allegory: a story that has its real meaning in a parallel, 'implied' story; individual events and characters thus have a wider significance than their literal or 'surface' meaning

alliteration: repetition of consonants, especially at the beginnings of words; often used in poetry, e.g. 'A slumber did my spirit seal' (Wordsworth)

allusion: reference to another literary or artistic work

ambiguity: lack of clarity in meaning, especially between two alternative possible meanings

ambivalence: being 'in two minds'; a state of uncertainty about whether something is right or true

anachronism: something out of date, belonging to an earlier time and out of place in its current context (anachronistic, adj.)

antagonist: the character who opposes the actions of the protagonist or hero

antithesis: the opposite (antithetical, adj.)

assonance: repetition of vowel sounds in words close together; often used in poetry, e.g. 'In the midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes' (Keats)

atmosphere: a feeling or mood evoked by a text through word selection, imagery, narrative pace, setting etc.; in drama, largely generated by stage settings and lighting

ballad: a poem traditionally sung: tells a story in a direct style and in simple language

binary opposition: two terms opposite in meaning, each defined by not being the other, e.g. black/white, present/absent, light/dark, freedom/captivity

blank verse: a form of poetry (also used in Shakespearean drama) in which lines have ten alternating unstressed and stressed syllables (i.e. iambic pentameter) and do not rhyme

caesura: a break in a line of poetry; often indicated by a comma but can be due simply to the natural rhythm of the words

caricature: an exaggerated, usually comical portrayal of a person or character type

catharsis: release of tension following the narrative crisis; crucial to the resolution of classical and Shakespearean tragedy

class: social group sharing similar levels of wealth, education, types of jobs, cultural interests etc.

cliché: an expression that is well-worn, hackneyed, over-used, e.g. 'pretty as a picture', 'fresh as a daisy'

colloquialism: word or phrase that belongs to everyday speech

colonialism: occupation of another country in order to make use of its resources (e.g. minerals, land, labour force) as if one's own; widely practised by European nations from the 15th century; in some cases involved settlement (e.g. Australia)

comedy: in drama, a form that takes a relatively positive view of society and human behaviour; often humorous; typically ends with a marriage (opposite of tragedy)

conceit: metaphor in which one thing stands for another quite different thing; unexpected and witty

connotation: suggested or implied meaning of a word or phrase

context: surrounding circumstances

corruption: a 'code' shared by writer and reader (or audience), e.g. the convention in prose of representing speech by quotation marks

couplet: two lines of poetry that can be grouped by forming a stanza on their own or by rhyming

culture: three main meanings are (1) a body of art works - literature, music, paintings etc. - generally agreed to be of high and lasting value; (2) all aspects of a way of life; (3) a state of civilisation, e.g. the culture of ancient Greece

deconstruction: approach to analysing or creating texts that promotes multiple meanings; subverts notions of a fixed or 'true' meaning; reveals rather than conceals the techniques of construction; often used in other creative fields, e.g. architecture, fashion, visual arts

denotation: the literal or 'dictionary' meaning of a word

dénouement: (French, 'unravelling') unravelling of tension or complications immediately following the narrative crisis

discourse: form of language use particular to a social group, profession or body of knowledge, e.g. medical discourse

dramatic monologue: a poem in which the speaker directly addresses an imaginary audience

elegy: a poem in which the speaker expresses a sense of loss; often a lament for a particular person or event

empathy: a feeling of identification with another person or character; an imaginative sense of being in that person's place

enjambment: the running-on of lines in poetry

epic: a poem that tells a story on a grand scale; usually thousands of lines in length

euphemism: an expression that substitutes for a more literal word or phrase in order to soften the impact of an event or observation, e.g. 'passed away' for 'died'

farce: type of exaggerated comedy intended to produce laughter; often uses absurd situations and/or behaviour

feminist criticism: approach to interpreting and evaluating texts by drawing attention to how women are represented,
especially in relation to how much power and independence they have.

**figurative language**: language that uses simile, metaphor, alliteration etc.

**free verse**: a form of poetry in which there is no regular pattern of rhythm, rhyme, line length or stanza length.

**genre**: category of texts that share several conventions concerning plot, narrative style, tone, characterisation, setting etc.

**hyperbole**: exaggeration in a simile or metaphor, usually for comic effect.

**ideology**: set of ideas and beliefs that underpin behaviour; often used to refer to socially dominant and/or political beliefs.

**idyll**: a poem which describes a rural scene in a tranquil or idealised fashion.

**imagery**: two main kinds are (1) use of language to represent sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, taste and touch); (2) use of simile, metaphor, symbol etc.

**intertextuality**: references to other texts; often implicit, e.g. by an unacknowledged quotation or the use of a word or phrase strongly associated with another text; can also mean a theory of writing that sees all texts as interrelated through shared discourses and conventions.

**irony**: the two main types are (1) verbal irony – where the literal meaning is the opposite of the real meaning; (2) dramatic irony – where the reader/audience and perhaps one or more characters possess knowledge that the remaining characters do not have.

**lyric**: a relatively short poem in the voice of a single 'character' (the speaker); uses a personal tone to convey the speaker’s private thoughts and feelings.

**Marxist criticism**: approach to interpreting and evaluating texts that focuses on representations of class and how money, goods and labour are exchanged and valued in a text; critical of capitalism; based on the ideas of Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95).

