HANDBOOK OF LITERARY TERMS

For more information about a topic, turn to the page(s) in this book that are indicated on a separate line at the end of the entry. For example, to learn more about *Alliteration,* turn to page 560.

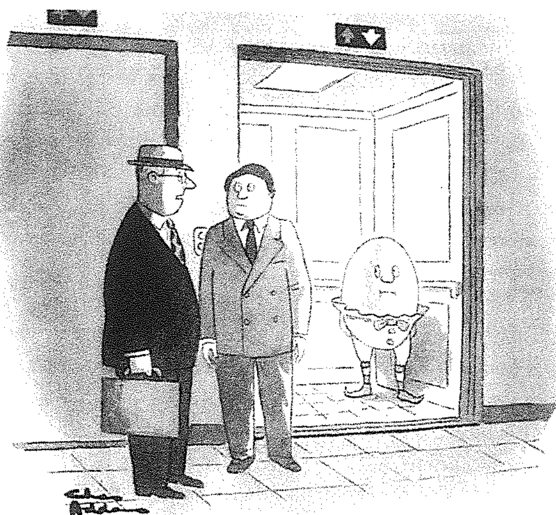
On another line are cross-references to entries in this handbook that provide closely related information. For instance, at the end of *Alliteration* is a cross-reference to *Assonance.*

ALLITERATION **Repetition of the same or very similar consonant sounds in words that are close together in a poem.** In this example the sounds "fl," "t," "n," and "w" are repeated in line 1, and the "s" sound is repeated in line 2:

> Open here I flung the shutter, when with
> many a flirt and flutter,
> In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly
> days of yore.
>
> —Edgar Allan Poe, from "The Raven"

See page 560.
See also *Assonance.*

ALLUSION **Reference to a statement, a person, a place, or an event from literature, history, religion, mythology, politics, sports, science, or pop culture.** In calling one of his stories "The Gift of the Magi" (page 202), O. Henry used an allusion to the wise men from the East called the Magi, who presented the infant Jesus with the first Christmas gifts.



"I think I'll wait for the next elevator."

Drawing by Chas. Addams; © 1988 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

ANALOGY **Comparison made between two things to show how they are alike in some respects.** During the Revolutionary War the writer Thomas Paine drew an analogy between a thief breaking into a house and the king of England interfering in the affairs of the American Colonies (*The Crisis,* No. 1). Similes are a kind of analogy. However, an analogy usually clarifies something, while a simile shows imaginatively how two different things are alike in some unusual way.

ANECDOTE **Very brief account of an incident.** Like parables, anecdotes often point out or illustrate a truth about life. For example, in her essay "Homeless" (page 461), Anna Quindlen uses an anecdote about a homeless woman to introduce a discussion of homelessness.

See pages 454, 458.

ARGUMENT **Form of persuasion that uses reason to try to lead a reader or listener to think or act in a certain way.** Like all persuasive writing, argument is aimed at winning people to the writer's point of view, but argument uses only facts and logical reasoning to achieve its purpose. (Other persuasive writing may use different methods, including an unashamed appeal to the emotions.) Debating societies use arguments to win points. Good arguments may be found in editorials and magazine articles.

See pages 452–453.
See also *Persuasion.*

ASIDE **Words that are spoken by a character in a play to the audience or to another character but that are not supposed to be overheard by the others onstage.** Stage directions usually tell when a speech is an aside. For example, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (page 735), there are two asides in the opening scene. Sampson speaks to Gregory in an aside, and Gregory responds to him in another aside as they pick a fight with the servants of the house of Montague. Sampson and Gregory hear each other's asides, and so do we in the audience, but Montague's servants do not.

See page 768.

ASSONANCE Repetition of similar vowel sounds that are followed by different consonant sounds, especially in words that are close together in a poem. The words *base* and *fade* and the words *young* and *love* are examples of assonance. The lines that follow are especially musical because of assonance:

> Seeing the snowman standing all alone
> In dusk and cold is more than he can bear.
> The small boy weeps to hear the wind prepare
> A night of gnashings and enormous moan.
>
> —Richard Wilbur,
> from "Boy at the Window"

See also *Alliteration, Onomatopoeia, Rhyme.*

AUTHOR The writer of a literary work.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY An account of the writer's own life. An example of a book-length autobiography is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (see page 357). Abraham Lincoln's "Not Much of Me" (page 348) is an example of an autobiographical essay.

