Glossary

Allegory a story or narrative, often told at some length, which has a deeper meaning below the surface. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan is a well-known allegory. A more modern example is George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, which on a surface level is about a group of animals who take over their farm but on a deeper level is an allegory of the Russian Revolution and the shortcomings of Communism.

Alliteration the repetition of the same consonant sound, especially at the beginning of words. For example, “Five miles meandering with a mazy motion” (*Kubla Khan* by S.T. Coleridge).

Allusion a reference to another event, person, place, or work of literature – the allusion is usually implied rather than explicit and often provides another layer of meaning to what is being said.

Ambiguity use of language where the meaning is unclear or has two or more possible interpretations or meanings. It could be created through a weakness in the way the writer has expressed himself or herself, but often it is used by writers quite deliberately to create layers of meaning in the mind of the reader.

Ambivalence this indicates more than one possible attitude is being displayed by the writer towards a character, theme, or idea, etc.

Anachronism something that is historically inaccurate, for example the reference to a clock chiming in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

Anthropomorphism the endowment of something that is not human with human characteristics.

Antithesis contrasting ideas or words that are balanced against each other.

Apostrophe an interruption in a poem or narrative so that the speaker or writer can address a dead or absent person or particular audience directly.

Archaic language that is old-fashioned – not completely obsolete but no longer in current use.

Assonance the repetition of similar vowel sounds. For example: “There must be Gods thrown down and trumpets blown” (*Hyperion* by John Keats).

This shows the paired assonance of “must”, “trum”, “thrown”, “blown”.

Atmosphere the prevailing mood created by a piece of writing.

Ballad a narrative poem that tells a story (traditional ballads were songs) usually in a straightforward way. The theme is often tragic or contains a whimsical, supernatural, or fantastical element.

Bathos an anti-climax or sudden descent from the serious to the ridiculous – sometimes deliberate, sometimes unintentional on the part of the writer.

Blank verse unrhymed poetry that adheres to a strict pattern in that each line is an iambic pentameter (a ten-syllable line with five stresses). It is close to the natural rhythm of English speech or prose, and is used a great deal by many writers including Shakespeare and Milton.

Caesura a conscious break in a line of poetry (see Chapter 5, page 120).

Caricature a character described through the exaggeration of a small number of features that he or she possesses.

Catharsis a purging of the emotions which takes place at the end of a tragedy.

Cliché a phrase, idea, or image that has been used so much that it has lost much of its original meaning, impact, and freshness.

Colloquial ordinary, everyday speech and language.

Comedy originally simply a play or other work which ended happily. Now we use this term to describe something that is funny and which makes us laugh. In literature the comedy is not necessarily a lightweight form. A play like Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, for example, is, for the most part a serious and dark play but as it ends happily, it is often described as a comedy.

Conceit an elaborate, extended, and sometimes surprising comparison between things that, at first sight, do not have much in common.

Connotation an implication or association attached to a word or phrase. A connotation is suggested or felt rather than being explicit.
Consonance the repetition of the same consonant sounds in two or more words in which the vowel sounds are different. For example: “And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, / By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell” (Strange Meeting by Wilfred Owen). Where consonance replaces the rhyme, as here, it is called half-rhyme.

Couplet two consecutive lines of verse that rhyme.

Dénouement the ending of a play, novel, or drama where “all is revealed” and the plot is unravelled.

Diction the choice of words that a writer makes. Another term for “vocabulary”.

Didactic a work that is intended to preach or teach, often containing a particular moral or political point.

Dramatic monologue a poem or prose piece in which a character addresses an audience. Often the monologue is complete in itself, as in Alan Bennett’s Talking Heads.

Elegy a meditative poem, usually sad and reflective in nature. Sometimes, though not always, it is concerned with the theme of death.

Empathy a feeling on the part of the reader of sharing the particular experience being described by the character or writer.

End stopping a verse line with a pause or a stop at the end of it.

