THE LONGMAN DICTIO
ONY OF LITERARY TERMS

Vocabulary for the Informed Reader

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Preface

The Longman Dictionary of Literary Terms is a user-friendly primer of critical terms, aimed at undergraduates getting their first taste of serious literary study. The definitions are concise, the citations pertinent and wide-ranging. All major schools of literary theory are presented clearly and fairly, but we have kept their definitions consistent in purpose and tone with those of other topics—no coy asides on postmodernism or poststructuralism. We present the basic tools of analysis—meter, metonymy, modernism, etc.—straightforwardly, letting the citations from ancient to contemporary literature add the spice of wit and the depth of genius. The goal is to provide students with a practical, instructive, and comprehensive guide to the language of literary study, one neither overly detailed nor facile in its explanations. As they practice the art of interpretation in introductory literature courses, students should regard this volume as a scholastic but accessible aide that eases their engagement with the humanities canon. In short, and on the premise that memory prefers the diverting to the dull, we hope that they absorb the definitions and enjoy the examples.

We understand the dislike many students feel for critical analysis over and above the simple pleasures of reading. We have assembled this little reference book trying not to cancel their joy with unnecessarily dry intellection. Critical terms may seem to them a pointless complication, and they wonder how knowing the meaning of Bildungsroman adds to their experience of a novel. They have a point, if the literature in mind is the ordinary product of mass culture, whose conventions are usually so scripted that they merit little attention. But what about the soliloquies of Shakespeare, the ballads of Wordsworth, the jagged metaphors of Emily Dickinson, the stream-of-consciousness of Faulkner? Works of literature with a thick verbal surface and a powerful theme summon a more adept reading knowledge. If they have no critical vocabulary to bring to the work, many readers will miss the refined joys of catching a playful irony, hearing an allusion to Greek myth, or noting a curious change in the sonnet structure.

Learning a critical vocabulary entails much more than knowing the meaning of individual terms. The vocabulary supplies the building materials for what educators call "domain knowledge," namely, the facts, texts, and skills peculiar to a discipline. An older name for it is humanitas, the sum of learning and sensibility that distinguishes a cultivated person and orients a liberal arts curriculum. Critical terms are an initial step in the process. Put the terms to use and other talents emerge. As they study the principles of different verse forms, for instance,
abstract and the "facts of modern science" too prosaic to bear the amplitude Whitman demands.

**Beat Generation** A group of American writers from the 1950s who made anti-Establishment, countercultural stances into a short-lived, but influential aesthetic movement. Regarding post-World War II U.S. culture as conformist, consumerist, and repressive, they advocated a life of experimentation and rebelliousness, combining religious mysticism, drugs, sexual liberation, and wayfaring into a "beat" sensibility. Though their freewheeling lives often resulted in dysfunction and despair, the writings they produced brought them fame and notoriety, and the Beats became established icons in the social landscape of the Fifties. Their members included Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsburg; leading Beat works are the novel *On the Road* (1957) and the free verse poem *Howl* (1956). The opening lines of *Howl* impart the intense experiential attitude, as well as the effusive rhetoric, of Beat expression:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starved by hypersensibility,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night, . . .

**Bildungsroman** [BIL-dungs-ROW-mawn] German for "novel of growth and development," the Bildungsroman is a subgenre that originated in eighteenth-century German fiction and spread across Europe and the United States. Sometimes called an apprenticeship novel, it depicts a youth who struggles toward maturity, forming a worldview or philosophy of life and leaving behind the concerns of adolescence. The development of the protagonist gives the Bildungsroman a coherent plot structure, and each character encountered and action undertaken proves a formative step in the youth's course toward adulthood. Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) are classic examples of the Bildungsroman in English.

**Biographical criticism** The practice of using the author's life to derive interpretations of the work. Although the work is understood as an independent creation, the biography of the author provides the material to underscore subtle but important meanings. Learning that Jorge Luis Borges was a librarian or that Mary Shelley's parents were two of the leading radicals of their era prompts readers to be sensitive to certain aspects of their work that they might otherwise miss or undervalue. Although literary theorists have assailed biographical criticism on methodological grounds, the biographical approach to literature has endured, mainly because of its advantages in illuminating literary works.

It is important to distinguish between biography and biographical criticism. Biography is a branch of historical scholarship. It yields a written account of a person's life. To establish and interpret the facts of an author's life, a biographer uses all the available evidence—not just personal documents such as letters and diaries, but also the stories and poems for the light they shed on the personal record. Biographical criticism, however, is not concerned with recreating the course of an author's life. It focuses on explicating the literary work by compiling relevant materials from the life.

Readers must use biographical interpretations cautiously. To treat the work solely as a reflection of the life is to reduce the multiple meanings and values of a work to one historical reality, the author's experience. Moreover, readers must examine biographical materials with a critical eye. Writers are notorious for revising the facts of their own lives. They often delete embarrassments and invent accomplishments, trading the truth for a preferred image. Family and friends cooperate and destroy or distort biographical materials after the author's death. John Cheever frequently told reporters about his sunny, privileged youth. After Cheever's death, biographer Scott Donaldson discovered a childhood scarred by a distant mother, a failed, alcoholic father, and nagging economic uncertainty. Once these facts came out, critics regarded Cheever's work in a different light.