See page 355.
See also *Biography.*

BALLAD Song that tells a story. Folk ballads are composed by unknown singers and are passed on for generations before they are written down. **Literary ballads,** on the other hand, are composed by known individuals and are written down in imitation of the old folk ballads. "Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley Randall (page 383) is a modern literary ballad. Ballads usually tell sensational stories of tragedy or adventure. They use simple language and a great deal of repetition and usually have regular rhythm and rhyme schemes, which make them easy to memorize.

BIOGRAPHY An account of a person's life, written or told by another person. A classic American biography is Carl Sandburg's multivolume life of Abraham Lincoln. Today biographies are written about movie stars, TV personalities, politicians, sports figures, self-made millionaires, even underworld figures. Biographies are among the most popular forms of contemporary literature. "Annie" (page 710) is an excerpt from Joseph P. Lash's biography of Helen Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan.

See page 355.
See also *Autobiography.*

BLANK VERSE Poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter. *Blank* means the poetry is not rhymed. *Iambic pentameter* means that each line contains five iambs, or metrical feet that consist of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (⌣ /). Blank verse is the most important poetic form in English epic and dramatic poetry. It is the major verse form in Shakespeare's plays.

See pages 740–741.
See also *Iambic Pentameter, Meter.*

CHARACTER Person in a story, poem, or play. Sometimes, as in George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm,* the characters are animals. In myths the characters are divinities or heroes who have superhuman powers, such as Poseidon and Athena and Odysseus in the *Odyssey* (page 889). Most often a character is an ordinary human being, like the grandmother in Toni Cade Bambara's "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" (page 267).

The process of revealing the personality of a character in a story is called **characterization.** A writer can reveal a character by

1. letting us hear the character speak
2. describing how the character looks and dresses
3. letting us listen to the character's inner thoughts and feelings
4. revealing what other characters in the story think or say about the character
5. showing us what the character does—how he or she acts
6. telling us directly what the character's personality is like: cruel, kind, sneaky, brave, and so on

The first five ways of revealing a character are known as **indirect characterization.** When a writer uses indirect characterization, we have to use our own judgment to decide what a character is like, based on the evidence the writer gives us. But when a writer uses the sixth method, known as **direct characterization,** we don't have to decide for ourselves; we are told directly what the character is like.

Characters can be classified as static or dynamic. A **static character** is one who does not change much in the course of a story. By contrast, a **dynamic character** changes as a result of the story's events.

Characters can also be classified as flat or round. A **flat character** has only one or two traits, and these can be described in a few words. Such a character has no depth, like a piece of cardboard. A **round character,** like a real person, has many different character traits, which sometimes contradict one another.

The fears or conflicts or needs that drive a character are called **motivation**. A character can be motivated by many factors, such as vengeance, fear, greed, love, even boredom.

See pages 120, 130–131, 144, 627–628.

CLIMAX Moment of great emotional intensity or suspense in a plot. The major climax in a story or play usually marks the moment when the conflict is decided one way or another.

See pages 32–33, 34, 258, 627, 732.

COMEDY In general, a story that ends happily. The hero or heroine of a comedy is usually an ordinary character who overcomes a series of obstacles that block what he or she wants. Many comedies have a boy-meets-girl plot, in which young lovers must face obstacles to their marrying. At the end of such comedies, the lovers marry, and everyone celebrates, as in Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In structure and characterization, a comedy is the opposite of a tragedy.

See also *Comic Relief, Tragedy.*

COMIC RELIEF Comic scene or event that breaks up a serious play or narrative. Comic relief allows writers to lighten the tone of a work and show the humorous side of a dramatic theme. In Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* (page 735), the nurse and Mercutio provide comic relief.

CONFLICT Struggle or clash between opposing characters or opposing forces. In an **external conflict,** a character struggles against an outside force. This outside force might be another character, or society as a whole, or something in nature. "The Most Dangerous Game" by Richard Connell (page 13) is about the external conflict between the evil General Zaroff and the hunter Rainsford. By contrast, an **internal conflict** takes place entirely within a character's own mind. An internal conflict is a struggle between opposing needs or desires or emotions within a single person. In James Hurst's "The Scarlet Ibis" (page 315), the young narrator struggles with an internal conflict—between love for his brother and hatred of his brother's disabilities. Many works, especially longer ones, contain both internal and external conflicts, and an external conflict often leads to internal problems.

