free direct or free indirect thought).  
**Irony:** a device representing a reality that is opposite to appearance or what is expected. There are different types of irony, verbal, dramatic or situational. A satirist's most commonly used device.

## J

**Juxtaposition:** opposition of ideas or images.

## K

**Kenning:** a metaphor used to describe objects or people in the Old English poetry. e.g. the way of the whale = the sea.

## L

**Lyric:** a poem expressing the emotions and feelings of the author. Initially accompanied by a lyre.

## M

**Masculine rhyme:** a rhyme falling on a stressed syllable (bad/sad).

**Masque:** a form of aristocratic entertainment rich of costumes and scenery, which flourished in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in England.

**Metafiction:** literature reflecting on the structure and nature of literature itself.

**Metaphor:** an implied comparison between two objects without the use of 'like' or 'as'. It is made up of three elements: the tenor (the subject under discussion), the vehicle (what the subject is compared to) and the ground (the common qualities of the previous two elements).  
 e.g. 'A *Violet* by a mossy stone' (W. Wordsworth) to mean that 'Lucy' is a 'violet'.

**Metaphysical poetry:** 17<sup>th</sup>-century poetry characterised by high intellectualism and daring associations of images in contrast with the highly conventional Elizabethan period. J. Donne is one of the main representatives.

**Metonymy:** the replacement of an attribute of a thing for the thing itself. e.g. 'the crown' for 'the King'.

**Metre:** a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in verse. The most common metres in English are iambic and trochaic ones.

**Middle English:** the English language from 1100 to 1500 A.D.

**Mock-heroic poem:** a poetic work that uses the epic conventions to deal with trivial subjects, thus provoking irony and criticism.

**Modernism:** European and American cultural movement that flourished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction against the Victorian values

and trends. Among its main representatives are Picasso and Klee in the artistic field and Joyce and Eliot in the literary one.

**Monologue:** a long speech delivered by a single actor in a play or by a character in a novel.

**Mystery novel:** a work of fiction based on suspense and mystery.

## N

**Narrator:** the one who tells the story or poem.

There are different types of narrators: the first/ third person narrators; the omniscient (intrusive, un-obtrusive) or non-omniscient narrators.

**Naturalism:** literary movement aiming at representing reality in a realistic way but especially lingering on its most negative aspects.

**Negative capability:** the capacity of the poet to annul himself so as to become a receptacle of the surrounding world that is then expressed in his poetry.

**Neo-Classicism:** 18<sup>th</sup>-century cultural movement devoted to the imitation of classical models from ancient Greece and Rome.

**Novel:** a long fictional narrative centred on the experience of a character portrayed with realism.

**Novella:** a prose fiction longer than a short story but shorter than a novel.

## O

**Objective correlative:** technical device presenting objects, actions and events that should arouse in the reader a particular emotion. The term was coined by T. S. Eliot.

**Oblique narration:** a literary technique by which the plot is told by one or more characters, not by an omniscient narrator. e.g. Conrad's way of writing.

**Octave:** a group of eight lines.

**Ode:** a classical lyric form of medium length and elevated style used for commemoration of special events in the past while the Romantic poets used it as a way to celebrate art, nature or particular states of mind.

**Old English:** the Anglo-Saxon language until 1100 A.D.

**Onomatopoeia:** words imitating natural sounds, like 'buzz, crash,' etc.

**Oxymoron:** combination of two words with opposite meaning like 'bitter sweetness'.

## P

**Paradox:** an apparently contradictory statement that reveals a hidden truth.

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**Parody:** a satiric imitation of a work in order to criticise its author as well as the ideas contained in it. Fielding's *Shamela* is a parody of Richardson's *Pamela*.

**Pentameter:** a line of five metrical feet. The classic English verse is the iambic pentameter, made up of five iambic feet.

**Perfect rhyme:** a rhyme in which the stressed vowel and the final consonants are the same (stop/crop).

**Persona:** a character assumed by an author in a written work.

**Personification:** a figure of speech by which human traits are given to inanimate objects.

**Petrarchan sonnet:** a sonnet of fourteen lines formed by two quatrains and two tercets.

**Picaresque novel:** a novel made up of episodes focussing on a central figure, a picaro or rogue. The aim is satirical as the evils of the society can be exposed.

