

Glossary of literary terms

Allegory A symbolic work in which characters and events represent a deeper political, historical or moral meaning. To some extent Angel and Alec in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are both allegorical figures representing good and evil.

Alliteration The effect created when several words that begin with the same or similar consonants are used together (e.g. 'Stormed at with shot and shell' in Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*).

Allusion When one text indirectly mentions or refers to another.

Alter ego A secondary character who sheds light on a main character when the two are compared, or another (usually dark and hidden) side of the main character him- or herself. Edward Hyde is the alter ego of William Jekyll in the story by R. L. Stevenson, for instance, and some feminist critics have seen Bertha Mason as the alter ego of Jane Eyre. From Latin, meaning 'other self'.

Anagnorisis The recognition by a character of an important truth.

Anthropomorphism Attributing human characteristics to animals or inanimate objects.

Archetype A perfect or typical model or example of something. Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* can be seen as the archetypal romantic hero, whereas in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Hodge is presented as the archetypal peasant.

Assonance The effect created when similar internal vowel sounds are repeated (e.g. 'that solitude, which suits/Abstruser musings' in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight').

Bathos A sudden plunge from the sublime to the ridiculous, usually for comic effect.

Bildungsroman A German term referring to novels which describe the process of growing up and learning about the world and the journey from childhood to adulthood. *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* are famous examples of this genre.

Bowlerise To remove from a text passages or words that are regarded as indecent. Hardy was forced to alter the text of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* prior to serial publication.

Byronic hero A character associated with the life and work of Lord Byron — typically a wandering and passionate rebel, loner or outcast.

Canon A list of literary texts which have come to be accepted as particularly great and exceptional works of art.

Catharsis The purging of strong or repressed emotions (especially pity and fear); a kind of spiritual cleansing.

Conceit A clever, unusual, exaggerated and far-fetched comparison or metaphor, common in metaphysical poetry.

Context Literally 'with the text'. Context looks at the circumstances which affect the production of the text by an author and the circumstances which affect the reception of the text by readers. These contexts include historical, political, social, cultural, religious, literary and biographical factors which may have had an impact upon the way a text was written and/or received.

Denouement The unfolding of the final stages of a plot, when all is revealed.

Dialect A form of speech peculiar to a district or class.

Diction The specific lexical choices which combine to create the **register**, lexis and **context** of a text. Diction also influences the sound patterns within a text, encompassing literary devices such as **onomatopoeia**, **assonance** and **alliteration**.

Didactic With the intention of teaching the reader and instilling moral values.

Diegesis The reporting or narration of events (in film it is the voiceover). This is to be contrasted with **mimesis**, which is the imitative representation of them. Narratives can fluctuate between the **diegetic** (which shows the control of a narrator) and the **mimetic**, during which narrative control is withdrawn.

Discourse A continuous piece of written or spoken text which is longer than a sentence; also the ways in which textual coherence is created.

Dominant reading position When reading a text it may seem that the writer wants the reader to accept one particular view rather than any other. This is known as the dominant reading position (see also **oppositional reading position**).

Dramatic monologue A text (usually a poem) in which the writer adopts the **persona** (see **narrative persona** below) of a speaker or character, for example 'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning.

Elegy A lament for the death or permanent loss of someone or something.

Epiphany A sudden moment of understanding or insight. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Angel Clare could be said to have such a moment in Brazil.

Epistolary novel A type of novel very popular in the late eighteenth century which appears to be made up of a sequence of letters and/or diary entries. An earlier draft of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* called *First Impressions* is thought to have been epistolary in form, and the final version still contains many letters sent by various characters.

Eponymous Relating to the main character after whom a work is named, e.g. *The Great Gatsby*.

Form The basic shape, type or design of a text (e.g. poem, novel, play), as distinct from its theme or content. See also **genre**.

Genre An identifiable text type or category (e.g. poem, novel, play) or a group of texts on the same basic subject (e.g. crime fiction). It follows from this that if the genre is teenage fiction, then vampire romance is one of its **subgenres**.

Gothic This term refers to texts which deal with dramatic supernatural themes, often set in isolated and gloomy locations and containing horrific and terrifying events.

Hamartia A fatal character flaw.

Hendiadys A pair of semantically linked words joined by 'and', expressing one concept, e.g. 'his foul and most unnatural murder'.

Hubris Human pride or over-reaching (originally by aspiring to divine status), resulting in downfall.

Hyperbole A rhetorical device which involves conscious and deliberate exaggeration for effect — 'hype'.

Idiolect The style of speech peculiar to an individual character and recognisable as such.

Imagery Figurative (as opposed to literal) descriptions designed to help the reader to remember something significant or recognise a likeness or comparison between two apparently dissimilar things. **Metaphors** are vivid comparisons which express a key idea about someone or something (e.g. calling someone a 'snake in the grass' to convey their sly nature). **Similes** are also figures of speech which compare two different things, but usually more overtly, as they almost always use 'like' or 'as' to draw attention to the connection being made (e.g. 'as black as ebony'). **Conceits** are deliberately challenging, ingenious and far-fetched comparisons (e.g. John Donne compares the relationship between a man and a woman as like that between the fixed and moving points of a pair

of compasses in 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', while Carol Ann Duffy compares love to an onion in 'Valentine').