Enjambment a line of verse that flows on into the next line without a pause.

Epic a long narrative poem, written in an elevated style and usually dealing with a heroic theme or story. Homer’s The Iliad and Milton’s Paradise Lost are examples of this.

Euphemism expressing an unpleasant or unsavoury idea in a less blunt and more pleasant way.

Euphony use of pleasant or melodious sounds.

Exemplum a story that contains or illustrates a moral point put forward as an “example”.

Fable a short story that presents a clear moral lesson.

Fabliau a short comic tale with a bawdy element, akin to the “dirty story”. Chaucer’s The Miller’s Tale contains strong elements of the fabliau.

Farce a play that aims to entertain the audience through absurd and ridiculous characters and action.

Feminine ending an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a line of poetry. (Contrast with a stressed syllable, a masculine ending.)

Figurative language language that is symbolic or metaphorical and not meant to be taken literally.

Foot a group of syllables forming a unit of verse – the basic unit of “metre”. (See Chapter 5, pages 122-123.)

Free verse verse written without any fixed structure (either in metre or rhyme).

Genre a particular type of writing, e.g. prose, poetry, drama.

Heptameter a verse line containing seven feet.

Hexameter a verse line containing six feet.

Hyperbole deliberate and extravagant exaggeration.

Iamb the most common metrical foot in English poetry, consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

Idyll a story, often written in verse, usually concerning innocent and rustic characters in rural, idealized surroundings. This form can also deal with more heroic subjects, as in Tennyson’s Idylls of the King. (See Pastoral.)

Imagery the use of words to create a picture or “image” in the mind of the reader. Images can relate to any of the senses, not just sight, but also hearing, taste, touch, and smell. “Imagery” is often used to refer to the use of descriptive language, particularly to the use of metaphors and similes.

Internal rhyme rhyming words within a line rather than at the end of lines.

Inter-textual having clear links with other texts through the themes, ideas, or issues which are explored.

Irony at its simplest level, irony means saying one thing while meaning another. It occurs where a word or phrase has one surface meaning but another contradictory, possibly opposite meaning is implied. Irony is frequently confused with sarcasm. Sarcasm is spoken, often relying on tone of voice, and is much more blunt than irony.
Lament a poem expressing intense grief.

Lyric originally a song performed to the accompaniment of a lyre (an early harp-like instrument) but now it can mean a song-like poem or a short poem expressing personal feeling.

Metaphor a comparison of one thing to another in order to make description more vivid. The metaphor actually states that one thing is the other. For example, a simile would be: "The huge knight stood like an impregnable tower in the ranks of the enemy", whereas the corresponding metaphor would be: "The huge knight was an impregnable tower in the ranks of the enemy". (See *Simile* and *Personification*.)

Metre the regular use of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry. (See *Foot* and Chapter 5, pages 122–123.)

Mock heroic a poem that treats trivial subject matter in the grand and elevated style of epic poetry. The effect produced is often satirical, as in Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*.

Monometer a verse line consisting of only one metrical foot.

Motif a dominant theme, subject or idea which runs through a piece of literature. Often a “motif” can assume a symbolic importance.

Narrative a piece of writing that tells a story.

Octameter a verse line consisting of eight feet.

Octave the first eight lines of a sonnet.

Ode a verse form similar to a lyric but often more lengthy and containing more serious and elevated thoughts.

Onomatopoeia the use of words whose sound copies the sound of the thing or process that they describe. On a simple level, words like “bang”, “hiss”, and “splash” are onomatopoeic, but it also has more subtle uses.

Oxymoron a figure of speech which joins together words of opposite meanings, e.g. “the living dead”, “bitter sweet”, etc.

Paradox a statement that appears contradictory, but when considered more closely is seen to contain a good deal of truth.

Parody a work that is written in imitation of another work, very often with the intention of making fun of the original.