See pages 12, 32–33, 626–627.

CONNOTATION All the meanings, associations, or emotions that a word suggests. For example, *skinny* and *slender* both have the same literal definition—"thin." But their connotations are completely different. If you call someone skinny, you are saying something unflattering. If you call someone slender, you are paying him or her a compliment. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell once gave a classic example of the different connotations of words: "I am firm. You are obstinate. He is a pigheaded fool." Connotations, or the suggestive power of certain words, play an important role in creating **mood**.

See page 451.
See also *Diction, Tone.*

COUPLET Two consecutive lines of poetry that rhyme. Alexander Pope wrote this sarcastic couplet for a dog's collar (Kew is a place in England):

> I am his Highness' dog at Kew;
> Pray tell me, Sir, whose dog are you?
>
> —Alexander Pope

Couplets work nicely for humor and satire because the punch line comes so quickly. However, they are most often used to express a completed thought. In Shakespeare's plays an important speech or scene often ends with a couplet.

See page 740.

DESCRIPTION Type of writing intended to create a mood or emotion or to re-create a person, a place, a thing, an event, or an experience. Description is one of the four major techniques used in writing. (The others are **narration, exposition,** and **persuasion.**) Description works by creating images that appeal to the senses of sight, smell, taste, hearing, or touch. Writers use description in all forms of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

See page 452.
See also *Imagery.*

DIALECT Way of speaking that is characteristic of a particular region or a particular group of people. Dialects may have a distinct vocabulary, pronunciation system, and grammar. In a sense, we all speak dialects; but one dialect usually becomes dominant in a country or culture and becomes accepted as the standard way of speaking. In the United States, for example, the formal

written language is known as standard English. (This is what you usually hear spoken by TV newscasters on the national channels.)

See page 277.

DICTION A writer's or speaker's choice of words. Diction is an essential element of a writer's **style**. Some writers use simple, down-to-earth, or even slang words (*house, home, digs*); others use ornate, official-sounding, or even flowery language (*domicile, residence, abode*). The **connotations** of words are an important aspect of diction.

See page 211.
See also *Connotation, Tone.*

DRAMA Story that is written to be acted for an audience. The action of a drama is usually driven by a character who wants something and takes steps to get it. The elements of a dramatic plot are **exposition, complications, climax,** and **resolution**.

See pages 626–630.

EPIC Long story told in elevated language (usually poetry), which relates the great deeds of a larger-than-life hero who embodies the values of a particular society. Most epics include elements of myth, legend, folk tale, and history. Their tone is serious and their language is grand. Most epic heroes undertake quests to achieve something of tremendous value to themselves or their people. Often the hero's quest is set in both heaven and hell. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (page 889) are the best-known epics in Western civilization. The great epic of ancient Rome is Virgil's *Aeneid,* which, like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* is based on events that happened during and immediately after the Trojan War.

See pages 878–884.

EPITHET Adjective or descriptive phrase that is regularly used to characterize a person, place, or thing. We speak of "Honest Abe," for example, and "America the Beautiful."

Homer created so many epithets in his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that his name is permanently associated with a type of epithet. The **Homeric epithet** in most English translations consists of a compound adjective that is regularly used to modify a particular noun. Three famous examples are "*wine-dark* sea," "*rosy-fingered* dawn," "the *gray-eyed* goddess Athena."

See page 953.

ESSAY Short piece of nonfiction that examines a single subject from a limited point of view. Most essays can be categorized as either **personal** or **formal**.

A **personal essay** (sometimes called an **informal essay**) generally reveals a great deal about the writer's personality and tastes. Its tone is often conversational, sometimes even humorous.

A **formal essay** is usually serious, objective, and impersonal in tone. Its purpose is to inform its readers about some topic of interest or to persuade them to accept the writer's views. The statements in a formal essay should be supported by facts and logic.

See page 399.

EXPOSITION Type of writing that explains, gives information, defines, or clarifies an idea. Exposition is one of the four major techniques used in writing. (The others are **narration, description,** and **persuasion**.) We find exposition in news articles, in histories, in biographies (and even in cookbook recipes). In fact, each entry in this Handbook of Literary Terms is an example of exposition.

