Critical Terms for Poetry

Many additional terms are defined (bolded) in the readings "An Introduction to Poetry" and "An Introduction to Fiction." The basic elements of plot, character, setting, point-of-view, and theme are discussed in detail in "An Introduction to Fiction." There is a separate glossary for terms applicable mostly to fiction.

Allusion: a historical, religious, mythic, literary, or other kind of outside reference used thematically or to reveal character in a work; allusions can also be used to broaden a work's focus: "This man had kept a school/And rode our *wingèd horse*"—W.B. Yeats's allusion to the mythological horse Pegasus, associated with poetry. See **intertexuality**.

Alliteration: (you can speak of examples of alliteration—*not* "alliterations"): the repetition of like sounds, usually consonants, at the beginning of words in close proximity: "O *w*ild *W*est *W*ind, thou *b*reath of Autumn's *b*eing" (P.B. Shelley).

Anaphora: a device of repetition; repeated words or phrases at the beginning of lines or clauses: "*I love thee* freely, as men strive for Right;/*I love thee* purely, as they turn from Praise./*I love thee* with the passion put to use/In my old griefs. . . ." (E.B. Browning).

Apostrophe: an address to an absent person, animal, object, or concept: "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" (John Keats).

Assonance: the repetition of like vowel sounds in nearby words: "Up to the sw*a*llow thr*o*nged l*o*ft by the sh*a*dow of my h*a*nd" (Dylan Thomas).

Chiasmus: the reversal in the order of words in two otherwise parallel phrases: Example—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (John Keats).

Conceit: an extended comparison or metaphor, usually complex and ingenious, such as John Donne's comparison in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" of separated lovers to a compass.

Consonance: the repetition of like consonant sounds in the middle or end of words: "the dreadf*ul* ridd*le* of their sku*ll*s" (P.K. Page).

Diction: word choice; could refer to specific words or to the level of language used in the work—e.g., formal, elevated, informal, colloquial, abstract, concrete.

Didacticism: poetry or prose, including literary prose, in which the primary purpose of the author is to instruct or educate the reader. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) attacked didacticism in poetry, but many works—both before and after Poe's time—have had a didactic purpose. In these works, it may be accurate to speak of an intended "message" or "moral"; most literary works written in this or last century, however, do not contain an identifiable message or moral.

Ellipsis: the omission of one or more words, which the reader can assume are implied, for the sake of brevity. Ellipsis contributes to the compression—the poetic intensity—of a work: "If ever two were one, then surely we [are one]. / If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee [(thou) art loved]" (Anne Bradstreet); square brackets indicate the words supplied by the reader. Also, in quoted material, the use of three periods to indicate where some words within the quotation have been omitted. If the omitted words follow the end of a sentence, the sentence has the closing period followed by the three points of ellipsis; if the omitted words include the end of a sentence,

the last word is followed by a space, the points of ellipsis, and then the period; if the omitted words are within a single sentence, then the three points of ellipsis have space on either side but no fourth point (or period) is used.

Figures of speech: the use of language in a way that stresses the non-literal meaning of words; Figures of speech lead the reader beyond the literal to expose a new and more complex way of seeing something. Many figures of speech involve an explicit (simile) or implicit (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche) comparison between two things. See **metaphors**, **similes**, **metonymy**, **synecdoche**, and **personification**.

Imagery: words conveying sense impressions, particularly sight, used in almost all literary writing. Images may occur in descriptive passages where their primary focus is on the physical world, or they may be used in figurative (non-literal) language; of course, an image can function descriptively *and* figuratively. Identical or similar images may recur throughout a work, becoming a motif that helps to clarify the work's theme. See **symbol** and **motif**.

Intertextuality: A complex and debated term, intertextuality can be considered the presence of a secondary (older) text (called the **intertext**) within a primary text. It has also been applied to the "retelling" of an older story, as in Angela Carter's use of the fairy tale: the original tale and the new one may interact to create "competing realities" (Munford vii). A text may have one main intertext (for example, Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* is the intertext of Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*). In a more general sense, intertextuality can refer to the reliance of virtually all texts on preceding texts. See **allusion**.

Irony: a device of **indirection**. Irony is the condition of two levels of meaning, the apparent (literal or surface) meaning and another intended (non-literal or deeper) meaning (see **tone**). Irony may differ in degree according to its purpose (see below, verbal irony), and traditionally is divided into three types.

