**Narrative**

A **narrative** is a sequence of events that a narrator tells in story form. A **narrator** is a storyteller of any kind, whether the authorial voice in a novel or a friend telling you about last night’s party.

**Point of View**

The **point of view** is the perspective that a narrative takes toward the events it describes.

**First-person narration:** A narrative in which the narrator tells the story from his/her own point of view and refers to him/herself as “I.” The narrator may be an active participant in the story or just an observer. When the point of view represented is specifically the author’s, and not a fictional narrator’s, the story is autobiographical and may be nonfictional (*see* Common Literary Forms and Genres below).

**Third-person narration:** The narrator remains outside the story and describes the characters in the story using proper names and the third-person pronouns “he,” “she,” “it,” and “they.”

* Omniscient narration: The narrator knows all of the actions, feelings, and motivations of all of the characters. For example, the narrator of Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* seems to know everything about all the characters and events in the story.
* Limited omniscient narration: The narrator knows the actions, feelings, and motivations of only one or a handful of characters. For example, the narrator of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* has full knowledge of only Alice.
* Free indirect discourse: The narrator conveys a character’s inner thoughts while staying in the third person. Gustave Flaubert pioneered this style in *Madame Bovary,* as in this passage: “Sometimes she thought that these were after all the best days of her life, the honeymoon, so-called.”

**Objective narration:** A style in which the narrator reports neutrally on the outward behavior of the characters but offers no interpretation of their actions or their inner states. Ernest Hemingway pioneered this style.

**Unreliable narration:** The narrator is revealed over time to be an untrustworthy source of information. Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* are good examples of unreliable narrators.

**Stream-of-consciousness narration:** The narrator conveys a subject’s thoughts, impressions, and perceptions exactly as they occur, often in disjointed fashion and without the logic and grammar of typical speech and writing. Molly Bloom’s monologue in the final chapter of James Joyce’s Ulysses is an example of stream of consciousness. While stream-of-consciousness narration usually is written in the first person, it can, by means of free indirect discourse (*see above*), be written in the third person, as in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*.

**Character**

A **character** is a person, animal, or any other thing with a personality that appears in a story.

Protagonist: The main character around whom the story revolves. If the protagonist is admirable, he or she is called the hero or heroine of the story. A protagonist who is not admirable, or who challenges our notions of what should be considered admirable, is called an antihero or antiheroine. For example, Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* is an antihero because he is ordinary and pathetic, whereas Meursault in Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* is an antihero because he challenges the traditional conception of what a hero should be.

**Antagonist:** The primary character or entity that acts to frustrate the goals of the protagonist. The antagonist typically is a character but may also be a nonhuman force. For example, Claudius is the antagonist in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet,* whereas the military bureaucracy is the antagonist in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*.

**Stock character:** A common character type that recurs throughout literature. Notable examples include the witty servant, the scheming villain, the femme fatale, the trusty sidekick, the old miser, and so on. A stock character that holds a central place in a culture’s folklore or consciousness may be called an archetype (*see* Thematic Meaning, *below*).

**Foil:** A character who illuminates the qualities of another character by means of contrast. In John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” the swiftly traveling nightingale serves as a foil to Keats’s sleepy, opium-laden narrator.

**Plot**

A **plot** is the arrangement of the events in a story, including the sequence in which they are told, the relative emphasis they are given, and the causal connections between events.

**Elements of a plot:** A plot can have a complicated structure, but most plots have the same basic elements.

1. Conflict: The central struggle that moves the plot forward. The conflict can be the protagonist’s struggle against fate, nature, society, or another person. In certain circumstances, the conflict can be between opposing elements within the protagonist.
2. Rising action: The early part of the narrative, which builds momentum and develops the narrative’s major conflict.
3. Climax: The moment of highest tension, at which the conflict comes to a head. The word “climax” can refer either to the single moment of highest tension in the plot or, more generally, to any episode of high tension. An anticlimax occurs when the plot builds up to an expected climax only to tease the reader with a frustrating non-event. Jane Austen’s novels, such as *Sense and Sensibility,* are full of romantic anticlimaxes.
4. Falling action: Also called the denouement, this is the latter part of the narrative, during which the protagonist responds to the events of the climax and the various plot elements introduced in the rising action are resolved.
5. Reversal: Sometimes called by its Greek name, peripeteia, a reversal is a sudden shift that sends the protagonist’s fortunes from good to bad or vice versa.
6. Resolution: An ending that satisfactorily answers all the questions raised over the course of the plot.

**Types of plot:** Plots can take a wide variety of forms, ranging from orderly sequences of clearly related events to chaotic jumbles of loosely connected events.

* Chronological plot: Events are arranged in the sequence in which they occur. Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea,* for example, tells a roughly straightforward story from beginning to end.
* Achronological plot: Events are not arranged in the sequence in which they occur. For example, Homer’s *Iliad* is full of flashbacks and digressions that relate what happened before and after the central conflict of the poem.
* Climactic plot: All the action focuses toward a single climax. Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* is a classic example of a climactic plot.
* Episodic plot: A series of loosely connected events. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* is episodic.
* Non sequitur plot: More of an “anti-plot,” the non sequitur plot defies traditional logic by presenting events without any clear sequence and characters without any clear motivation. The theater of the absurd (*see* Literary Movements, *below*) is particularly famous for its non sequiturs.
* Subplot: A secondary plot that is of less importance to the overall story but may serve as a point of contrast or comparison to the main plot. For example, the subplot involving Gloucester and his sons in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* serves this function.

**Setting**

Setting is the location of a narrative in time and space. It may be specifically historical or geographical, as in the ancient Rome of Robert Graves’s *I, Claudius,* or it may be imaginary, as in the Neverland of J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan.* The suggestive mood that the setting may create is called the atmosphere. For example, the open windows of the nursery in *Peter Pan* create an atmosphere of innocence and magic.

# Elements of Style

## Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are expressions that stretch words beyond their literal meanings. By connecting or juxtaposing different sounds and thoughts, figures of speech increase the breadth and subtlety of expression.

**Alliteration:** The repetition of similar sounds, usually consonants, at the beginning of words. For example, Robert Frost’s poem “Out, out—” contains the alliterative phrase “sweet scented stuff.”

**Aposiopesis:** A breaking-off of speech, usually because of rising emotion or excitement. For example, “Touch me one more time, and I swear—”

**Apostrophe:** A direct address to an absent or dead person, or to an object, quality, or idea. Walt Whitman’s poem “O Captain, My Captain,” written upon the death of Abraham Lincoln, is an example of apostrophe.

**Assonance:** The repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sequence of nearby words. For example, Alfred, Lord Tennyson creates assonance with the “o” sound in this line from “The Lotos-Eaters”: “All day the wind breathes low with mellower tone.”

**Cacophony:** The clash of discordant or harsh sounds within a sentence or phrase. Cacophony is a familiar feature of tongue twisters but can also be used to poetic effect, as in the words “anfractuous rocks” in T. S. Eliot’s “Sweeney Erect.” Although dissonance has a different musical meaning, it is sometimes used interchangeably with “cacophony.”

**Chiasmus:** Two phrases in which the syntax is the same but the placement of words is reversed, as in these lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Pains of Sleep”: “To be beloved is all I need, / And whom I love, I love indeed.”

**Cliché:** An expression such as “turn over a new leaf” that has been used so frequently it has lost its expressive power.

**Colloquialism:** An informal expression or slang, especially in the context of formal writing, as in Philip Larkin’s “Send No Money”: “All the other lads there / Were itching to have a bash.”