Exposition is also the term for that part of a plot that gives information about the characters and their problems or conflicts.

See page 452.
See also *Plot.*

FABLE Very brief story in prose or verse that teaches a moral, or a practical lesson about how to get along in life. The characters of most fables are animals that behave and speak like human beings. Some of the most popular fables are those attributed to Aesop, who is supposed to have been a slave in ancient Greece.

See page 100.
See also *Folk Tale, Tall Tale.*

FIGURE OF SPEECH Word or phrase that describes one thing in terms of another and is not meant to be understood on a literal level. Figures of speech, or **figurative language,** always involve some sort of imaginative comparison between seemingly unlike things.

Some 250 different types of figures of speech have been identified. The most common are the **simile** ("I wandered lonely as a cloud"), the **metaphor** ("Fame is a bee"), and **personification** ("The wind stood up and gave a shout").

See pages 520–521.
See also *Metaphor, Personification, Simile.*

FLASHBACK Scene in a movie, play, short story, novel, or narrative poem that interrupts the present action of the plot to flash backward and tell what happened at an earlier time. That is, a flashback breaks the normal time sequence of events in the narrative, usually to give the readers or viewers some background information that helps them make sense of the story. Much of the *Odyssey* (page 889) is told in the form of a flashback, as Odysseus describes his previous adventures to the Phaeacian court of King Alcinous. Flashbacks are extremely common storytelling devices in movies. In fact, the word *flashback* comes from film criticism, and it has spread to the rest of literature.

See page 686.

FOIL Character who is used as a contrast to another character. A writer uses a foil to accentuate and clarify the distinct qualities of two characters. The word *foil* is also used for a thin sheet of shiny metal that is placed beneath a gem to intensify its brilliance. A character who is a foil, like the metal behind the gem, sets off or intensifies the qualities of another character. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (page 735), the cynical, sophisticated Mercutio is a foil to the romantic, naive Romeo.

See page 762.

FOLK TALE Story that has no known author and was originally passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth. Unlike myths, which are about gods and heroes, folk tales are usually about ordinary people, as in "The Talking Skull" (page 247). Folk tales tend to travel, and you'll often find the same motifs—elements such as characters, images, and story lines—in the tales of different cultures. For example, there are said to be nine hundred versions of the folk tale about Cinderella.

See page 244.
See also *Fable, Tall Tale.*

FORESHADOWING The use of clues to hint at events that will occur later in a plot. Foreshadowing is used to build suspense and, sometimes, anxiety in the reader or viewer. In a drama the gun found in a bureau drawer in Act I is likely to foreshadow violence later in the play. In "The Cask of Amontillado" (page 233), Poe uses foreshadowing skillfully. For example, when Montresor produces a trowel from beneath his cloak, he is foreshadowing the means he will use to murder his enemy. When later he begins to build a wall around Fortunato, we remember that trowel.

See page 50.

FREE VERSE Poetry that does not have a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Poets writing in free verse try to capture the natural rhythms of ordinary speech. To create its music, free verse may use **internal rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, refrain,** and **parallel structure**. For an example of a poem written in free verse, read "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" (page 496).

See page 555.
See also *Meter, Rhythm.*

HAIKU Japanese verse form consisting of three lines and, usually, seventeen syllables (five in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third). The writer of a haiku uses association and suggestion to describe a particular moment of discovery or enlightenment. A haiku often presents an image of daily life that relates to a particular season.

See page 499.

HYPERBOLE Figure of speech that uses exaggeration to express strong emotion or to create a comic effect. Writers often use hyperbole (hī·pʉr′bə·lē), called **overstatement,** to intensify a description or to emphasize the essential nature of something. If you say that a limousine is as long as an ocean liner, you are using hyperbole.

See page 375.

IAMBIC PENTAMETER Line of poetry that contains five iambs. An **iamb** is a metrical foot, or unit of measure, consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (⏑ ′). *Pentameter* comes from the Greek

penta (five) and *meter* (measure). Here is one iamb: *arise*. Here is a line measuring five iambs:

> But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
>
> —William Shakespeare, from *Romeo and Juliet*

Iambic pentameter is by far the most common verse line in English poetry.