Intertextuality The relationship between different texts; the ways in which one text echoes or refers to others.

Irony A humorous, cynical and/or satirical comment which opens up a gap between what is said and what is meant by subverting the literal meaning of a text.

Liminality A term which suggests marginality. A liminal character tends to live on the threshold or limits of a group or society, and as such may be seen as a threat by more conventional people.

Litotes The opposite of **hyperbole** (see above); a deliberate understatement, often used for ironic or comic effect. Jane Austen remarks of the marriage of the hero and heroine of *Northanger Abbey* that 'To begin perfect happiness at the respective ages of twenty-six and eighteen is to do pretty well.'

Malapropism The ludicrous misuse of a word in mistake for one resembling it.

Melodrama A sensational theatrical work with stereotyped characters.

Metaphor See **imagery**.

Metre The pattern of rhythm in a line of verse.

Mimesis See **diegesis**.

Mood is connected to state of mind, thoughts, feelings and atmosphere created within a text.

Motif A recurring pattern or image in a text which may be associated with a particular theme or character.

Narrative persona The persona is the invented voice which presents a narrative — the 'I' of a narrative which is not necessarily the voice of the author (e.g. Esther Summerson in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*).

Narrative voice The narrative voice is the voice which 'tells' a story. Some narratives are **third-person** (he/she/they) while others are **first-person** (I), although within these broad categories there are many subtle distinctions.

Narrator The person in a text who appears to be addressing the reader, such as Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Narrators can be **omniscient** or **unreliable**. An omniscient narrator tells the story but is not part of the action, despite knowing all there is to know about the characters and events. An unreliable narrator may distort, miss out, edit or alter the events he or she is reporting so that the reader comes to distrust him or her.

Objective correlative A term coined by the poet and critic T. S. Eliot in which objects, situations or events are used to signify characters or emotions.

Onomatopoeia Using 'sound effect' words which mimic the sound associated with what is being described (e.g. 'buzz' or 'crack').

Oppositional reading position Although we may infer a **dominant reading position** (see above) in a particular text, if we choose to adopt a different view of the text we are taking an oppositional reading position.

Parataxis The juxtaposition of clauses or sentences without connecting words, e.g. 'The cavalry arrived; the soldiers fled.'

Parody A text which mimics an existing source text, drawing attention to key features of its theme, form, language and/or structure for comic effect.

Pathetic fallacy Attributing emotions to inanimate objects, usually elements of nature, to represent the persona's feelings, e.g. describing the sky as melancholy.

Pathos The evocation of pity by a situation of suffering and helplessness.

Peripeteia A sudden reversal of fortune.

Picaresque narrative A story about the adventures of a criminal or roguish character.

Ploce Delayed repetition of the same word. Dickens repeats the word 'fog' repeatedly at the beginning of *Bleak House* to create a certain effect.

Polysyndeton Repeated use of conjunctions to link together words, clauses or sentences, e.g. 'The room was long and broad and high and smelt of sawdust.'

Proxemics Studying the distances between actors on stage, which indicate the relationships between the characters.

Register The level of formality of a written or spoken text. Register varies according to topic, audience, purpose and context.

Reification Describing a person or abstract concept as an object.

Reporting clause Indicates the speaker in a narrative.

Rhyme When words echo each others' sounds, usually at the end of a line of poetry, these sound patterns often highlight a similarity or contrast between the words in question. Specific sound patterns are known as 'rhyme schemes' and are denoted using letters of the alphabet (e.g. a sonnet comprised of three quatrains and a rhyming couplet would have an *abab cdcd efef gg* rhyme scheme).

Rhythm The pace and beat of the language within a text, which can profoundly affect the way in which it is read.

Romance A story of love and heroism, deriving from medieval court life and fairy tale.

Rule of three The technique of grouping three things together in a written or spoken text to heighten their impact.

Satire The use of humour to criticise aspects of human behaviour.

Simile See **imagery**.

Soliloquy A speech in which a character alone on stage says his or her thoughts aloud for the benefit of the audience. Conventionally, soliloquies reveal a character's true feelings, with the result that the audience gains inside knowledge unavailable to other characters in the play. The term comes from Latin, meaning 'solo speaker'.

Structure The way the telling of the story is ordered, arranged and organised in a particular text; the way in which its different parts work to build up the text as a whole (e.g. chapters in a novel, acts and scenes in a play or stanzas in a poem).

Subtext The possible underlying hidden message or meaning(s) below the surface of a text.

Symbol Something that signifies or embodies something else, often an object which stands for an abstract idea. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the Chinese lantern represents Blanche's wish to hide from reality.

Syntax The ordering, arrangement and relationship between words to form phrases and sentences.

Theme What the text is really about; the fundamental idea which makes the text a coherent entity.

Tone The way something is said or written can show what the speaker or writer is really thinking, especially when it indicates that their attitude is ironic or satirical, and that the true meaning of the text is hidden below the surface. It can help to think of 'tone of voice' here, and the many different ways in which words can be expressed.

Viewpoint The position, place or perspective from which we are encouraged (or forced) to consider the events and characters within a text. Our view may be deliberately restricted so that we only receive one point of view, while other potential viewpoints are misrepresented or missing altogether.