An added danger, especially in the case of a famous writer such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, is that the life can overwhelm the work, leading critics to draw simple connections between this element in the work and that event in the life, with the latter taking priority. The texts are complicated and mystifying, but the real life events are (putatively) not, and so critics are tempted to invoke the latter to resolve the former. A savvy biographical critic remembers to base an interpretation on what is in the text itself. Biographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not cover it with life episodes.

**Biography** A factual account of a person's life, examining all available information and texts relevant to the subject. (See also Biographical criticism.)

**Black Box theater** See Flexible theater.

**Blank verse** The most common meter of unrhymed poetry in English, introduced by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, in the mid-sixteenth century in a translation of *The Aeneid*. The form is simple: five iambic feet per line (decasyllabic verse) and no rhymes (blank means "unrhymed."). Lacking stanza form and rhyme, blank verse is well-fitted to complex, lengthy subjects and many literary works of epic scope have been written in it, including John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850). The form also suits dramatic dialogue. Shakespeare's plays are written primarily in blank verse, as are Ben Jonson's. In other poetic forms involving meditative subjects, poets have used blank verse to nominate informally upon personal and philosophical matters—as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's conversation poem "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" (1797)—the unrhymed pentameter line allowing for casual, extemporaneous reflection. The modern era is considered a period of formal experimentation, but
Fearless, endangered Heaven's perpetual King,  
And put to proof his high supremacy,  
Whether upheld by strength, or chance or fate!  
Too well I see and rue the dire event  
That with sad overthrow and foul defeat  
Hath lost us Heaven..."  
(I. 128-36)

(See also Levels of diction.)

**Formalist criticism** A school of criticism that focuses on the form of the literary work, downplaying outside influences and information such as events in the writer's life. The foundational principle of formalism is that literature is a discrete form of expression whose significance lies in its form as much as in its content. Literary language, formalists argue, is such because the material and structural aspects of it (sound, rhythm, irony, etc.) are prominent enough to claim explicit attention. As one early-twentieth-century theorist put it, in a literary work the "linguistic patterns acquire independent value." To appreciate them properly, formalist critics treat the work not primarily as a social, historical, or biographical document, but as a literary artifact, one understood mainly by reference to its intrinsic literary features—style, imagery, genre, figures of speech, etc.

Because form is such a varied concept, there are many different methods of formalist criticism. Some formalisms focus upon narrative, analyzing the structure of the plot. Others concentrate on the poetic surface, searching for patterns and motifs in the concrete language of the verse. The New Critic Cleanth Brooks believed that the task of formalism is to explicate a poem's "structure of meanings," the general form "balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings." Hence, he analyzed the ways in which words, metaphors, and images were contextualized by the individual poem in which they appear—for instance, how the word "adoration" in a William Wordsworth sonnet accumulates multiple resonances when placed in juxtaposition to other words in the poem. What makes the Brooks's analysis formal is that the meanings uncovered arise from the relation between the words as written, not simply from the dictionary meaning of each one.

Although different approaches disagree about the grounds of literary value—for instance, some maintain that superior literary forms are organically unified, with all the parts cohering into a whole—formalists all agree that the meaning of a literary work is inextricable from (although not entirely reducible to) its form. Too often, they say, critics and students approach literature by trying to extract its content, thinking that an abstract paraprase is the goal of interpretation. This is to convert the literature into history, philosophy, commentary, or some other nonliterary mode, and to consider the literary aspects of the work as mere ornament. In the best examples of formalist criticism, the meaning of a poem is shown to be grounded in a dynamic connection of form and content. Too much form leads to a mechanical enumeration of figures of speech, metrical feet, etc., and too much content leads to a colorless summation of themes and concepts—both of them worthwhile but incomplete exercises.

**Found poetry** Poetry that purports to be constructed out of bits of found verse. The "recovered" fragments may form all or part of the final text, but the convention rests on their ability to suggest a missing context, the place from which the verse was "lost." Antecedents of found poems date back to the Renaissance; but the subgenre is essentially a twentieth-century development, practiced extensively by surrealist poets in France and by Americans Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, who includes (among other items) personal letters and a geological survey document in his long poem *Paterson* (1949).

**Français [FRAWN-glay]** An idiom of French characterized by the incorporation of English words, most of them taken from mass and commercial culture: for example, *weekend, burn-out, shopping, parking, Wallman, bonus, jogging*. Francais is considered an ominous phenomenon in French-speaking regions whose inhabitants worry about the integrity of their culture and the survival of their heritage.