Pastoral generally, literature concerning rural life with idealized settings and rustic characters. Often pastorals are concerned with the lives of shepherds and shepherdesses presented in idyllic and unrealistic ways. (See *Idyll*.)

Pathos the effect in literature which makes the reader feel sadness or pity.

Pentameter a line of verse containing five feet.

Periphrasis a round-about or long-winded way of expressing something.

Personification the attribution of human feelings, emotions, or sensations to an inanimate object. Personification is a kind of metaphor where human qualities are given to things or abstract ideas, and they are described as if they were a person.

Plot the sequence of events in a poem, play, novel, or short story that make up the main storyline.

Prose any kind of writing which is not verse – usually divided into fiction and non-fiction.

Protagonist the main character or speaker in a poem, monologue, play, or story.

Pun a play on words that have similar sounds but quite different meanings.

Quatrain a stanza of four lines which can have various rhyme schemes.

Refrain repetition throughout a poem of a phrase, line, or series of lines, as in the “chorus” of a song.

Rhetoric originally, the art of speaking and writing in such a way as to persuade an audience to a particular point of view. Now this term is often used to imply grand words that have no substance to them. There are a variety of rhetorical devices, such as the rhetorical question – a question which does not require an answer as the answer is either obvious or implied in the question itself. (See *Apostrophe*, *Exemplum*.)

Rhyme corresponding sounds in words, usually at the end of each line but not always. (See Internal rhyme.)

Rhyme scheme the pattern of the rhymes in a poem.

Rhythm the “movement” of the poem as created through the metre and the way that language is stressed within the poem.
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Satire the highlighting or exposing of human failings or foolishness within a society through ridiculing them. Satire can range from being gentle and light to being extremely biting and bitter in tone. E.g. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or *A Modest Proposal*, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

Scansion the analysis of metrical patterns in poetry. (See Chapter 5, pages 122–123.)

Septet a seven-line stanza.

Sestet the last six lines of a sonnet.

Simile a comparison of one thing to another in order to make description more vivid. Similes use the words “like” or “as” in this comparison. (See Metaphor.)

Soliloquy a speech in which a character, alone on stage, expresses his or her thoughts and feelings aloud for the benefit of the audience, often in a revealing way.

Sonnet a fourteen-line poem, usually with ten syllables in each line. There are several ways in which the lines can be organized, but often they consist of an octave and a sestet.

Stanza the blocks of lines into which a poem is divided. (Sometimes these are, less precisely, referred to as verses, which can lead to confusion as poetry is sometimes called “verse”.)

Stream of consciousness a technique in which the writer records thoughts and emotions in a “stream” as they come to mind, without giving order or structure.

Structure the way that a poem or play or other piece of writing has been put together. This can include the metre pattern, stanza arrangement, and the way the ideas are developed, etc.

Style the individual way in which a writer has used language to express his or her ideas.

Sub-plot a secondary storyline in a story or play. Often, as in some Shakespeare plays, the sub-plot can provide some comic relief from the main action, but sub-plots can also relate in quite complex ways to the main plot of a text.

Sub-text ideas, themes, or issues that are not dealt with overtly by a text but which exist below the surface meaning of it.

Symbol like images, symbols represent something else. In very simple terms a red rose is often used to symbolize love; distant thunder is often symbolic of approaching trouble. Symbols can be very subtle and multi-layered in their significance.

Syntax the way in which sentences are structured. Sentences can be structured in different ways to achieve different effects.

Tetrameter a verse line of four feet.

Theme the central idea or ideas that the writer explores through a text.

Tone the tone of a text is created through the combined effects of a number of features, such as diction, syntax, rhythm, etc. The tone is a major factor in establishing the overall impression of the piece of writing.

Trimeter a verse line consisting of three feet.

Zeugma a device that joins together two apparently incongruous things by applying a verb or adjective to both which only really applies to one of them, e.g. “Kill the boys and the luggage” (Shakespeare’s *Henry V*).