**Conceit:** An elaborate parallel between two seemingly dissimilar objects or ideas. The metaphysical poets (*see* Literary Movements, *below*) are especially known for their conceits, as in John Donne’s “The Flea.”

**Epithet:** An adjective or phrase that describes a prominent feature of a person or thing. “Richard ‘the Lionheart’ ” and “ ‘Shoeless’ Joe Jackson” are both examples of epithets.

**Euphemism:** The use of decorous language to express vulgar or unpleasant ideas, events, or actions. For example, “passed away” instead of “died”; “ethnic cleansing” instead of “genocide.”

**Euphony:** A pleasing arrangement of sounds. Many consider “cellar door” one of the most euphonious phrases in English.

**Hyperbole:** An excessive overstatement or conscious exaggeration of fact: “I’ve told you about it a million times already.”

**Idiom:** A common expression that has acquired a meaning that differs from its literal meaning, such as “it’s raining cats and dogs” or “a bolt from the blue.”

**Litotes:** A form of understatement in which a statement is affirmed by negating its opposite: “He is not unfriendly.”

**Meiosis:** Intentional understatement, as, for example, in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet,* when Mercutio is mortally wounded and says it is only “a scratch.” Meiosis is the opposite of hyperbole and often employs litotes to ironic effect.

**Metaphor:** The comparison of one thing to another that does not use the terms “like” or “as.” Shakespeare is famous for his metaphors, as in *Macbeth*: “Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage.”

* Mixed metaphor: A combination of metaphors that produces a confused or contradictory image, such as “The company’s collapse left mountains of debt in its wake.”

**Metonymy:** The substitution of one term for another that generally is associated with it. For example, “suits” instead of “businessmen.”

**Onomatopoeia:** The use of words, such as “pop,” “hiss,” and “boing,” that sound like the thing they refer to.

**Oxymoron:** The association of two contrary terms, as in the expressions “same difference” or “wise fool.”

**Paradox:** A statement that seems absurd or even contradictory on its face but often expresses a deeper truth. For example, a line in Oscar Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”: “And all men kill the thing they love.”

**Paralipsis:** Also known as praeteritio, the technique of drawing attention to something by claiming not to mention it. For example, from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*: “We will not speak of all Queequeg’s peculiarities here; how he eschewed coffee and hot rolls, and applied his undivided attention to beefsteaks, done rare.”

**Parallelism:** The use of similar grammatical structures or word order in two sentences or phrases to suggest a comparison or contrast between them. In Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 129”: “Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.” Parallelism also can refer to parallels between larger elements in a narrative (*see* Literary Techniques, *below*).

**Pathetic fallacy:** The attribution of human feeling or motivation to a nonhuman object, especially an object found in nature. For example, John Keats’s “Ode to Melancholy” describes a “weeping” cloud.

**Periphrasis:** An elaborate and roundabout manner of speech that uses more words than necessary. Saying “I appear to be entirely without financial resources” instead of “I’m broke” is an example. Euphemisms often employ periphrasis.

**Personification:** The use of human characteristics to describe animals, things, or ideas. Carl Sandburg’s poem “Chicago” describes the city as “Stormy, husky, brawling, / City of the Big Shoulders.”

**Pun:** A play on words that exploits the similarity in sound between two words with distinctly different meanings. For example, the title of Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a pun on the word “earnest,” which means “serious or sober,” and the name “Ernest,” which figures into a scheme that some of the play’s main characters perpetrate.

**Rhetorical question:** A question that is asked not to elicit a response but to make an impact or call attention to something. For example, the question “Isn’t she great?” expresses regard for another person and does not call for discussion.

**Sarcasm:** A simple form of verbal irony (*see* Literary Techniques, *below*) in which it is obvious from context and tone that the speaker means the opposite of what he or she says. Sarcasm usually, but not always, expresses scorn. Commenting “That was graceful” when someone trips and falls is an example.

**Simile:** A comparison of two things through the use of “like” or “as.” The title of Robert Burns’s poem “My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose” is a simile.

**Synaesthesia:** The use of one kind of sensory experience to describe another, such as in the line “Heard melodies are sweet” in John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

**Synecdoche:** A form of metonymy in which a part of an entity is used to refer to the whole, for example, “my wheels” for “my car.”

**Trope:** A category of figures of speech that extend the literal meanings of words by inviting a comparison to other words, things, or ideas. Metaphor, metonymy, and simile are three common tropes.

**Zeugma:** The use of one word in a sentence to modify two other words in the sentence, typically in two different ways. For example, in Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers,* the sentence “Mr. Pickwick took his hat and his leave” uses the word “took” to mean two different things.

## Literary Techniques

Whereas figures of speech work on the level of individual words or sentences, writers also use a variety of techniques to add clarity or intensity to a larger passage, advance the plot in a particular way, or suggest connections between elements in the plot.

**Allusion:** An implicit reference within a literary work to a historical or literary person, place, or event. For example, the title of William Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury* alludes to a line from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Authors use allusion to add symbolic weight because it makes subtle or implicit connections with other works. For example, in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick,* Captain Ahab’s name alludes to the wicked and idolatrous biblical king Ahab—a connection that adds depth to our understanding of Ahab’s character.

**Anagnorisis:** A moment of recognition or discovery, primarily used in reference to Greek tragedy. For example, in Euripides’ *The Bacchae,* Agave experiences anagnorisis when she discovers that she has murdered her own son, Pentheus.

**Bathos:** A sudden and unexpected drop from the lofty to the trivial or excessively sentimental. Bathos sometimes is used intentionally, to create humor, but just as often is derided as miscalculation or poor judgment on a writer’s part. An example from Alexander Pope: “Ye Gods! Annihilate but Space and Time / And make two lovers happy.”

**Caricature:** A description or characterization that exaggerates or distorts a character’s prominent features, usually to elicit mockery. For example, in *Candide,* Voltaire portrays the character of Pangloss as a mocking caricature of the optimistic rationalism of philosophers like Leibniz.

***Deus ex machina:*** Greek for “God from a machine.” The phrase originally referred to a technique in ancient tragedy in which a mechanical god was lowered onto the stage to intervene and solve the play’s problems or bring the play to a satisfactory conclusion. Now, the term describes more generally a sudden or improbable plot twist that brings about the plot’s resolution.

**Epiphany:** A sudden, powerful, and often spiritual or life changing realization that a character reaches in an otherwise ordinary or everyday moment. Many of the short stories in James Joyce’s *Dubliners* involve moments of epiphany.

**Foreshadowing:** An author’s deliberate use of hints or suggestions to give a preview of events or themes that do not develop until later in the narrative. For example, in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights,* the nightmares Lockwood has the night he spends in Catherine’s bed prefigure later events in the novel.

***In medias rest:*** Latin for “in the middle of things.” The term refers to the technique of starting a narrative in the middle of the action. For example, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost,* which concerns the war among the angels in Heaven, opens after the fallen angels already are in Hell and only later examines the events that led to their expulsion from Heaven.

**Interior monologue:** A record of a character’s thoughts, unmediated by a narrator. Interior monologue sometimes takes the form of stream-of-consciousness narration (*see* Point of View, *above*) but often is more structured and logical than stream of consciousness.

**Invocation:** A prayer for inspiration to a god or muse usually placed at the beginning of an epic. Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* both open with invocations.

**Irony:** A wide-ranging technique of detachment that draws awareness to the discrepancy between words and their meanings, between expectation and fulfillment, or, most generally, between what is and what seems to be.