**Free verse** From the French *vers libre*, free verse is poetry whose lines fall into no consistent meter. It may have internal and external rhyme, and it may contain intricate rhetorical patterns, but none of them are regular enough to mark it as a fixed form. Precursors of free verse poetry may be found in the works of Jean de La Fontaine (seventeenth-century France), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (eighteenth-century Germany), and Alexander Pushkin (nineteenth-century Russia), each of whom developed verse forms different from the conventional forms popular in their respective countries. But free verse didn't become a distinct verse form until the advent of Walt Whitman, who in *Leaves of Grass* (first edition 1855) conceived a revolutionary poetic medium. Whitman's verse lines are wholly inconsistent, his verse paragraphs without pattern. Internal rhyme, *anaphora*, *assonance*, *consonance*, and other rhetorical, poetic features abound in the poems:

*I fly the flights of a fluid and swallowing soul,  
My course runs below the soundings of plummets.  
(Song of Myself, 11.800-01)*

*O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,  
O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you,  
Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,  
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me.  
("Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking")*
But the patterns seem to emerge at random, as if the only order to the verse is the rhythm of Whitman's own fluctuating impulse. It isn't that Whitman breaks the verse protocols of different fixed forms such as the sonnet. Rather, his compositions disperse with any relationship with fixed form, imitative or transgressive. Herein lies the "freedom" of free verse, not that it has no organization at all, but that the organization is due to something other than systematic metrical. In Song of Myself, lines 756–70 all begin with "Where," lines 771–73 with "Through," and lines 774–78 with "Plea'd with the," but although the anaphora marks a pattern, the lines still count as free verse, because Whitman never repeats the pattern and he might just as well have altered it without breaking any metrical rule.

Whitman's work has deeply influenced twentieth-century poetry, and free verse has become a customary practice. While some Modernist poets (Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens) opted for regular metrics, others such as William Carlos Williams (in Paterson, 1949) and Ezra Pound (in Cantos, 1954) experimented with free verse in their most ambitious works. The Beat Generation poets employed free verse as a habit, and today free verse has no claims to unconventional expression. Indeed, it is the most standard convention in contemporary verse. (See also Open form.)

**Gender criticism** A school of criticism that examines how sexual identity influences the creation, interpretation, and evaluation of literary works. As an organized academic study, gender criticism sprang from the feminist movement in the Sixties, borrowing its premises from foundational texts such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (English trans. 1953) and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), and from woman-centered studies in sociology, psychology, and anthropology. As a first principle, it states that Western culture, including the tradition of literary study, is a patriarchal one based upon unexamined male-oriented assumptions, habits, and values. Gender critics see their work as correcting this imbalance by recasting gender as a socially-constructed norm, not a biological grounding, then analyzing the patriarchal mindset and combating its practices. Many previous interpretations of literature, they claim, pass off a patriarchal outlook as a general truth. For example, a half-century ago formalist critic Allen Tate emphasized the universality of Emily Dickinson's poetry, affirming how powerfully the language, imagery, and mythmaking of her poems combine to affect a generalized reader. But Sandra Gilbert, a leading feminist scholar, identifies attitudes and assumptions in Dickinson's poetry that are characteristically female, greatly attributable to the difficult position of an intellectual woman in nineteenth-century Massachusetts. Tate's hypothetical reader is (putatively) sexless; Gilbert's reader is sexually-determined. To feminists, Tate's approach is a repressive sexism.

Gilbert's approach (and gender criticism's in general) aims to lift the repression and recover women's experience as it was and is apart from the filter of the masculine outlook. First, it insists that "sexless" interpretation—that is, a gender-neutral approach—is impossible; second, it articulates the sexual meanings and identities embedded, distorted, and submerged in the history of literature and literary study.

In recent years, gender criticism has expanded beyond traditional feminist concerns to include sexual orientation in its conceptual arsenal. Whereas feminism focused upon male/female identity, current gender studies turn to heterosexual/homosexual identity as well. Critical practice explores the "compulsory heterosexuality" of Western culture, the course of gay and lesbian identities in the Western world from the ancients to the moderns, and similar historical and social themes. Gender theorists ponder the existence of liminal figures such as cross-dressers and "bitch" women, figures who blur the boundaries of sexual identity and show its ultimate fluidity.

The pitfall of gender criticism is the pitfall of all theories with a strong social commitment: it tends to predestine interpretation to a general conclusion. In unskilled hands, the literary work turns into an illustration of feminist beliefs, another case of sexism and repressed identity. Because it is a social agenda as much as it is a critical practice, gender criticism sometimes handles literary works crudely, translating them into customary feminist themes. But despite its biases, few challenge the fact that gender criticism has opened literary studies to new areas of research and enriched the meanings and values to be ascertained through critical interpretation. As a scholarly endeavor paralleling the Women's Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the recovery and reassessment of women's literature and history has placed traditional literatures and histories in a new light and yielded a more balanced understanding of the past.

**General English** The ordinary speech of educated native speakers. Most literary speech and writing is general English, the discourse one finds in The New York Times and The New Republic magazine, its dictation is more sophisticated than that of colloquial English, yet not as elevated as that of formal English. (See also Levels of diction.)