1. In **verbal irony**, the discrepancy is between the literal and intended meanings of language. Verbal irony resembles sarcasm, but irony is usually more indirect than **sarcasm**, which simply states something as its opposite. Sarcasm: Mr. Bennet in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* refers to his worthless son-in-law: "I am prodigiously proud of him." Verbal irony: "Yet graceful Ease, and Sweetness void of Pride, / Might hide her Faults, if *Belles* had Faults to hide" (Alexander Pope). The last clause is ironic since the "belle," Belinda, is mortal and, as such, does have faults. In his anti-war poem "*Dulce et Decorum Est*," the irony intended by Wilfred Owen is much harsher. His graphic images of a youth dying from a gas attack render ironic the patriot's claim that "dulce et decorem est"—it is "sweet and right to die for your country." While the title affords an example of verbal irony, the poem, as an indictment of war and the "lie" of those who promote its glory, exemplifies situational irony (see below).
2. In **dramatic irony**, the reader/audience possesses an awareness about the character or situation that the character doesn't have. For example, in many of Shakespeare's comedies, people are disguised, and while the audience is aware of these disguises, most of the characters are not. **Tragic irony** exists if the reader/audience is aware of a situation that the hero is oblivious to and that will lead to disaster, as when the audience for Shakespeare's *Othello* learns long before Othello does of Iago's treachery. Dramatic irony can also be found in poetry and fiction—for example, in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" where the narrator shares the fact of Fortunato's impending death with the reader.

3. In **situational irony**, a situation appears to point to a particular outcome but results in the reverse of the expected or intended one. Situational irony is often found in drama, fiction, and narrative poetry. It is ironic that Pip, the protagonist of Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*, discovers that his benefactor is not the wealthy Miss Havisham but the convict Magwitch.

Metaphor: an implicit comparison between two things not usually considered similar; metaphors call attention to an object in an unexpected comparison: "Love . . . is the star to every wandering bark" (Shakespeare). Love is compared to a star and the lover is implicitly compared to a "bark" or ship; "star" and "bark" are metaphors for love and the lover, respectively). Metaphors can be divided into the *tenor* (the object being compared—"love," the lover) and the *vehicle* (the image to which the tenor is linked—"star," "bark"). See **conceit**, **simile**.

Metonymy: the substitution of an object or idea for a related one: "A *goose's quill* has put an end to murder" (Dylan Thomas—the poet refers to a document signed by a king; it is in reality the person, not the quill, who "put an end to murder"). See **synecdoche**.

Metre: the pattern or arrangement of feet in a line of poetry. Metre usually refers to the repetition of stressed and unstressed syllables. The name of the metre is determined by the basic unit of measurement (the foot) and the number of feet in a line. The four most common feet are:

iamb (unstressed + stressed syllable make up the unit)
"On either side the river lie" (Alfred, Lord Tennyson) ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´

trochee (stressed + unstressed syllable)
"Tyger, Tyger, burning bright" (William Blake) ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´

anapest (two unstressed syllables + stressed syllable)
"When the voices of children are heard on the green" (Blake)
˘ ˘ ´ ˘ ˘ ´ ˘ ˘ ´ ˘ ˘ ´

dactyl (stressed syllable + two unstressed syllables)
"lurching through forests of white spruce and cedar" (Alden Nowlan)
´ ˘ ˘ ´ ˘ ˘ ´ ˘ ˘ ´ ˘

Truncated rhythm occurs when a syllable is omitted from the beginning or end of a line; in the previous example from Nowlan, the last foot omits the final unstressed syllable.

A line that contains three feet is called a **trimeter**, one that contains four feet is a **tetrameter**, and one made up of five feet is a **pentameter**. Thus, a poem with lines composed of five iambs would be written in **iambic pentameter**. **Blank verse**, the closest to the rhythms of everyday English speech, is written in unrhymed **iambic pentameter**. Blank verse is used in much narrative and dramatic poetry, including the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton, and parts of Shakespeare's plays.

Paradox: a statement that appears impossible on the surface but turns out to be true when examined closely: "Take me to you, imprison me, for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free" (John Donne—the poem's context resolves the apparent contradiction of imprisonment and freedom).

Personification: attributing human qualities to the non-human: "The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay, / Chin upon hand" (Robert Browning).

Rhyme: the repetition of identical sounds at the end of lines (**end rhyme**); in the middle of a line it is known as **internal rhyme**; in **masculine rhyme**, the identical sound occurs on a final stressed syllable ("bells," "shells"), while in **feminine (double) rhyme**, the identical sound is heard on the stressed syllable and on the unstressed syllable ("battle," "rattle"); **near rhyme**

(**slant rhyme**) repeats the final vowel sounds *or* consonant sounds, not both: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant— / Success in circuit lies / Too bright for our infirm Delight / The Truth's superb surprise"—(Emily Dickinson): lines 2 and 4 illustrate end rhyme (masculine); lines 1 and 3 provide an example of near rhyme; "bright" and "Delight" illustrate internal rhyme. A rhyme scheme is a distinctive pattern in which letters are assigned to the end rhymes; for example, in an *aabb* rhyme, the first two lines and the last two lines would rhyme. See also **stanza**.