* Verbal irony: The use of a statement that, by its context, implies its opposite. For example, in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar,* Antony repeats, “Brutus is an honorable man,” while clearly implying that Brutus is dishonorable. Sarcasm (*see* Figures of Speech, *above*) is a particularly blunt form of verbal irony.
* Situational irony: A technique in which one understanding of a situation stands in sharp contrast to another, usually more prevalent, understanding of the same situation. For example, Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” comments on the grotesque difference between politicians’ high-minded praise of the noble warrior and the unspeakably awful conditions of soldiers at the front.
* Romantic irony: An author’s persistent reminding of his or her presence in the work. By drawing attention to the artifice of the work, the author ensures that the reader or audience will maintain critical detachment and not simply accept the writing at face value. Laurence Sterne employs romantic irony in *Tristram Shandy* by discussing the writing of the novel in the novel itself.
* Dramatic irony: A technique in which the author lets the audience or reader in on a character’s situation while the character himself remains in the dark. With dramatic irony, the character’s words or actions carry a significance that the character is not aware of. When used in tragedy, dramatic irony is called tragic irony. One example is in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex,* when Oedipus vows to discover his father’s murderer, not knowing, as the audience does, that he himself is the murderer.
* Cosmic irony: The perception of fate or the universe as malicious or indifferent to human suffering, which creates a painful contrast between our purposeful activity and its ultimate meaninglessness. Thomas Hardy’s novels abound in cosmic irony.

**Melodrama:** The use of sentimentality, gushing emotion, or sensational action or plot twists to provoke audience or reader response. Melodrama was popular in Victorian England, but critics now deride it as manipulative and hokey. Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop,* for example, is a particularly melodramatic work.

**Parallelism:** Similarities between elements in a narrative (such as two characters or two plot lines). For instance, in Shakespeare’s *King Lear,* both Lear and Gloucester suffer at the hands of their own children because they are blind to which of their children are goodhearted and which areKing Lear, evil. Parallelism can also occur on the level of sentences or phrases (*see* Figures of Speech, *above*).

Pathos: From the Greek word for “feeling,” the quality in a work of literature that evokes high emotion, most commonly sorrow, pity, or compassion. Charles Dickens exploits pathos very effectively, especially when describing the deaths of his characters.

**Poetic diction:** The use of specific types of words, phrases, or literary structures that are not common in contemporary speech or prose. For example, Wilfred Owen’s “Sonnet On Seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought Into Action,” though written in the 20th century, uses antiquated diction and the time-tested sonnet form. The intentional discrepancy creates an ironic contrast between the horrors of modern war and the way poets wrote about war in the past: “Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm, / Great gun towering toward Heaven, about to curse.”

**Poetic license** The liberty that authors sometimes take with ordinary rules of syntax and grammar, employing unusual vocabulary, metrical devices, or figures of speech or committing factual errors in order to strengthen a passage of writing. For example, the poet e. e. cummings takes poetic license in violating rules of capitalization in his works.

**Wit:** A form of wordplay that displays cleverness or ingenuity with language. Often, but not always, wit displays humor. Oscar Wilde’s plays are famous for their witty phrases, which expose the hypocrisies of the intellectual beliefs of Wilde’s time.

## Thematic Meaning

Literature becomes universal when it draws connections between the particular and the general. Often, certain levels of a literary work’s meaning are not immediately evident. The following terms relate to the relationship between the words on the page and the deeper significance those words may hold.

**Archetype:** A theme, motif, symbol, or stock character that holds a familiar and fixed place in a culture’s consciousness. For example, many cultures across the world feature an archetype of the resurrected god to herald the coming of spring. The Fisher King, Jesus Christ, and the goddess Persephone are three familiar instances of this archetype in Western culture.

**Emblem:** A concrete object that represents something abstract. For example, the Star of David is an emblem of Judaism. An emblem differs from a symbol in that an emblem’s meaning is fixed: the Star of David always represents Judaism, regardless of context.

**Imagery:** Language that brings to mind sense-impressions, especially via figures of speech. Sometimes, certain imagery is characteristic of a particular writer or work. For example, many of Shakespeare’s plays contain nautical imagery.

**Motif:** A recurring structure, contrast, or other device that develops or informs a work’s major themes. A motif may relate to concrete objects, like Eastern vs. Western architecture in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India,* or may be a recurrent idea, phrase, or emotion, like Lily Bart’s constant desire to move up in the world in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth.*

**Symbol:** An object, character, figure, or color that is used to represent an abstract idea or concept. For example, the two roads in Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” symbolize the choice between two paths in life. Unlike an emblem, a symbol may have different meanings in different contexts.

**Theme:** A fundamental and universal idea explored in a literary work. For example, a major theme of John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* is the perpetual contest between good and evil.

**Thesis:** The central argument that an author makes in a work. Although the term is primarily associated with nonfiction, it can apply to fiction. For example, the thesis of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* is that Chicago meatpacking plants subject poor immigrants to horrible and unjust working conditions, and that the government must do something to address the problem.

**Tone:** The general atmosphere created in a story, or the narrator’s attitude toward the story or reader. For example, the tone of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* is outraged, defiant, and claustrophobic.

# Elements of Poetry

Poetry is a literary form characterized by a strong sense of rhythm and meter and an emphasis on the interaction between sound and sense. The study of the elements of poetry is called prosody. For an in-depth explanation of poetry and poetic forms, see the *Poetry* Spark Chart.

## Rhythm and Meter

Rhythm and meter are the building blocks of poetry. Rhythm is the pattern of sound created by the varying length and emphasis given to different syllables. The rise and fall of spoken language is called its cadence.

**Meter**

Meter is the rhythmic pattern created in a line of verse. There are four basic kinds of meter:

**Accentual (strong-stress) meter:** The number of stressed syllables in a line is fixed, but the number of total syllables is not. This kind of meter is common in Anglo-Saxon poetry, such as *Beowulf.* Gerard Manley Hopkins developed a form of accentual meter called sprung rhythm, which had considerable influence on 20th-century poetry.

**Syllabic meter:** The number of total syllables in a line is fixed, but the number of stressed syllables is not. This kind of meter is relatively rare in English poetry.

**Accentual-syllabic meter:** Both the number of stressed syllables and the number of total syllables is fixed. Accentual-syllabic meter has been the most common kind of meter in English poetry since Chaucer in the late Middle Ages.

**Quantitative meter:** The duration of sound of each syllable, rather than its stress, determines the meter. Quantitative meter is common in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and Arabic but not in English.

**The Foot**

The foot is the basic rhythmic unit into which a line of verse can be divided. When reciting verse, there usually is a slight pause between feet. When this pause is especially pronounced, it is called a caesura. The process of analyzing the number and type of feet in a line is called scansion.

These are the most common types of feet in English poetry.

* Iamb: An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: “to day ”
* Trochee: A stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: “ car ry”
* Dactyl: A stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables: “ diff icult”
* Anapest: Two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable: “it is time ”
* Spondee: Two successive syllables with strong stresses: “stop, thief”
* Pyrrhic: Two successive syllables with light stresses: “up to”

Most English poetry has four or five feet in a line, but it is not uncommon to see as few as one or as many as eight.

* Monometer: One foot
* Dimeter: Two feet
* Trimeter: Three feet
* Tetrameter: Four feet
* Pentameter: Five feet
* Hexameter: Six feet
* Heptameter: Seven feet
* Octameter: Eight feet

**Types of Accentual-Syllabic Meter**

Accentual-syllabic meter is determined by the number and type of feet in a line of verse.