**Genre** [JAWN-ruh] A term for the different kinds of literary work—epic, novel, tragedy, etc. Classifications of literary genres are based upon their combination of literary form and subject matter. An epic is a genre whose literary form includes an episodic plot and a consistent, expansive verse form such as blank verse or heroic couplets, and whose subject matter includes a hero and grand martial adventures. Make the hero a comical character and the adventures set of petty incidents and you have the subgenre of mock-epic. In social terms, a genre implies a preexisting understanding between the artist and the reader about the purpose and rules of the work. A horror story, for example, combines the form of the short story with certain conventional subjects, styles,
High comedy

A comic genre directed to the intelligence and cultivation of spectators and readers. Whereas low comedy relies on slapstick, farce, and the like for its humor, high comedy relies on verbal sparring and urbane irony. Smart characters speak in clever repartee and express sophisticated sentiments. Wit prevails over clownishness. A man slipping on a banana peel is low comedy; a woman fending off the advances of a clever rake with subtle skepticisms that puncture his orneries is high comedy. The audience observes the action from a distance, appreciating the refined humor of the situation without becoming too engrossed in the characters' fates. The French playwright Molière and the English dramatists of the Restoration Period developed a special form of high comedy in the comedy of manners, focused on the social relations and amorous intrigues of sophisticated upper-class men and women conducted through pointed and ironic dialogue. In Love for Love (1695) by William Congreve, the opening conversation between a witty, but prodigate, lover and his servant marks the play as refined social comedy:

Valentine: Well, and now I am poor, I have an opportunity to be revenged on 'em all. I'll pursue Angelica with more love than ever, and appear more notoriously her admirer in this restraint than when I openly railed the rich fops that made court to her.

...And for the wits, I'm sure I'm in a condition to be even with them.

Jeremy: Nay, your condition is pretty even with theirs, that's the truth on't.

Valentine: 'I'll take some of their trade out of their hands.

Jeremy: Now heav'n of mercy continue the tax upon paper! You don't mean to write!

Valentine: Yes, I do; I'll write a play.

(See also Comedy.)

Historical criticism

The practice of analyzing a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it, a context that includes the artist's biography and milieu. Historical critics are less concerned with explaining a work's literary significance for today's readers than with recreating the historical moment in which it arose. Every literary work issues from a particular time and place, they insist, and until we can reconstruct that setting our knowledge of the work is incomplete. There have been so many social, cultural, and linguistic changes over time that some older texts are incomprehensible without scholarly assistance.

A historical analysis, then, requires extensive study beyond the text itself. A full interpretation ties all the materials of the text to relevant conditions of the time. Words must be aligned with their meanings back then, not with those of today. Basic events in the plot must be situated within contemporary social practices. For example, Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) portrays a merchant captain stranded on a remote island, and the situation has provided materials for everything from children's stories to Marxist economics. But a historical critic hesitates to lift the story out of its early-eighteenth-century setting. Such scholars would address the novel with information about late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century global politics, the slave trade, and European voyages of discovery and colonization. In the process, images and events in the novel that mean little to us emerge as significant elements.

Obviously, historical criticism enriches the significance of literary works. Without it, readers overlook casual allusions and meaningful references and misconstrue the polemical or satirical aspects. It also has an educational benefit in that it forces scholars and students to widen their studies, to incorporate historical, sociological, legal, religious, and economic material into their research. Finally, because of its empirical nature, historical criticism also serves to curb speculative interpretations of literature. If a speculative reading of a poem begins by noting a double-meaning in a particular word in the title, but historical analysis shows that the second meaning did not develop for another two hundred years, the speculative reading is discredited. While historical criticism may skirt the stylistic details that are highlighted by formalist criticism, its recovery of context is essential to the full understanding of literature.

Historical fiction

A type of fiction in which the narrative is set in another time or place, with marked attention to historical accuracy. In historical fiction, the author usually attempts to recreate a faithful picture of daily life during the period, letting it serve as the backdrop for the local action. Hence, historical fiction writers bear a double burden of telling a good story and getting the past right. For example, Robert Graves's I, Claudius (1934) depicts the lives of the ancient Roman ruling class in the early Imperial age, choosing famed personages from the past as its characters. On the other hand, the Romantic writer Sir Walter Scott invented his Waverley novels imaginary heroes, but placed them amidst the action of real historical events, such as the mid-eighteenth-century Jacobite uprisings against Hanoverian rule. The effect of such portrayals is to lend authenticity to the fiction, adding a layer of historical fact and imagery to the imaginary action; and readers are often compelled as much by the historical detail as they are by the invented plot and characters. Indeed, historians sometimes complain that people in the United States learn more about history by watching movies and reading narratives, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories of Puritan New England, than by reading straightforward historical scholarship.