See pages 740–741.
See also *Blank Verse, Meter, Rhythm.*

IDIOM Expression peculiar to a particular language that means something different from the literal meaning of each word. "It's raining cats and dogs" and "We heard it through the grapevine" are idioms of American English. One of the difficulties of translating a work from another language is translating the idioms.

IMAGERY Language that appeals to the senses. Most images are visual—that is, they create pictures in the reader's mind by appealing to the sense of sight. Images can also appeal to the senses of sound, touch, taste, or smell or even to several senses at once. Imagery is an element in all types of writing, but it is especially important in poetry. The following lines contain images that make us see, hear, and even smell what the speaker experiences as he travels to meet someone he loves.

> Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
> Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
> A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
> And blue spurt of a lighted match . . .
>
> —Robert Browning, from "Meeting at Night"

See pages 492–493.
See also *Description.*

INVERSION Reversal of the normal word order of a sentence. The elements of a standard English sentence are subject, verb, and complement, and in most sentences that is the order in which they appear. (*Ray rowed the boat.*) Writers use inversion for emphasis and variety. They may also use it for more technical reasons—to create end rhymes or to accommodate a given meter. In a statement about Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, the historian Bruce Catton wrote, "Daring and resourcefulness they had too. . . ." Catton inverted the order of the parts of the sentence so that the important words (*daring* and *resourcefulness*) came first.

IRONY Contrast or discrepancy between expectation and reality—between what is said and what is really meant, between what is expected to happen and what really does happen, or between what appears to be true and what is really true.

In **verbal irony,** a writer or speaker says one thing but really means something completely different. If you call a clumsy basketball player "the new Michael Jordan," you are using verbal irony. The murderer in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (page 233) is using verbal irony when he says to his unsuspecting victim, ". . . your health is precious."

Situational irony occurs when there is a contrast between what would seem appropriate and what really happens or when there is a contradiction between what we expect to happen and what really does take place.

Dramatic irony occurs when the audience or the reader knows something important that a character in a play or story does not know. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (page 735), we know, but Romeo *does not,* that when he finds Juliet in the tomb, she is drugged, not dead. Thus we feel a terrible sense of dramatic irony as we watch Romeo kill himself upon discovering her body.

See pages 202, 212–213.
See also *Satire, Tone.*

LYRIC POETRY Poetry that does not tell a story but is aimed only at expressing a speaker's emotions or thoughts. Most lyrics are short, and they usually imply, rather than directly state, a single strong emotion. The term *lyric* comes from the Greek. In ancient Greece, lyric poems were recited to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument called a lyre. Today poets still try to make their lyrics "sing," but they rely only on the musical effects they create with words (such as **rhyme, rhythm,** and **onomatopoeia**).

See also *Sonnet.*

METAPHOR Figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unlike things, in which one thing becomes another thing without the use of the word *like, as, than,* or *resembles.* The poet

Robert Burns's famous comparison "O my love is like a red, red rose" is a simile. If he had written "O my love *is* a red, red rose" or "O my love bursts into bloom," he would have been using a metaphor.

Notice that the comparison in the second metaphor above is implied, or suggested, rather than directly stated, as it is in the first metaphor. An **implied metaphor** does not tell us directly that one thing *is* something else. Instead, it uses words that suggest the nature of the comparison. The phrase "bursts into bloom" implies that the feeling of love is like a budding flower.

An **extended metaphor** is a metaphor that is extended, or developed, over several lines of writing or even throughout an entire poem.

A **dead metaphor** is a metaphor that has been used so often that we no longer realize it is a figure of speech—we simply skip over the metaphorical connection it makes. Examples of dead metaphors are *the roof of the mouth, the eye of the storm, the heart of the matter,* and *the arm of a chair.*

A **mixed metaphor** is the inconsistent mixture of two or more metaphors. Mixed metaphors are a common problem in bad writing, and they are often unintentionally funny. You are using a mixed metaphor if you say "Put it on the back burner and let it germinate" or "That's a very hard blow to swallow" or "Let's set sail and get this show on the road."