Rhythm: the rhythm of poetry in English is determined by the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables; the rhythmical pattern in most traditional English poetry can be classified according to its **metre**.

Simile: a comparison using "like" or "as" or a similar word/phrase: "The holy time is *quiet as a Nun*" (William Wordsworth).

Stanza: A structural unit of poetry consisting of a group of lines, usually with a distinctive metre and rhyming scheme and a line break between one stanzaic unit and another; it is very roughly equivalent to the paragraph in prose. Three-line stanzas (**tercets**) and four-line stanzas (**quatrains**) are common arrangements. A **couplet** consists of a two-line rhyming unit; it is usually part of a larger stanzaic unit.

Synecdoche: a kind of substitution wherein the part stands for the whole or the whole for the part: "By *mourning tongues* / the death of the poet was kept from his poems" (W.H. Auden—it is not the "tongues" that mourn but the people who speak about the poet's death).

Syntax: word order; poets may invert or disrupt normal syntax for surprise or emphasis: "Berries or children, patient she is with these" (Irving Layton); the regular English syntax would be "She is patient with berries or children."

Chronological List of Literary Time Periods

Many critical approaches and "schools" of thought arose (and declined) within these periods, some more unified and developed than others (bolded below). The demarcations are intended as a very rough chronological guide to some of the prevailing ideas that the writers living during those times drew on; of course, these ideas also influenced writers outside of these times.

The Age of Reason, *Neoclassicism*, or the *Age of Enlightenment*: 18th century before French revolution in 1789: rationalism, balance, democracy, order, belief in science, optimism, moderation, human perfectibility, social responsibility. *Key historical event/ frame of reference*: the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.
Romanticism: 1789-1830: individualism, emotions, imagination, excess, interest in the unconscious, the natural, and the exotic. *Key historical event/ frame of reference*: the French Revolution (1789-1799). **Gothicism** (1790-1820) is sometimes seen as an outgrowth of the Romantic Movement; here the stress is on excess and the exotic. Conventions of gothic writing include dark and foreboding settings—isolated mansions, craggy castles, mazy corridors, locked rooms—larger-than-life characters, extreme emotional states (especially terror) and the use of the supernatural.

The Victorian Era: 1837-1901: a time of apparent political and social stability (at least, seen through the lens of Britain imperialism), this time also brought reform and radical thinking; is sometimes divided into early, middle, and late Victorianism: on the one hand, ideas and

ideologies, scientific rationalism, expansion of the frontiers of knowledge, optimism; on the other hand, institutional faith, determinism, morality, propriety. *Key historical event/ frame of reference*: late industrialization; *key intellectual event*: Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species* (1859). **Realism**: with its roots in French writers Gustav Flaubert and Honoré de Balzac, realism spread to North America in the late 19th-century. Realism sought to depict the lives of ordinary people (usually members of the middle class), using the language of everyday speech. In documentary realism, the writer uses journalistic methods to convey a historical or another collective perspective on an event or character (see Scott, "Charcoal"; Gallant parodies this kind of realism in "From the Fifteenth District"). **Naturalism**: often considered a movement in American literature, reached its zenith 1890-1920; influenced by the findings of Darwin, portrayed individuals (often from the working classes) as victimized by heredity and/or environmental/social forces. Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser incorporated naturalistic elements in their fiction.

Modernism: 1895-1945: reacted against Victorian morality and sense of order; a period characterized by literary innovation/experimentation; emphasized subjective rather than objective experience, using styles and techniques to represent inner (psychological) states and indirect methods, such as non-linear narratives and multiple perspectives. "High modernism" produced much theorizing about art, a new artistic self-consciousness. *Key historical event/ frame of reference*: World War I; *key intellectual event*: psychological discoveries of Freud and Jung. Modernism produced many different approaches to the literary and other arts, including **imagism**, which focuses on the direct presentation of the image; and **impressionism**, a way of recording inner experience in which sensual detail, not coherently ordered, reflects immediacy of feelings, thoughts, and sensations. W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, and Sinclair Ross embraced different aspects of modernism.

Postmodernism: 1980- : notoriously hard to define: although postmodernism reflects—and sometimes relentlessly pursues—some of the goals of modernism, it rejects the idea of privilege and univocal perspectives, replacing them with multi-vocal perspectives and multidisciplinary viewpoints; characterized by discontinuity, fragmentation, inclusiveness. Important critical movements include **postcolonialism**, which centres on the literature of former European colonies, often critiquing Eurocentric perspectives and exploring the theme of identity; **deconstruction**, which probes for gaps, inconsistencies in texts to encourage variant readings; and **feminist criticism**, which began as a critique of patriarchal structures, including linguistic ones, but has expanded to focus on the study of gender itself and embraces such areas as race and class, anthropology, psychology, ecology, and economics.