**Iambic pentameter:** Each line of verse has five feet (pentameter), each of which consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (iamb). Iambic pentameter is one of the most popular metrical schemes in English poetry.

**Blank verse:** Unrhymed iambic pentameter. Blank verse bears a close resemblance to the rhythms of ordinary speech, giving poetry a natural feel. Shakespeare’s plays are written primarily in blank verse.

**Ballad:** Alternating tetrameter and trimeter, usually iambic and rhyming. Ballad form, which is common in traditional folk poetry and song, enjoyed a revival in the Romantic period with such poems as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

**Free verse:** Verse that does not conform to any fixed meter or rhyme scheme. Free verse is not, however, loose or unrestricted: its rules of composition are as strict and difficult as traditional verse, for they rely on less evident rhythmic patterns to give the poem shape. Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is a seminal work of free verse.

## Line and Stanza

Poetry generally is divided into lines of verse. A grouping of lines, equivalent to a paragraph in prose, is called a stanza. On the printed page, line breaks normally are used to separate stanzas from one another.

**Types of Rhyme**

One common way of creating a sense of musicality between lines of verse is to make them **rhyme.**

**End rhyme:** A rhyme that comes at the end of a line of verse. Most rhyming poetry uses end rhymes.

**Internal rhyme:** A rhyme between two or more words within a single line of verse, as in “God’s Grandeur” by Gerard Manley Hopkins: “And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil.”

**Masculine rhyme:** A rhyme consisting of a single stressed syllable, as in the rhyme between “car” and “far.”

**Feminine rhyme:** A rhyme consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, as in the rhyme between “mother” and “brother.”

**Perfect rhyme:** An exact match of sounds in a rhyme.

**Slant rhyme:** An imperfect rhyme, also called oblique rhyme or off rhyme, in which the sounds are similar but not exactly the same, as between “port” and “heart.” Modern poets often use slant rhyme as a subtler alternative to perfect rhyme.

**Rhyme Schemes**

Rhymes do not always occur between two successive lines of verse. Here are some of the most common **rhyme schemes.**

**Couplet:** Two successive rhymed lines that are equal in length. A heroic couplet is a pair of rhyming lines in iambic pentameter. In Shakespeare’s plays, characters often speak a heroic couplet before exiting, as in these lines from Hamlet: “The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!”

**Quatrain:** A four-line stanza. The most common form of English verse, the quatrain has many variants. One of the most important is the heroic quatrain, written in iambic pentameter with an ABAB rhyme scheme.

**Tercet:** A grouping of three lines, often bearing a single rhyme.

***Terza rima:*** A system of interlaced tercets linked by common rhymes: ABA BCB CDC etc. Dante pioneered *terza rima* in *The Divine Comedy.* The form is hard to maintain in English, although there are some notable exceptions, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.”

## Other Techniques

**Punctuation:** Like syllable stresses and rhyme, punctuation marks influence the musicality of a line of poetry.

* When there is a break at the end of a line denoted by a comma, period, semicolon, or other punctuation mark, that line is end-stopped.
* In enjambment, a sentence or clause runs onto the next line without a break. Enjambment creates a sense of suspense or excitement and gives added emphasis to the word at the end of the line, as in John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”: “Thy plaintive anthem fades / Past the near meadows, over the still stream.”

**Repetition:** Words, sounds, phrases, lines, or elements of syntax may repeat within a poem. Sometimes, repetition can enhance an element of meaning, but at other times it can dilute or dissipate meaning.

* **Alliteration:** The repetition of sounds in initial stressed syllables (*see* Figures of Speech, *above*).
* **Assonance:** The repetition of vowel sounds (*see* Figures of Speech, *above*).
* **Refrain:** A phrase or group of lines that is repeated at significant moments within a poem, usually at the end of a stanza.

## Poetic Forms

Certain traditional forms of poetry have a distinctive stanza length combined with a distinctive meter or rhyme pattern. Here are some popular forms.

**Haiku:** A compact form of Japanese poetry written in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables, respectively.

**Limerick:** A fanciful five-line poem with an AABBA rhyme scheme in which the first, second, and fifth lines have three feet and the third and fourth have two feet.

***Ottava rima:*** In English, an eight-line stanza with iambic pentameter and the rhyme scheme ABABABCC. This form is difficult to use in English, where it is hard to find two rhyming triplets that do not sound childish. Its effect is majestic yet simple. William Butler Yeats’s poem “Among School Children” uses *ottava rima.*

**Sestina:** Six six-line stanzas followed by a three-line stanza. The same six words are repeated at the end of lines throughout the poem in a predetermined pattern. The last word in the last line of one stanza becomes the last word of the first line in the next. All six endwords appear in the final three-line stanza. Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* contains examples of the sestina.

**Sonnet:** A single-stanza lyric poem containing fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter. In some formulations, the first eight lines (octave) pose a question or dilemma that is resolved in the final six lines (sestet). There are three predominant sonnet forms.

* Italian or Petrarchan sonnet: Developed by the Italian poet Petrarch, this sonnet is divided into an octave with the rhyme scheme ABBAABBA or ABBACDDC and a sestet with the rhyme scheme CDECDE or CDCCDC.
* Shakespearean sonnet: Also called the English sonnet or Elizabethan sonnet, this poetic form, which Shakespeare made famous, contains three quatrains and a final couplet. The rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.
* Spenserian sonnet: A variant that the poet Edmund Spenser developed from the Shakespearean sonnet. The Spenserian sonnet has the rhyme scheme ABAB BCBCCDCD EE.

**Villanelle:** A nineteen-line poem made up of five tercets and a final quatrain in which all nineteen lines carry one of only two rhymes. There are two refrains, alternating between the ends of each tercet and then forming the last two lines of the quatrain. Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” is a famous example.

# Common Literary Forms and Genres

**Allegory:** A narrative in which literal meaning corresponds clearly and directly to symbolic meaning. For example, the literal story in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—Christian’s journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City—is an allegory for the spiritual journey from sin to holiness.

**Anecdote:** The brief narration of a single event or incident.

**Aphorism:** A concise expression of insight or wisdom: “The vanity of others offends our taste only when it offends our vanity” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*).

**Autobiography:** The nonfictional story of a person’s life, told by that person. St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is an early, canonical work in this genre (*see* also memoir,*below*).

**Ballad:** Traditionally, a folk song telling a story or legend in simple language, often with a refrain. A number of poets outside the folk tradition have adopted the ballad form, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge did in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

**Biography:** The nonfictional story of a person’s life. James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* is one of the most celebrated works of biography. When the author of a biography is also its subject, the work is an autobiography (*see above*).

**Black comedy:** Disturbing or absurd material presented in a humorous manner, usually with the intention to confront uncomfortable truths. Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is a notable example.

**Burlesque:** A humorous imitation of a serious work of literature. The humor often arises from the incongruity between the imitation and the work being imitated. For example, Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* uses the high diction of epic poetry to talk about a domestic matter.

**Confessional poetry:** An autobiographical poetic genre in which the poet discusses intensely personal subject matter with unusual frankness. The genre was popular from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, due in part to Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959).

**Didactic literature:** Literature intended to instruct or educate. For example, Virgil’s *Georgics* contains farming advice in verse form.

**Dirge:** A short poetic expression of grief. A dirge differs from an elegy (*see below*) in that it often is embedded within a larger work, is less highly structured, and is meant to be sung. Ariel’s song “Full fathom five thy father lies” in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is an example of a dirge.