**Plot:** the sequence of events as the author has arranged them. The usual pattern for a plot is: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution.

**Poetic diction:** a series of rules governing the composition of an elevated poem (the choice of words, structures of a sentence, etc.). It also means 'affectation'.

**Point of view:** the perspective from which a story is told. It can either be a 'first person narrator' or a third person narrator, internal or external.

**Post-Modernism:** word used to define contemporary trends in literature, the arts including music and cinema, architecture and philosophy. Such works are characterised by irony and allusions to the past in the attempt to deconstruct traditional models and create new ones reflecting the apparent chaos of the electronic age.

**Problem play/novel:** a play or a novel about a social problem.

## Q

**Quatrain:** a four-line stanza.

## R

**Realism:** mimetic approach to reality.

**Repetition:** technical device used to highlight the meaning of a word/concept. It is given by the repetition of sounds, words, phrases.

**Rhyme:** the use of the same or similar sounds either internally or at the ends of lines. The **rhyme scheme** is the regular repetition of a pattern of sounds while modern poetry prefers a **near rhyme** like 'bald'/'cold'.

**Rhythm:** the sequence of stressed and unstressed words creating a particular sense of movement.

**Romance:** a narrative work on the fantastic and dangerous adventures of extraordinary characters on a quest for magic objects. The medieval romance was in verse and involved such characters as knights, dragons, magicians, etc.

**Romanticism:** a European cultural movement of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries stressing imagination, passion and free expression over reason, intellect and tradition, typical of the previous age.

**Round character:** a fully developed character showing dynamic traits.

## S

**Sarcasm:** bitter irony.

**Satire:** a literary genre exposing human vice and folly. Its aim is to highlight hypocrisy and to foster improvement. The techniques used may be comparisons, lists of incongruous elements, oxymorons, metaphors and so on.

**Sci-fi:** work of fiction usually set in the future or in the universe. It mixes the medieval romance with scientific and technological elements. e.g. A.C. Clarke's, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

**Setting:** when and where a poem, a fictional story or a drama develop.

**Short story:** a literary form shorter than a novel, usually focusing on a single incident.

**Simile:** a figure of speech that is an explicit comparison between two objects, introduced by 'like' or 'as'.

**Soliloquy:** a speech delivered by a character directly to the audience or to himself/herself. It usually unveils hidden thoughts or feelings. Sometimes it is called 'monologue'.

**Sonnet:** a 14-line poem in iambic pentameters. There are two main types of sonnet: the Petrarchan sonnet divided into an octave and a sestet and the Shakespearean sonnet divided into three quatrains and a final couplet.

**Sprung rhythm:** a term coined by G.M. Hopkins to define a rhythm given by stresses, not by syllables and regular feet.

**Stage directions:** instructions given by the author relevant to the actions on the stage, the tone of voice and the mise-en-scène.

**Stanza:** a unity of lines in a poem. It can be made up of two lines (couplet), three lines (tercet), four lines (quatrain) and so on. It can also be of different length, and be rhymed or not.

**Story:** the sequence of events of a fictional work arranged chronologically.

**Stream of consciousness:** a style of writing used to express the flow of a character's thoughts and feelings.

**Style:** the way a particular writer expresses himself/herself. It is given by the choice of words, structures, literary devices.

**Subject:** the topic of a literary work.

**Subplot:** a series of events that are parallel to the main story in a novel or drama.

**Symbol:** an image that is charged with a deeper meaning.

**Synaesthesia:** a mixing of sensations or rather the creation of an image perceived by two different senses simultaneously, like hearing a colour or seeing a smell. e.g. *the silent sun* (J. Milton).

**Synecdoche:** a figure of speech in which a part stands for the whole or the whole for a part (e.g. 'bread' for 'food').

## T

**Theme:** the main idea/s of a literary work.

**Tone:** the reflection of the writer's attitude in his/her work. It can be serious, detached, ironic and so on.

**Tragedy:** a work of literature beginning in happiness and ending in misery. It portrays the struggle and eventual downfall of a hero/ine who is admired but who also has a fatal flaw. e.g. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

## U

**Utopian literature:** a prose work showing an ideal society.

## V

**Villain:** the antagonist of the hero; the bad character in a story.

## W

**Wit:** the combination of words to produce a clever type of humorous effect.