**metaphor**: figure of speech which describes one thing as if it is another thing, e.g. ‘the black cloak of night’.

**metonymy**: figure of speech which refers to an object in terms of a quality or attribute of the object, e.g. referring to the sea as ‘the deep’; referring to the monarchy as ‘the crown’.

**metre**: in poetry, a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables with a fixed number of syllables per line.

**mock heroic**: use of a heroic style to describe a relatively trivial subject for comic effect; can be used to satirise the subject and/or the heroic style.

**modernism**: artistic and philosophical movement in the period roughly 1900–50, characterised by widespread disillusionment with the breakdown of traditional social forms exacerbated by two world wars; writers experimented with form and style to reflect and comment on these shifts.

**motif**: a recurring idea or image.

**myth**: story involving supernatural beings or gods; usually an account of an aspect of creation.

**mythology**: a body of myths, e.g. ancient Greek mythology; Celtic mythology.

**narrative**: the way in which a story is told.

**narrator**: figure who tells the story.

**New Criticism**: school of literary criticism developed in the 1920s promoting the unity and wholeness of literary texts; placed the emphasis on close reading of the text rather than on its author or context.

**ode**: a lyric poem with a ceremonial, stately quality.

**omniscient narrator**: narrator who knows everything about the world of the text.

**onomatopoeia**: the use of a word or phrase which has a sound that imitates the sound being referred to, e.g. ‘crackle’, ‘whizz’, ‘plopp’.

**oxymoron**: figure of speech which contains a contradiction or paradox, e.g. ‘I burn and freeze like ice’ (Thomas Wyatt).

**paradox**: statement that appears self-contradictory but contains a coherent meaning.

**parody**: imitation that ‘sends up’ the original by humorous exaggeration.

**pastiche**: patchwork of pieces or styles of writing.

**pastoral**: an account of rural life, usually emphasising its charms and simplicity; often nostalgic and/or idealistic; traditionally involved the depiction of shepherds.

**pathos**: feeling of sadness and pity evoked by a text or other work of art.

**patriarchy**: form of society in which property is passed down the male line and the father is regarded as the head of the family.

**personification**: figurative language which attributes human qualities to inanimate objects, e.g. ‘The candle/cut down and recovers its small altitude’ (Thal).

**plot**: the arrangement of events in a narrative in a particular order to generate interest, suspense, tension, humour etc.

**post-colonialism**: movement in literature, art and criticism following the breakdown of European empires and the gaining of independence by former colonies in the 20th century; usually critical of colonialism and writings complicit with it; gives voice to previously suppressed identities and histories.

**postmodernism**: movement in art and literature from around 1950 characterised by the breakdown of traditional forms, a sense of play with the possibilities of language, and an often sceptical view of power structures and social hierarchies.

**prose**: writing in sentences.

**protagonist**: the main character, whose ambitions and actions ‘drive’ the narrative.
psychoanalytic criticism: approach to interpreting texts that draws on the ideas of psychoanalysis, originally developed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939); uses Freud's theory of personality as structured by drives (especially sexual) and repression to analyse how gaps, silences, repetitions and substitutions in texts contribute to or complicate their meaning

pun: figure of speech which uses two or more meanings of a word, or which 'plays' on the meaning of a word by invoking a word similar in sound but different in meaning (e.g. sun/son)

reading (noun): an interpretation of what a text means

resistant reading: an interpretation that disagrees with ('resists') the most obvious or apparently intended meaning of a text

rhetoric: language that is intended to persuade

rhyme: matching vowel and consonant sounds at the ends of words, e.g. catch/match; thought/draught

rhythm: a feeling of movement or pulse in writing produced by the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables, the length of syllables, use of punctuation etc.

satire: critique of an aspect of human behaviour or society; often humorous; often uses irony

semantics: the meanings of words

semiotics: theory that language works like a system of signs or codes (semiology is the study of signs)

simile: figure of speech in which two things are compared using 'like' or 'as', e.g. 'the night was as black as a cloak'

soliloquy: in a play, a speech given by a character who is alone on stage; the reader/audience takes the content of this speech to be truthful, even when the character deceives all other characters

sonnet: poem with fourteen lines; usually about love; often conforms to established patterns of rhyme and metre

stanza: group of lines in a poem, separated from other stanzas by a space

stream of consciousness: narrative technique that represents the mind's ceaseless and often fragmented flow of thoughts

stereotype: character that conforms to a fixed and simplistic type, e.g. 'the greedy capitalist', 'the noble savage'

style: all aspects of a writer's use of language, e.g. imagery, sentence length and structure, word choice

subplot: a plot or storyline that runs in parallel to the main plot, usually complementing or commenting on it in some way

subtext: a meaning that lies underneath the 'surface' of the text; implied rather than explicitly stated

symbol: object that 'stands for' a larger or more abstract entity; the symbolic object is part of or associated with the larger entity, e.g. scales symbolise justice

syntax: the ways in which words are combined to form phrases or sentences

text: conventionally in literary studies, a literary work that exists in print form; more recently, any cultural form that can be interpreted ('read') in different ways

theme: an idea or proposition that is explored (usually implicitly) throughout a text

tone: aspect of language use that conveys an attitude towards the subject matter, e.g. serious, humorous, sarcastic, mocking, formal or informal index of names and titles

tragedy: in drama, a form that takes a serious and often dark view of society and/or human nature; ends with death or the destruction of relationships (opposite of comedy)