**Drama:** A composition that is meant to be performed. The term often is used interchangeably with play (*see below*), but drama is a broader term that includes some forms that may not strictly be defined as plays, such as radio broadcasts, comedy sketches, and opera.

**Dramatic monologue:** A poem that contains words that a fictional or historical character speaks to a particular audience. Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “Ulysses” is a famous example.

**Dystopic literature:** A genre of fiction that presents an imagined future society that purports to be perfect and utopian but that the author presents to the reader as horrifyingly inhuman. Usually the author intends to warn contemporary readers that their own society resembles, or is in danger of resembling, this flawed future world. George Orwell’s 1984 and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* are well-known works of dystopic literature.

**Eclogue:** A short pastoral poem (*see below*) in the form of a soliloquy (*see below*) or dialogue between two shepherds. Virgil’s *Eclogues* is the most famous example of this genre.

**Elegy:** A formal poem that laments the death of a friend or public figure, or, occasionally, a meditation on death itself. In Greek and Latin poetry, the term applies to a specific type of meter (alternating hexameters and pentameters) regardless of content, but only some elegies in English obey that meter. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem “Adonais,” which mourns the death of John Keats, is an example of an elegy.

**Epic:** A lengthy narrative that describes the deeds of a heroic figure, often of national or cultural importance, in elevated language. Strictly, the term applies only to verse narratives like *Beowulf* or Virgil’s *Aeneid,* but it is used to describe prose, drama, or film works of similar scope, such as Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* or Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables.*

**Epigram:** A succinct, witty statement, often in verse. For example, William Wordsworth’s observation “The child is the father of the man.”

**Essay:** A form of nonfictional discussion or argument that Michel de Montaigne pioneered in the 1500s. Essays are flexible in form: although they usually are short prose works, there are also examples of book-length essays (by John Locke) and verse essays (by Alexander Pope).

**Fable:** A short prose or verse narrative, such as those by Aesop, that illustrates a moral, which often is stated explicitly at the end. Frequently, the characters in a fable are animals that embody different human character traits.

**Fiction:** An invented narrative, as opposed to one that reports true events.

**Legend:** A story about a heroic figure derived from oral tradition and based partly on fact and partly on fiction. The terms legend and myth (*see below*) are often used interchangeably, but legends are typically rooted in real historical events, whereas myths are primarily supernatural. The stories of King Arthur and Robin Hood are examples of legends.

**Lyric:** A short poetic composition that describes the thoughts of a single speaker. Most modern poetry is lyrical (as opposed to dramatic or narrative), employing such common forms as the ode and sonnet.

**Memoir:** An autobiographical work. Rather than focus exclusively on the author’s life, it pays significant attention to the author’s involvement in historical events and the characterization of individuals other than the author. A famous example is Winston Churchill’s *Memoirs of the Second World War.*

**Metafiction:** Fiction that concerns the nature of fiction itself, either by reinterpreting a previous fictional work or by drawing attention to its own fictional status. Examples of the former include John Gardner’s *Grendel,* which retells the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* from a new perspective, and Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours,* which portrays three women connected to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway,* including Woolf herself. An example of the latter is Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* in which the narrator tells the story and simultaneously comments on his own telling of the story.

**Myth:** A story about the origins of a culture’s beliefs and practices, or of supernatural phenomena, usually derived from oral tradition and set in an imagined supernatural past. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is a famous early example. Some writers, such as William Blake and William Butler Yeats, have invented their own myths. Myths are similar, but not equivalent, to legends (*see above*).

**Noir:** A fiction genre, popularized in the 1940s, with a cynical, disillusioned, loner protagonist. Noir often involves crime or the criminal underworld. The term stems from “film noir,” which describes films of similar style and content. Classic examples of noir fiction include Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* and Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon.*

**Nonfiction:** A narrative work that reports true events.

**Novel:** A fictional prose narrative of significant length. Since the novel form became popular in the 1700s, however, the term has come to describe other works—nonfiction novels, novels in verse, short novels, and others—that do not necessarily fit this strict definition.

* Autobiographical novel: A novel that tells a nonfictional, autobiographical story but uses novelistic techniques, such as fictionalized dialogue or anecdotes, to add color, immediacy, or thematic unity. Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an autobiographical novel.
* Bildungsroman: A German term, meaning “formation novel,” for a novel about a child or adolescent’s development into maturity, with special focus on the protagonist’s quest for identity. James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a notable example.
* Epistolary novel: A novel written in the form of letters exchanged by characters in the story, such as Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* or Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple.* This form was especially popular in the 1700s.
* Historical novel: A novel set in an earlier historical period that features a plot shaped by the historical circumstances of that period. Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient,* written in the early 1990s, portrays a tragic romance set against the backdrop of World War II.
* Novel of ideas: A novel, such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea,* that the author uses as a platform for discussing ideas. Character and plot are of secondary importance.
* Novel of manners: A novel that focuses on the social customs of a certain class of people, often with a sharp eye for irony. Jane Austen’s novels are prime examples of this genre.
* Picaresque novel: Originally, a realistic novel detailing a scoundrel’s exploits. The term grew to refer more generally to any novel with a loosely structured, episodic plot that revolves around the adventures of a central character. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* is a classic picaresque novel.
* Social protest novel: A novel in which the author’s aim is to tell a story that illuminates and draws attention to contemporary social problems with the goal of inciting change for the better. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* which exposed the horrors of African- American slavery, and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath,* which popularized the plight of penniless migrant workers during the Great Depression, are examples.
* Verse novel: A full-length fictional work that is novelistic in nature but written in verse rather than prose. Examples include Aleksandr Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* and Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate.*

**Novella:** A work of fiction of middle length, often divided into a few short chapters, such as Henry James’s *Daisy Miller.*

**Ode:** A serious lyric poem, often of significant length, that usually conforms to an elaborate metrical structure. An example is William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality.”

**Parable:** A short narrative that illustrates a moral by means of allegory (see above).

**Parody:** A humorous and often satirical imitation of the style or particular work of another author. Henry Fielding’s *Shamela* is a parody of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela.*

**Pastiche:** A work that imitates the style of a previous author, work, or literary genre. Alternatively, the term may refer to a work that contains a hodgepodge of elements or fragments from different sources or influences. Pastiche differs from parody in that its imitation is not meant as a form of mockery. For example, John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* was written in the 1960s but imitates the style of the Victorian novel.

**Pastoral:** A celebration of the simple, rustic life of shepherds and shepherdesses, usually written by a sophisticated, urban writer. Christopher Marlowe’s poem “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” epitomizes pastoral themes.

**Play:** A story meant to be performed in a theater before an audience. Most plays are written in dialogue form and are divided into several acts. Many include stage directions and instructions for sets and costumes.