Hubris [HOO-bris] Overweening pride, the insolence that leads to ruin, hubris was in the Greek moral vocabulary the antithesis of moderation or rectitude. Creon, in Sophocles' Antigone, is a good example of a character brought down by his hubris. Creon's decision to deny Antigone's brother Polyneices burial is a violation of the ancient unwritten law requiring kin to inter their dead.
outlooks are consolidated and passed from generation to generation, and in ritual enactments of myths community members experience their most profound understanding of life and existence. Scholars of myth take a more objective approach, regarding myth in social terms as a means of tribal unity, or in mental terms as a conversion of natural processes into human form. That is, they substitute for the truth or falsity of myth the instrumental or psychological value of it.

**Mythological criticism** The practice of analyzing literature by looking for recurring patterns of plot and character and relating them to the universal experiences of humanity. An interdisciplinary approach that combines anthropology, psychology, history, and comparative religion, mythological criticism assumes that human creativity has certain traits and impulses common to all cultures and epochs. These show up in motifs, heroes, villains, situations, and outcomes that appear in works of literature spanning vast times and places. How else to explain the presence of, say, quest motifs and creation stories in so many cultures? The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung named these fundamental elements archetypes, claiming that they evoked deep psychic realities. Jung believed that all individuals share a "collective unconscious," a set of primal memories common to the human race, existing "beneath" each person's conscious awareness. In his writings, Jung connected the collective unconscious with archetypal images (which often involve primordial phenomena such as the sun, moon, fire, night, and blood). Later literary critics adopted archetypal thinking while downplaying Jung's metaphysical speculations. Critic Northrop Frye defined the archetype in less occult terms as "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole." Because of its comparatist nature, mythological criticism links the individual text under discussion to a broader context of works that share an underlying pattern. In discussing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601), for instance, a critic might relate the Danish prince to other mythical sons avenging the deaths of their fathers, such as Orestes from Greek tragedy and Sigmund of Norse legend. Joseph Campbell took such comparisons even further; his compendious study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) demonstrates how certain mythic characters arise in virtually every culture on every continent.

Although mythological criticism enjoyed a vogue in the mid-twentieth century, few literary critics practice it today. But researchers working in other fields, especially anthropology, often engage in mythological criticism when they include literature in their scholarship.

**Naive narrator** See Innocent narrator.

**Narrative poem** A poem that tells a story. Narrative is one of the four traditional modes of poetry, along with lyric, drama, and didactic. Ballads and epics are two common forms of narrative poetry.

**Narrator** A voice or character that tells a story, providing readers with information and insight about characters and incidents in the narrative. A narrator's perspective and personality greatly affect how a story is told, and thus shape the meaning of the work. Speaking in the first or third person, a narrator may be reliable or unreliable, opinionated or nonjudgmental, a participant in the action or a storyteller outside the action. In either case, readers must determine the narrator's role in the presentation. For instance, in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), the narrator, Captain Gulliver, has undergone experiences that render him insane, and yet the entire story comes through his eyes. Such complications force readers not only to judge the materials of the narrative, but to examine the motives and limitations of the narrator himself. Added to the actions and figures is an all-too-human outlook. In other words, the distance between narrator and narrative is where ironies set in, where identifications of reader with storyteller are problematized, and where the significance of the events undergoes an initial interpretation. In narratives such as Edgar Allan Poe's tales (for example, "The Tell-Tale Heart," 1843), the real drama lies in the narrator's own head, not in the ostensibly events taking place before him. In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), we see a fundamental narrative distinction: Huck is a voluble, observant first-person narrator, but as a character interacting with other characters he is quiet and unassuming. (See also Innocent narrator, Nonparticipant narrator, Omniscient narrator, Participant narrator, Point of view, Unreliable narrator.)

**Naturalism** A school of fiction and drama in which the characters are presented as products of victims of environment and heredity. Influenced by evolutionary theory, naturalism portrays human beings as natural creatures set apart from other animals only by virtue of their intelligence. Society is a veneer of civility under which simmering urges of fear, lust, and acquisitiveness. No supernatural entities appear, and the world runs on an unforgiving natural law of cause and effect, the strong tending upon the weak. Plots move forward through the conflict of inner motive and outward circumstance, with characters thrown into social and economic milieu that more or less fail to meet their primitive needs.

Naturalism was at first formally developed by French novelist Émile Zola in the 1870s. In promoting naturalism as a theory of human behavior, Zola urged the modeling of naturalist literature and drama on the scientific case study. The writer, like the scientist, was to record objective reality in all its amoral abundance with detachment; events should be reproduced with sufficient exactness to demonstrate the strict laws of material causality. Important American Naturalists writing in fiction include Jack London, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser. *Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) opens with an exemplary naturalistic scene:

A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil's Row.
Psychological criticism The practice of analyzing literature in terms of the nature of literary genius, the psyche of a particular artist, and the psychic content of fictional elements, especially characters. Such approaches, proponents argue, disclose the underlying motivations and meanings of a literary work and lay bare the process of its creation. Although psychological elements have appeared in literary criticism for centuries, not until the work of Sigmund Freud does psychological criticism become a distinct and systematic school of thought. In keeping with his theory of human nature, Freud tied literary expression to wish fulfillment, infant sexuality, the unconscious, and repression, extending the meanings of language and symbols to their reflection of unconscious fears and desires. He also derived many psychoanalytic theories from literary sources: narcissism from the myth of Narcissus, the Oedipus Complex from the Oedipus story, Hamlet (1601), and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov (1879-80).