See pages 520–521, 858.
See also *Figure of Speech, Personification, Simile.*

METER Generally regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry. When we want to indicate the metrical pattern of a poem, we mark the stressed syllables with the symbol (ʹ) and the unstressed syllables with the symbol (˘). Indicating the metrical pattern of a poem in this way is called **scanning** the poem, or **scansion** (skan′shən). Notice the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in the first four lines of this poem:

/ ˘ / ˘ ˘ / ˘ /
Slowly, silently, now the moon
/ ˘ / ˘ ˘ / ˘ /
Walks the night in her silver shoon;
/ ˘ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
This way, and that, she peers, and sees
/ ˘ / ˘ ˘ / ˘ /
Silver fruit upon silver trees. . . .

—Walter de la Mare, from "Silver"

See pages 554–555.
See also *Blank Verse, Iambic Pentameter.*

MYTH Traditional story that is rooted in a particular culture, is basically religious, and usually serves to explain a belief, a ritual, or a mysterious natural phenomenon. Most myths grew out of religious rituals, and almost all of them involve the influence of gods on human affairs. Every culture has its own mythology. For many centuries the myths of ancient Greece and Rome were very influential in the Western world.

See pages 878–884.

NARRATION Type of writing or speaking that tells about a series of related events. Narration is one of the four major techniques used in writing. (The others are **description, exposition,** and **persuasion.**) Narration can be any length, from a brief paragraph to an entire book. It is most often found in short stories, novels, epics, and ballads. But narration is also used in any piece of nonfiction that relates a series of events that tell what happened—such as a biography, essay, or news story—and even in a scientific analysis or a report of a business meeting.

See page 452.
See also *Point of View.*

NONFICTION Prose writing that deals with real people, things, events, and places. The most popular forms of nonfiction are **biography** and **autobiography**. Other examples include essays, newspaper stories, magazine articles, historical writing, scientific reports, and even personal diaries and letters.

See page 342.

NOVEL Fictional prose narrative usually consisting of more than fifty thousand words. In general, the novel uses the same basic literary elements as the short story (**plot, character, setting, theme,** and **point of view**) but develops them more fully. Many novels have several subplots, for instance. Modern writers often do away with one or more of the novel's traditional elements. Some novels today are basically character studies, with only the barest, stripped-down story lines.

ONOMATOPOEIA (än′ō·mat′ō·pē′ə) **Use of a word whose sound imitates or suggests its meaning.** Onomatopoeia is so natural to us that we begin using it instinctively as children. *Crackle, pop, fizz, click, zoom,* and

chirp are examples of onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia is an important element in the music of poetry.

> And in the hush of waters was the sound
> Of pebbles, rolling round;
> Forever rolling, with a hollow sound:
>
> And bubbling seaweeds, as the waters go,
> Swish to and fro
> Their long cold tentacles of slimy gray. . . .
>
> —James Stephens, from "The Shell"

See page 560.
See also *Alliteration, Assonance.*

PARADOX **Statement or situation that seems to be a contradiction but reveals a truth.** Paradoxes in literature are designed to make readers stop and think. They often express aspects of life that are mysterious, surprising, or difficult to describe. When O. Henry, in "The Gift of the Magi" (page 202), refers to the impoverished Della and Jim as "one of the richest couples on earth," he is stating a paradox.

PARALLELISM **Repetition of words, phrases, or sentences that have the same grammatical structure or that state a similar idea.** Parallelism, or **parallel structure,** helps make lines rhythmic and memorable and heightens their emotional effect:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way. . . .
>
> —Charles Dickens, from *A Tale of Two Cities*

See pages 467, 721.

PERSONIFICATION **Kind of metaphor in which a nonhuman thing or quality is talked about as if it were human.** Here are a few lines in which poetry itself is personified—that is, it is described as behaving and feeling the way people do:

> This poetry gets bored of being alone,
> it wants to go outdoors to chew on the
> winds,
> to fill its commas with the keels of
> rowboats. . . .
>
> —Hugo Margenat, from "Living Poetry"

See pages 520–521, 858.
See also *Figure of Speech, Metaphor.*

PERSUASION **Type of writing that is aimed at leading the reader or listener to think or act in a certain way.** Examples of persuasive writing are found in newspaper editorials, in speeches, and in many essays and articles. Persuasion can use language that appeals to the emotions, or it can use logic to appeal to reason. When persuasive writing appeals to reason and not to the emotions, it is called **argument**.