* Comedy: A lighthearted play characterized by humor and a happy ending.
* Epic theater: Bertolt Brecht’s Marxist approach to theater, which rejects emotional and psychological engagement in favor of critical detachment. His plays *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mother Courage* are two famous works in this genre.
* Farce: A form of high-energy comedy that plays on confusions and deceptions between characters and features a convoluted and fast-paced plot. Farce often incorporates buffoonery, slapstick, and stock characters to provoke uproarious laughter. Molière was a master of farce with such plays as *The Imaginary Invalid.*
* Miracle play: A play from the Middle Ages featuring saints or miraculous appearances by the Virgin Mary.
* Morality play: A play written in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries that presents an allegory (*see above*) of the Christian struggle for salvation.
* Mystery play: A short play based on a biblical story. Mystery plays, popular in the Middle Ages, often were presented in cycles, in which dozens of plays were performed at different locations throughout a city and collectively presented the most significant moments in the Bible.
* Noh drama: A ritualized form of Japanese drama that evolved in the 1300s involving masks and slow, stylized movement.
* Problem play: A play that confronts a contemporary social problem with the intent of changing public opinion on the matter. Henrik Ibsen popularized this form in plays such as *Hedda Gabler.*
* Tragedy: A serious play that ends unhappily for the protagonist. Sophocles’ *Antigone* is one of the best-known Greek tragedies.
* Tragicomedy: A play such as Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* that mixes elements of tragedy and comedy.
* One-act play: A play consisting of a single act, without intermission and running usually less than an hour. Edward Albee’s *Zoo Story* is a well-known example.

**Primitivist literature:** Works that express a preference for the natural over the artificial in human culture, and a belief that the life of primitive cultures is preferable to modern lifestyles. Primitivism is often associated with a nostalgia for the lost innocence of a natural, childlike past. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the foremost advocates of primitivism in works such as *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse.*

**Propaganda:** A work of didactic literature that aims to influence the reader on a specific social or political issue. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* is an example of propaganda instrumental in the American Revolution.

**Prose:** Any composition not written in verse. The basic unit of prose is the sentence, which distinguishes it from free verse (see poetry, above), in which the basic unit is a line of verse. Prose writing can be rhythmic, but on the whole, rhythm in prose is less pronounced than in verse. Prose works encompass everything from Henry James’s *The Ambassadors,* with its elaborate sentences, to Amy Tan’s interconnected stories in *The Joy Luck Club.*

**Prose poem:** A poetic work that features the strong rhythms of free verse (*see* **Rhythm and Meter,***above*) but is presented on the page in the form of prose, without line breaks. Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* is an example of a prose poem.

**Romance:** A nonrealistic story, in verse or prose, that features idealized characters, improbable adventures, and exotic settings. Although love often plays a significant role, the association of “romance” with “love” is a modern phenomenon. Romances, such as Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene,* were particularly popular in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

* Chivalric romance: A romance that describes the adventures of medieval knights and celebrates their strict code of honor, loyalty, and respectful devotion to women. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is an example of a chivalric romance.

**Satire:** A work that exposes to ridicule the shortcomings of individuals, institutions, or society, often to make a political point. Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is one of the most well known satires in English.

**Science fiction:** Fiction that is set in an alternative reality—often a technologically advanced future—and that contains fantastical elements. The genre traces its roots to the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells in the late 1800s. Notable 20th-century science fiction writers include Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov.

**Short story:** A work of prose fiction that is much shorter than a novel (rarely more than forty pages) and focused more tightly on a single event. Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden Party” is a masterful short story.

**Short-short story:** A particularly compressed and truncated short story. Short-short stories are rarely longer than 1,000 words.

**Soliloquy:** A speech, often in verse, by a lone character. Soliloquies are most common in drama, perhaps the most famous example being the “To be or not to be” speech in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet.*

# Literary Movements and Periods

Literature constantly evolves as new movements emerge to speak to the concerns of different groups of people and historical periods.

**Absurd, literature of the (c. 1930–1970):** A movement, primarily in the theater, that responded to the seeming illogicality and purposelessness of human life in works marked by a lack of clear narrative, understandable psychological motives, or emotional catharsis. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is one of the most celebrated works in the theater of the absurd.

**Aestheticism (c. 1835–1910):** A late-19th-century movement that believed in art as an end in itself. Aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater rejected the view that art had to posses a higher moral or political value and believed instead in “art for art’s sake.”

**Angry Young Men (1950s–1980s):** A group of male British writers who created visceral plays and fiction at odds with the political establishment and a self-satisfied middle class. John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* (1957) is one of the seminal works of this movement.

**Beat Generation (1950s–1960s):** A group of American writers in the 1950s and 1960s who sought release and illumination though a bohemian counterculture of sex, drugs, and Zen Buddhism. Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac (*On The Road*) and Allen Ginsberg (*Howl*) gained fame by giving readings in coffeehouses, often accompanied by jazz music.

**Bloomsbury Group (c. 1906–1930s):** An informal group of friends and lovers, including Clive Bell, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and John Maynard Keynes, who lived in the Bloomsbury section of London in the early 20th century and who had a considerable liberalizing influence on British culture.

**Commedia dell’arte (1500s–1700s):** Improvisational comedy first developed in Renaissance Italy that involved stock characters and centered around a set scenario. The elements of farce and buffoonery in commedia dell’arte, as well as its standard characters and plot intrigues, have had a tremendous influence on Western comedy, and can still be seen in contemporary drama and television sitcoms.

**Dadaism (1916–1922):** An avant-garde movement that began in response to the devastation of World War I. Based in Paris and led by the poet Tristan Tzara, the Dadaists produced nihilistic and antilogical prose, poetry, and art, and rejected the traditions, rules, and ideals of prewar Europe.

**Enlightenment (c. 1660–1790):** An intellectual movement in France and other parts of Europe that emphasized the importance of reason, progress, and liberty. The Enlightenment, sometimes called the Age of Reason, is primarily associated with nonfiction writing, such as essays and philosophical treatises. Major Enlightenment writers include Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, René Descartes.

**Elizabethan era (c. 1558–1603):** A flourishing period in English literature, particularly drama, that coincided with the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and included writers such as Francis Bacon, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Sir Philip Sidney, and Edmund Spenser.

**Gothic fiction (c. 1764–1820):** A genre of late-18th-century literature that featured brooding, mysterious settings and plots and set the stage for what we now call “horror stories.” Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto,* set inside a medieval castle, was the first major Gothic novel. Later, the term “Gothic” grew to include any work that attempted to create an atmosphere of terror or the unknown, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories.

**Harlem Renaissance (c. 1918–1930):** A flowering of African-American literature, art, and music during the 1920s in New York City. W. E. B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* anticipated the movement, which included Alain Locke’s anthology *The New Negro,* Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* and the poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen.

**Lost Generation (c. 1918–1930s):** A term used to describe the generation of writers, many of them soldiers that came to maturity during World War I. Notable members of this group include F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, and Ernest Hemingway, whose novel *The Sun Also Rises* embodies the Lost Generation’s sense of disillusionment.

**Magic realism (c. 1935–present):** A style of writing, popularized by Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Günter Grass, and others, that combines realism with moments of dream-like fantasy within a single prose narrative.

**Metaphysical poets (c. 1633–1680):** A group of 17th-century poets who combined direct language with ingenious images, paradoxes, and conceits. John Donne and Andrew Marvell are the best known poets of this school.

**Middle English (c. 1066–1500):** The transitional period between Anglo-Saxon and modern English. The cultural upheaval that followed the Norman Conquest of England, in 1066, saw a flowering of secular literature, including ballads, chivalric romances, allegorical poems, and a variety of religious plays. Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is the most celebrated work of this period.

**Modernism (1890s–1940s):** A literary and artistic movement that provided a radical breaks with traditional modes of Western art, thought, religion, social conventions, and morality. Major themes of this period include the attack on notions of hierarchy; experimentation in new forms of narrative, such as stream of consciousness; doubt about the existence of knowable, objective reality; attention to alternative viewpoints and modes of thinking; and self-referentiality as a means of drawing attention to the relationships between artist and audience, and form and content.