A pioneering instance of psychoanalytical criticism is Freud's brief essay, "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming" (1908). Here Freud explains the attraction of certain works of literature: they provide "compromise formations" by which repressed and taboo desires are expressed in sublimated forms, that is, forms that in one way or another bypass the shame and guilt the direct expression of those desires evokes. Popular works of literature are like collective fantasies, and it is the genius of the artist to discover plots, characters, etc., in which fantasies are realized and through which readers experience troublesome desires in pleasurable ways. In the make-believe space of literature, readers share the freedom of repressed wishes (for instance, a story in which a youth cleverly undermines an authority's command), but once the story ends they return to the restraints of social life. What would be upsetting in real life is pleasurable in fantasy life. Although the interpretation of literature as bits of fantasy yielding vicarious pleasure often yields predictable interpretations and foregone Freudian conclusions, handled judiciously psychological criticism sometimes provides explanations of creativity and the power of certain works that other schools of criticism cannot.

Since Freud's time, psychological criticism has become at once more eclectic and less formulaic. Carl Gustav Jung's mythological criticism was an early rival of Freudian thinking, and, more recently, reader-response criticism has drawn attention to the psychological mechanisms at work in the reader. The work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has been tremendously influential in Anglo-American literary theory since the late-Sixties, in part because Lacan set the acquisition of language at the center of psychic development, thus making every work of literature a psychically-meaningful statement.

Opposition to psychological criticism has come from many sides. The decline of Freud's reputation among clinicians and professional psychologists has hampered the prestige of Freudian interpretation, and the many instances of reductive, simplistic conversions of complex texts into routine psychic problems has annoyed literary critics sensitive to historical contexts and formal traits. Despite the attacks, however, psychological criticism of literature is bound to continue as long as psychology thrives as an academic discipline and a professional field. (See also Literary theory.)

Pulp fiction A type of formulaic and hastily-produced fiction originally distributed in cheap mass circulation magazines. The term pulp refers to the inexpensive wood-pulp paper developed in the mid-nineteenth century on which these magazines were printed. Most pulp fiction journals printed melodramatic genre pieces—westerns, science fiction, romance, horror, adventure tales, and crime stories.

Pun A play on words in which one word is substituted for another similar or identical sound, but of very different meaning. Shakespeare, a chronic punster, plays on his own name in Sonnet 135 (1609):

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will,  
And Will to boot, and Will in overplus. . .

In Romeo and Juliet (1596) as Mercutio lies dying from a stab wound, Romeo assures him "the hurt cannot be much." Mercutio replies with a pun on "grave": "No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door. But 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man" (III.i). In Hamlet (1601) when Claudius calls him into the light, Hamlet replies, "I am too much i' th' sun" (I.ii.67), a not-so-subtle remark upon his sense of filial responsibility. Although Shakespeare and other canonical writers indulge in puns, many critics have found it an inferior practice. Eighteenth-century critic Samuel Johnson considered punning Shakespeare's chief defect, and nineteenth-century essayist Charles Lamb called a pun a "pistol let off at the ear, not a feather to tickle the intellect"—that is, a blunt and easy joke.

Purgation See Katharsis.

Quantitative meter A meter constructed on the principle of vowel length rather than stress. Such quantities are difficult to hear in English, whose meters are based upon a syllable's intensity, not its duration. Classical Greek and Latin poetry is scanned in quantitative meters. (See also Accentual meter.)

Quatrain A stanza consisting of four lines—for example, the ballad stanza. The quatrain is the most common stanza form used in English-language poetry.

Rap A popular style of music that emerged in the 1980s, in which lyrics are spoken or chanted over a steady beat, usually sampled or prerecorded. Rap lyrics
are almost always rhymed and jarringly repetitive, articulating crude phrases over a heavy, syncopated rhythm. Originally an African American form, rap is now international, a popular poetry that mingles adolescent protest, street slang, and irreverence:

With vice I hold the mike device
With force I keep it away of course
And I'm keepin' you from sleepin'
And on the stage I rage
And I'm rollin'
To the poor, I pour it on in metaphors
No bluffin', it's nothin'
We ain't did before.