See pages 452–453.
See also *Argument.*

PLOT **Series of related events that make up a story or drama.** Plot is what happens in a story, novel, or play. An outline showing the "bare bones" of a plot would include the story's **basic situation,** or **exposition;** the **conflict,** or problem; the **main events** (including **complications**); the final **climax;** and **resolution,** or **denouement.**

See pages 32–33, 626–630.
See also *Exposition.*

POETRY **Type of rhythmic, compressed language that uses figures of speech and imagery to appeal to the reader's emotions and imagination.** The major forms of poetry are the **lyric,** the **epic,** and the **ballad.** Beyond this, poetry is difficult to define, though many readers feel it is easy to recognize. The poet Wallace Stevens, for example, once described poetry as "a search for the inexplicable."

See page 488.
See also *Ballad, Epic, Lyric Poetry.*

POINT OF VIEW Vantage point from which a writer tells a story. In broad terms there are three possible points of view: omniscient, first-person, and third-person limited.

In the **omniscient** (or "all-knowing") **point of view,** the person telling the story knows everything there is to know about the characters and their problems. This all-knowing narrator can tell us about the past, the present, and the future of all the characters. He or she can even tell us what the characters are thinking. The narrator can also tell us what is happening in other places. In the omniscient point of view, the narrator is not in the story at all. In fact, the omniscient narrator is like a god telling the story.

In the **first-person point of view,** one of the characters is actually the narrator telling the story, using the pronoun *I*. We get to know this narrator very well, but we can know only what this character knows, and we can observe only what this character observes. All of our information about the events in the story must come from this one character.

In the **third-person limited point of view,** the narrator, who plays no part in the story, zooms in on the thoughts and feelings of just one character. With this point of view, we observe the action through the eyes and with the feelings of this one character.

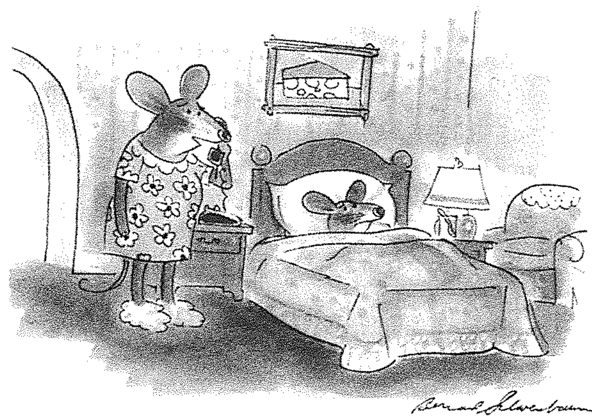
See pages 218–219, 220.

PROTAGONIST Main character in fiction or drama. The protagonist is the character we focus our attention on, the person who sets the plot in motion. The character or force that blocks the protagonist is the **antagonist**. Most protagonists are rounded, dynamic characters who change in some important way by the end of the story, novel, or play. The antagonist is often but not always the villain in the story. Similarly, the protagonist is often but not always the hero.

See page 626.

PUN Play on the multiple meanings of a word or on two words that sound alike but have different meanings. Most often puns are used for their humorous effects; they are used in jokes all the time. ("What has four wheels and flies?" Answer: "A garbage truck.") Shakespeare was one of the great punsters of all time. The servants in *Romeo and Juliet* (page 735) make crude puns as they clown around at the start of the play. Later, Romeo and his friend Mercutio trade wits in a series of more sophisticated puns. Since word meanings change so quickly, some of Shakespeare's puns are barely understandable to us today, just as puns popular today may be puzzling to people a hundred years from now.

See pages 489, 524, 858.



"Does the doctor make mouse calls?"

Drawing by Bernard Schoenbaum; © 1991 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

REFRAIN Repeated word, phrase, line, or group of lines. Though refrains are usually associated with songs and poems, they are also used in speeches and other forms of literature. Refrains are most often used to build rhythm, but they may also provide commentary or build suspense.

See page 574.

RHYME Repetition of accented vowel sounds, and all sounds following them, in words that are close together in a poem. *Choice* and *voice* are rhymes, as are *tingle* and *jingle*.

End rhymes occur at the ends of lines. In this poem the words *defense/tense, know/go,* and *Spain/Maine* are end rhymes:

Old Mary

My last defense
Is the present tense.
It little hurts me now to know
I shall not go
Cathedral-hunting in Spain
Nor cherrying in Michigan or Maine.