* High modernism (1920s): Generally considered the golden age of modernist literature, this period saw the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses,* T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land,* Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway,* and Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time.*

**Naturalism (c. 1865–1900):** A literary movement that used detailed realism to suggest that social conditions, heredity, and environment had inescapable force in shaping human character. Leading writers in the movement include Émile Zola, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane.

**Neoclassicism (c. 1660–1798):** A literary movement, inspired by the rediscovery of classical works of ancient Greece and Rome that emphasized balance, restraint, and order. Neoclassicism roughly coincided with the Enlightenment, which espoused reason over passion. Notable neoclassical writers include Edmund Burke, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift.

**Nouveau Roman (“New Novel”) (c. 1955–1970):** A French movement, led by Alain Robbe-Grillet, that dispensed with traditional elements of the novel, such as plot and character, in favor of neutrally recording the experience of sensations and things.

**Postcolonial literature (c. 1950s–present):** Literature by and about people from former European colonies, primarily in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean. This literature aims both to expand the traditional canon of Western literature and to challenge Eurocentric assumptions about literature, especially through examination of questions of otherness, identity, and race. Prominent postcolonial works include Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart,* V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas,* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children.* Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) provided an important theoretical basis for understanding postcolonial literature.

**Postmodernism (c. 1945–present):** A notoriously ambiguous term, especially as it refers to literature, postmodernism can be seen as a response to the elitism of high modernism as well as to the horrors of World War II. Postmodern literature is characterized by a disjointed, fragmented pastiche of high and low culture that reflects the absence of tradition and structure in a world driven by technology and consumerism. Julian Barnes, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, and Kurt Vonnegut are among many who are considered postmodern authors.

**Pre-Raphaelites (c. 1848–1870):** The literary arm of an artistic movement that drew inspiration from Italian artists working before Raphael (1483–1520). The Pre-Raphaelites combined sensuousness and religiosity through archaic poetic forms and medieval settings. William Morris, Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Charles Swinburne were leading poets in the movement.

**Realism (c. 1830–1900):** A loose term that can refer to any work that aims at honest portrayal over sensationalism, exaggeration, or melodrama. Technically, realism refers to a late-19th-century literary movement—primarily French, English, and American—that aimed at accurate detailed portrayal of ordinary, contemporary life. Many of the 19th century’s greatest novelists, such as Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy, are classified as realists. Naturalism ( see above ) can be seen as an intensification of realism.

**Romanticism (c. 1798–1832):** A literary and artistic movement that reacted against the restraint and universalism of the Enlightenment. The Romantics celebrated spontaneity, imagination, subjectivity, and the purity of nature. Notable English Romantic writers include Jane Austen, William Blake, Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth. Prominent figures in the American Romantic movement include Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, William Cullen Bryant, and John Greenleaf Whittier.

***Sturm und Drang* (1770s):** German for “storm and stress,” this brief German literary movement advocated passionate individuality in the face of Neoclassical rationalism and restraint. Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is the most enduring work of this movement, which greatly influenced the Romantic movement (*see above*).

**Surrealism (1920s–1930s):** An avant-garde movement, based primarily in France, that sought to break down the boundaries between rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, through a variety of literary and artistic experiments. The surrealist poets, such as André Breton and Paul Eluard, were not as successful as their artist counterparts, who included Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, and René Magritte.

**Symbolists (1870s–1890s):** A group of French poets who reacted against realism with a poetry of suggestion based on private symbols, and experimented with new poetic forms such as free verse and the prose poem. The symbolists—Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine are the most well known—were influenced by Charles Baudelaire. In turn, they had a seminal influence on the modernist poetry of the early 20th century.

**Transcendentalism (c. 1835–1860):** An American philosophical and spiritual movement, based in New England, that focused on the primacy of the individual conscience and rejected materialism in favor of closer communion with nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* are famous transcendentalist works.

**Victorian era (c. 1832–1901):** The period of English history between the passage of the first Reform Bill (1832) and the death of Queen Victoria (reigned 1837–1901). Though remembered for strict social, political, and sexual conservatism and frequent clashes between religion and science, the period also saw prolific literary activity and significant social reform and criticism. Notable Victorian novelists include the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, and Thomas Hardy, while prominent poets include Matthew Arnold; Robert Browning; Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Gerard Manley Hopkins; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and Christina Rossetti. Notable Victorian nonfiction writers include Walter Pater, John Ruskin, and Charles Darwin, who penned the famous *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

**Literary Theory and Criticism**

**Literary theory and literary criticism are interpretive tools that help us think more deeply and insightfully about the literature that we read. Over time, different schools of literary criticism have developed, each with its own approaches to the act of reading.**

**Schools of Interpretation**

**Cambridge School (1920s–1930s):** A group of scholars at Cambridge University who rejected historical and biographical analysis of texts in favor of close readings of the texts themselves.

**Chicago School (1950s):** A group, formed at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, that drew on Aristotle’s distinctions between the various elements within a narrative to analyze the relation between form and structure. *Critics and Criticisms: Ancient and Modern* (1952) is the major work of the Chicago School.

**Deconstruction (1967–present):** A philosophical approach to reading, first advanced by Jacques Derrida that attacks the assumption that a text has a single, stable meaning. Derrida suggests that all interpretation of a text simply constitutes further texts, which means there is no “outside the text” at all. Therefore, it is impossible for a text to have stable meaning. The practice of deconstruction involves identifying the contradictions within a text’s claim to have a single, stable meaning, and showing that a text can be taken to mean a variety of things that differ significantly from what it purports to mean.

**Feminist criticism (1960s–present):** An umbrella term for a number of different critical approaches that seek to distinguish the human experience from the male experience. Feminist critics draw attention to the ways in which patriarchal social structures have marginalized women and male authors have exploited women in their portrayal of them. Although feminist criticism dates as far back as Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) and had some significant advocates in the early 20th century, such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, it did not gain widespread recognition as a theoretical and political movement until the 1960s and 1970s.

**Psychoanalytic criticism:** Any form of criticism that draws on psychoanalysis, the practice of analyzing the role of unconscious psychological drives and impulses in shaping human behavior or artistic production. The three main schools of psychoanalysis are named for the three leading figures in developing psychoanalytic theory: Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan.

* Freudian criticism (c. 1900–present): The view of art as the imagined fulfillment of wishes that reality denies. According to Freud, artists sublimate their desires and translate their imagined wishes into art. We, as an audience, respond to the sublimated wishes that we share with the artist. Working from this view, an artist’s biography becomes a useful tool in interpreting his or her work. “Freudian criticism” is also used as a term to describe the analysis of Freudian images within a work of art.
* Jungian criticism (1920s–present): A school of criticism that draws on Carl Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious, a reservoir of common thoughts and experiences that all cultures share. Jung holds that literature is an expression of the main themes of the collective unconscious, and critics often invoke his work in discussions of literary archetypes.
* Lacanian criticism (c. 1977–present): Criticism based on Jacques Lacan’s view that the unconscious, and our perception of ourselves, is shaped in the “symbolic” order of language rather than in the “imaginary” order of prelinguistic thought. Lacan is famous in literary circles for his influential reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter.”

**Marxist criticism:** An umbrella term for a number of critical approaches to literature that draw inspiration from the social and economic theories of Karl Marx. Marx maintained that material production, or economics, ultimately determines the course of history, and in turn influences social structures.These social structures, Marx argued, are held in place by the dominant ideology, which serves to reinforce the interests of the ruling class. Marxist criticism approaches literature as a struggle with social realities and ideologies.