(Public Enemy, "Prophets of Rage"; 1988)

Reader-response criticism The practice of analyzing a literary work by describing what happens in the reader's mind as he or she assimilates the text. A school of criticism popular in the Seventies and Eighties, reader-response criticism assumes that no literary text exists independently of readers' interpretations, and that there is no single fixed interpretation of any literary work. Reading is a transaction of text and mind, the latter a subjectivity bringing dispositions, memories, habits, tastes, and beliefs to bear upon all its experiences. Because no two readers read alike, reader-response criticism recognizes the inevitable plurality of readings, treating reading as a creative process just as writing is a creative process. When an idiosyncratic interpretation comes along, David Bleich maintains, it reveals "not an error, but an important form of individual perception created by the particular biases of the reader." As Oscar Wilde remarked in the preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."

Reader-response criticism invokes common experience to back up its premises. A book one read as an adolescent often fails to impress the same reader many years later. The character one initially emulated now seems less admirable, while another character formerly disliked seems sympathetic. Likewise, the same book may appear entirely different to people of different backgrounds and cultures. A suburban teenager is likely to interpret a text quite differently than a middle-aged Native American. While other schools of criticism try to arbitrate these differences by appealing to the evidence of the text, reader-response critics preserve these differences, indeed, treating them as fundamental aspects of the text. The difficulty with such an approach, of course, is that it resists the selection of one interpretation over another—which is a necessary act in disciplinary settings (classrooms, editorial offices, etc.). In leveling interpretations to, precisely, "reader response," reader response criticism takes away the criteria of judgment that teachers, scholars, and editors need in order to carry out their work of grading, peer review, and manuscript acceptance.

Realism An attempt to reproduce faithfully the surface appearance of life, especially that of ordinary people in everyday situations. As a literary term, realism has two meanings, one general, the other historical. In a general sense, realism refers to the representation of characters, events, and settings in ways that the spectator will consider plausible. The setting is common and the characters are consistent, recognizable types. This sort of realism does not necessarily depend on elaborate factual description or documentation but more on the author's ability to draft plots and characters within a conventional framework of social, economic, and psychological reality. Fantastical and supernatural plots and unusual personages are excluded, as are strange situations and extreme emotional states. What happens in the narrative should be the kind of thing that happens in real life.

In a historical sense, Realism (usually capitalized) refers to a movement in nineteenth-century European and American literature and theater that rejected the idealism, elitism, and romanticism of earlier verse dramas and prose fiction in an attempt to represent life truthfully. Realist literature customarily focused on the middle class (and occasionally the working class) rather than the aristocracy, and it invoked social customs and economic detail to create an accurate description of ordinary human behavior. It considered romance mere escapism, and eschewed sentimentality as a phony intensification of ordinary circumstances to teary levels. Realism began in France with Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, Gustave Flaubert, and Guy de Maupassant, and then spread throughout the world. Other major Realists include Leo Tolstoy, William Dean Howells, Anton Chekhov, and Thomas Hardy.

Critics of Realism judged it both tedious and limited. "Why read a book portraying real life when you can observe real life by riding a train?" they asked, and writer Ambrose Bierce defined realism as "The art of depicting nature as seen by toads." But Howells insisted that the effort to put ordinary life and people into literature wasn't as simple as it seemed. A character in his realist novel The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885) declares:

Commonplace? The commonplace is just that, light, impalpable, aerial essence which they've never got into their confounded books yet. The novelist who could interpret the common feelings of commonplace people would have the answer to "the riddle of the painful earth" on his tongue.

Recognition In the plotting of tragedy, the moment of recognition occurs when ignorance gives way to knowledge, illusion to disillusion. As described in Aristotle's Poetics, this is usually a disclosure of blood ties or kinship between
presents one or two main characters involved in a single compelling action. One of the originators of the modern short story, Edgar Allan Poe, made the concentration of the short story an essential component of the reading experience:

in almost all classes of composition, the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance. It is clear, moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting . . . 
(Review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*; 1842)

So, he concluded, the short prose narrative must entail no more than two hours of reading time. This requires the writer to establish character and setting with economy, and to speed the plot toward its climax. Although the short story has precursors in the ancient genres of fable and *parable*, its modern form begins in the nineteenth century and has proven one of the most popular literary genres of our time.

**Simile** A major figure of speech, a simile is a comparison of two ostensibly unlike things, indicated by some connective, usually *like*, *as*, or *than*. An effective simile draws two things together, positing a resemblance that elucidates each thing in a fresh way. For example:

The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,  
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes . . .  
(Robert Frost, "Once by the Pacific"; 1928)

Unlike metaphor, *metonymy*, and *synecdoche*, however, which condense unlike things into a single verbal unit, simile often expands the comparison by elaborating the figurative side of the pairing. In another poem by Frost, "The Silken Tent" (1942), a simile begins with the first line:

She is as in a field a silken tent  
At midday when a sunny summer breeze  
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,  
So that in guys it gently sways at ease . . .

For another ten lines Frost details the figurative "tent" side of the description, the central pole, the cords, the breeze, and the pinnacle, but says nothing literal about "She." Such extended comparisons, "epic similes," date back to Homer and are a basic technique epic-poets use to achieve the grandiloquence of heroic verse.