* **Frankfurt School (c. 1923–1970):** A group of German Marxist thinkers associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. These thinkers applied the principles of Marxism to a wide range of social phenomena, including literature. Major members of the Frankfurt School include Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas.

**New Criticism (1930s–1960s):** Coined in John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* (1941), this approach discourages the use of history and biography in interpreting a literary work. Instead, it encourages readers to discover the meaning of a work through a detailed analysis of the text itself. This approach was popular in the middle of the 20th century, especially in the United States, but has since fallen out of favor.

**New Historicism (1980s–present):** An approach that breaks down distinctions between “literature” and “historical context” by examining the contemporary production and reception of literary texts, including the dominant social, political, and moral movements of the time. Stephen Greenblatt is a leader in this field, which joins the careful textual analysis of New Criticism with a dynamic model of historical research.

**New Humanism (c. 1910–1933):** An American movement, led by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, that embraced conservative literary and moral values and advocated a return to humanistic education.

**Post-structuralism (1960s–1970s):** A movement that comprised, among other things, Deconstruction, Lacanian criticism, and the later works of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. It criticized structuralism for its claims to scientific objectivity, including its assumption that the system of signs in which language operates was stable.

**Queer theory (1980s–present):** A “constructivist” (as opposed to “essentialist”) approach to gender and sexuality that asserts that gender roles and sexual identity are social constructions rather than an essential, inescapable part of our nature. Queer theory consequently studies literary texts with an eye to the ways in which different authors in different eras construct sexual and gender identity. Queer theory draws on certain branches of feminist criticism and traces its roots to the first volume of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1976).

**Russian Formalism (1915–1929):** A school that attempted a scientific analysis of the formal literary devices used in a text. The Stalinist authorities criticized and silenced the Formalists, but Western critics rediscovered their work in the 1960s. Ultimately, the Russian Formalists had significant influence on structuralism and Marxist criticism.

**Structuralism (1950s–1960s):** An intellectual movement that made significant contributions not only to literary criticism but also to philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and history. Structuralist literary critics, such as Roland Barthes, read texts as an interrelated system of signs that refer to one another rather than to an external “meaning” that is fixed either by author or reader. Structuralist literary theory draws on the work of the Russian Formalists, as well as the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and C. S. Peirce.

**Literary Terms and Theories**

**Literary theory is notorious for its complex and somewhat inaccessible jargon. The following list defines some of the more commonly encountered terms in the field.**

**Anxiety of influence:** A theory that the critic Harold Bloom put forth in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973). Bloom uses Freud’s idea of the Oedipus complex (*see below*) to suggest that poets, plagued by anxiety that they have nothing new to say, struggle against the influence of earlier generations of poets. Bloom suggests that poets find their distinctive voices in an act of misprision, or misreading, of earlier influences, thus refiguring the poetic tradition. Although Bloom presents his thesis as a theory of poetry, it can be applied to other arts as well.

**Canon:** A group of literary works commonly regarded as central or authoritative to the literary tradition. For example, many critics concur that the Western canon—the central literary works of Western civilization—includes the writings of Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and the like. A canon is an evolving entity, as works are added or subtracted as their perceived value shifts over time. For example, the fiction of W. Somerset Maugham was central to the canon during the middle of the 20th century but is read less frequently today. In recent decades, the idea of an authoritative canon has come under attack, especially from feminist and postcolonial critics, who see the canon as a tyranny of dead white males that marginalizes less mainstream voices.

**Death of the author:** A post-structuralist theory, first advanced by Roland Barthes, that suggests that the reader, not the author, creates the meaning of a text. Ultimately, the very idea of an author is a fiction invented by the reader.

**Diachronic/synchronic:** Terms that Ferdinand de Saussure used to describe two different approaches to language. The diachronic approach looks at language as a historical process and examines the ways in which it has changed over time. The synchronic approach looks at language at a particular moment in time, without reference to history. Saussure’s structuralist approach is synchronic, for it studies language as a system of interrelated signs that have no reference to anything (such as history) outside of the system.

**Dialogic/monologic:** Terms that the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin used to distinguish works that are controlled by a single, authorial voice (monologic) from works in which no single voice predominates (dialogic or polyphonic). Bakhtin takes Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky as examples of monologic and dialogic writing, respectively.

**Diegesis/Mimesis:** Terms that Aristotle first used to distinguish “telling” (diegesis) from “showing” (mimesis). In a play, for instance, most of the action is mimetic, but moments in which a character recounts what has happened offstage are diegetic.

**Discourse:** A post-structuralist term for the wider social and intellectual context in which communication takes place. The implication is that the meaning of works is as dependent on their surrounding context as it is on the content of the works themselves.

**Exegesis:** An explanation of a text that clarifies difficult passages and analyzes its contemporary relevance or application.

**Explication:** A close reading of a text that identifies and explains the figurative language and forms within the work.

**Hermeneutics:** The study of textual interpretation and of the way in which a text communicates meaning.

**Intertextuality:** The various relationships a text may have with other texts, through allusions, borrowing of formal or thematic elements, or simply by reference to traditional literary forms. The term is important to structuralist and poststructuralist critics, who argue that texts relate primarily to one another and not to an external reality.

**Linguistics:** The scientific study of language, encompassing, among other things, the study of syntax, semantics, and the evolution of language.

**Logocentrism:** The desire for an ultimate guarantee of meaning, whether God, Truth, Reason, or something else. Jacques Derrida criticizes the bulk of Western philosophy as being based on a logocentric “metaphysics of presence,” which insists on the presence of some such ultimate guarantee. The main goal of deconstruction is to undermine this belief.

**Metalanguage:** A technical language that explains and interprets the properties of ordinary language. For example, the vocabulary of literary criticism is a metalanguage that explains the ordinary language of literature. Post-structuralist critics argue that there is no such thing as a metalanguage; rather, they assert, all language is on an even plane and therefore there is no essential difference between literature and criticism.

**Metanarrative:** A larger framework within which we understand historical processes. For instance, a Marxist metanarrative sees history primarily as a history of changing material circumstances and class struggle. Post-structuralist critics draw our attention to the ways in which assumed met narratives can be used as tools of political domination.

**Mimesis:***See*diegesis/mimesis,*above.*

**Monologic:***See*dialogic/monologic,*above.*

**Narratology:** The study of narrative, encompassing the different kinds of narrative voices, forms of narrative, and possibilities of narrative analysis.

**Oedipus complex:** Sigmund Freud’s theory that a male child feels unconscious jealousy toward his father and lust for his mother. The name comes from Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex,* in which the main character unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. Freud applies this theory in an influential reading of Hamlet, in which he sees Hamlet as struggling with his admiration of Claudius, who fulfilled Hamlet’s own desire of murdering Hamlet’s father and marrying his mother.

**Semantics:** The branch of linguistics that studies the meanings of words.

**Semiotics or semiology:** Terms for the study of sign systems and the ways in which communication functions through conventions in sign systems. Semiotics is central to structuralist linguistics.

**Sign/signifier/signified:** Terms fundamental to Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralism linguistics. A sign is a basic unit of meaning—a word, picture, or hand gesture, for instance, that conveys some meaning. A signifier is the perceptible aspect of a sign (e.g., the word “car”) while the signified is the conceptual aspect of a sign (e.g., the concept of a car). A referent is a physical object to which a sign system refers (e.g., the physical car itself).

**Synchronic:***See*diachronic/synchronic*above.*