**Situational irony** *See Irony.*

**Skene** [SKEE-nee] In classical Greek drama of the fifth century B.C.E., the temporary wooden stage building in which actors switched masks and costumes when changing roles. Its facade, with double center doors and possibly two side doors, served as the setting for action taking place before a palace, temple, cave, or other interior space.

**Sketch** A short, static, descriptive composition. Either fictional or nonfictional, a sketch usually delineates a person or place with a minimum of narrative, providing a kind of snapshot of a person or place. The informality and transience of the sketch are neatly rendered in the prefatory note to Washington Irving's *Sketch Book* of *Geoffrey Crayon*, Genl. (1819–23):

I have wandered through different countries and witnessed many of the shifting scenes of life. I cannot say I have studied them with the eye of a philosopher, but rather with the sauntering gaze with which humble lovers of the picturesque stroll from the window of one print shop to another; caught sometimes by the delineation of beauty, sometimes by the distortions of caricature and sometimes by the loveliness of landscape.

**Slack syllable** An unstressed syllable in a line of verse. (See also Prosody, *Rhythm.*)

**Slant rhyme** A rhyme in which the final consonant sounds are the same but the vowel sounds are different, as in letter and litter, bone and beam, priestess and justice. Slant rhyme may also be called *near rhyme*, *off rhyme*, or *imperfect rhyme*. Although slant rhyme fails to reach a complete rhyming sound, it should not be considered a flaw. Sometimes poets deliberately miss a perfect rhyme for reasons of effect or meaning, as in stanza 6 of Hart Crane’s "The Broken Tower" (1932):

My word I poured. But was it cognate, scored  
Of that tribunal monarch of the air  
Whose thigh embraces earth, strikes crystal Word  
In wounds pledged once to hope—cleft to despair?

Lines 2 and 4 make a perfect rhyme, lines 1 and 3 a slant rhyme. (See also *Consonance.*)

**Slapstick comedy** A kind of farce, featuring pratfalls, pie throwing, fisticuffs, and other boisterous action. It takes its name originally from the stick carried by the *commedia dell’arte*’s main servant type, Harlequin, who slapped other characters with it.

**Sociological criticism** The application of sociological methods to literary works. This entails studying empirically the social conditions in which the work was written and received. "Art is not created in a vacuum," critic Wilbur Scott observed, "it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering a community of which he is an important because articulate part." Adopting the premise that all art is socially-embedded, sociological
Soliloquy [so-LIL-o-kwe] In drama, a speech by a character alone onstage in which he or she utters his or her thoughts aloud. The soliloquy is a crucial part of drama, as it imparts a character's inner life and private motivations. For example, Act I, Scene II of Shakespeare's King Lear (1605) opens with Edmund standing alone with a letter in hand. He announces, "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound." He continues for another twenty lines, spewing his resentment at being born a bastard until the entrance of his father ends his speech.

Sonnet From the Italian sonetto ("little song"), the sonnet is a traditional and widely-used verse form, especially popular for love poetry. A fixed form of fourteen lines, traditionally written in iambic pentameter, sonnets may be divided into an octave (the first eight lines) and a sestet (the final six lines) or into three quatrains and a couplet, the former an Italian sonnet, the latter an English sonnet. The poem turns—that is, shifts in focus or mood—after, respectively, the eighth line or the twelfth line. Within this structure, poets work variations. William Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much With Us" (1807) turns in the middle of the ninth line, running the octave an extra two feet with "It moves us not." William Butler Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" (1924) has two turns, one at the traditional point after the eighth line and one in the middle of the eleventh line. Robert Graves's "Spoils" (1955) changes the structure of the sonnet entirely, breaking it up into two seven-line stanzas, one addressing the "spoils of war," the other the "spoils of love." The high point in English literary history for the sonnet occurred during the Elizabethan Period, when major writers composed lengthy sonnet cycles to their beloved. Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophel and Stella (1591) runs to 108 poems; Edmund Spenser's Amoretti (1595) to 89; Samuel Daniel's Delia (1592) to 60; Michael Drayton's Amours (1594) to 51 and his Idea (1619) to 63; and Shakespeare's sonnets (published in 1609 but some written as early as the 1580s) to 154.

Spenserian stanza The stanza of Edmund Spenser's epic poem The Faerie Queene (1590). Nine lines long and predominantly iambic, with the first eight measuring five feet and the last six feet (rhyme scheme: ababbcbcc), the Spenserian stanza has the advantage of being long enough to contain a single thought or image, yet short and flexible enough to allow a narrative to flow through it. The opening of Canto I of The Faerie Queene (1590) displays the stanza's combination of storytelling and lyric structure:

  A gentle knight was pricking on the plain,
  Y-clad in mighty arms and silver shield,
  Wherein old dents of deep wounds did remain,
  The cruel marks of many a bloody field;
  Yet arms till that time did he never wield
  His angry steed did chide his foaming bit,
  As much disdaining to the curb to yield.
  Full jolly knight he seemed and fair did sit,
  As one for knightly jousts and fierce encounters fit.