—Gwendolyn Brooks

Internal rhymes occur in the middle of a line. This line has an internal rhyme (*dreary* rhymes with *weary*):

> Once upon a midnight dreary, while I
> pondered, weak and weary
>
> —Edgar Allan Poe, from "The Raven"

When two words have some sound in common but do not rhyme exactly, they are called **approximate rhymes** (or **near rhymes,** or **slant rhymes**). In Brooks's poem on this page, the words *now* and *know* are approximate rhymes.

The pattern of rhymes in a poem is called a **rhyme scheme**. The rhyme scheme of a stanza or poem is indicated by the use of a different letter of the alphabet for each rhyme. For example, the rhyme scheme of Brooks's poem is *aabbcc.*

See pages 559–560.

RHYTHM Musical quality in language produced by repetition. Rhythm occurs naturally in all forms of spoken and written language. The most obvious kind of rhythm is produced by **meter,** the regular repetition of stressed and unstressed syllables found in some poetry. But writers can also create rhythm by using rhymes, by repeating words and phrases, and even by repeating whole lines or sentences. This stanza by Walt Whitman is written in free verse and so does not follow a metrical pattern. Yet the lines are rhythmical because of Whitman's repeated use of certain sentence structures, words, and sounds.

> Give me the splendid silent sun with all his
> beams full-dazzling,
> Give me juicy autumnal fruit ripe and red
> from the orchard,
> Give me a field where the unmowed grass
> grows,
> Give me an arbor, give me the trellised grape,
> Give me fresh corn and wheat, give me
> serene-moving animals teaching content,
> Give me nights perfectly quiet as on high
> plateaus west of the Mississippi, and I
> looking up at the stars. . . .
>
> —Walt Whitman, from "Give Me the
> Splendid Silent Sun"

See pages 554–555.
See also *Meter.*

SATIRE Type of writing that ridicules something—a person, a group of people, humanity at large, an attitude or failing, a social institution—in order to reveal a weakness. Most satires are an attempt to convince us of a point of view or to persuade us to follow a course of action. They do this by pointing out how the opposite point of view or action is ridiculous or laughable. Satire often involves **exaggeration**—the act of overstating something to make it look worse than it is. For example, in the satiric short story "Harrison Bergeron" (page 133), Kurt Vonnegut exaggerates the conditions in his imagined future society so that we can see the flaws in our own society.

See page 132.
See also *Irony, Tone.*

SETTING The time and place of a story or play. Most often the setting of a narrative is established early in the story. For example, in the fourth paragraph of "The Cask of Amontillado" (page 233), Edgar Allan Poe tells his readers, "It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season. . . ." Setting often contributes to a story's emotional effect. In "The Cask of Amontillado" the descriptions of the gloomy Montresor palace, with its damp catacombs full of bones, help create the story's mood of horror. Setting can also contribute to the conflict in a story, as the harsh environment does in Dorothy Johnson's "A Man Called Horse" (page 167). Setting can also be used to reveal character, as it does in Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory" (page 145).

See pages 164–165, 166.

SHORT STORY Short, concentrated, fictional prose narrative. Some say Edgar Allan Poe was the first short-story writer. He was also one of the first to attempt to define the short story. He said "unity of effect" is crucial, meaning that a short story ought to concentrate on a single purpose. Short stories are usually built on a plot that consists of these "bare bones": the **basic situation** or **exposition, complications, climax,** and **resolution**. Years ago, most short stories were notable for their strong plots. Today's short-story writers tend to be more interested in character.

See page 2.

SIMILE Figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unlike things, using a word such

as *like, as, resembles,* or *than.* Shakespeare, in one of his famous sonnets, uses a simile with an ironic twist, comparing two things that are *not* alike:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun

We would expect a love poem to compare the light in a lover's eyes to the bright sun. But instead, Shakespeare puts a twist into a common comparison—in order to make a point about the extravagant similes found in most love poems of his day.

See pages 520–521, 858, 884, 927.
See also *Figure of Speech, Metaphor.*

SOLILOQUY An unusually long speech in which a character who is onstage alone expresses his or her thoughts aloud. The soliloquy is a very old dramatic convention, in which the audience is supposedly overhearing the private thoughts of the character. Perhaps the most famous soliloquy is the "To be or not to be" speech in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet.* There are also several soliloquies in *Romeo and Juliet,* including Friar Laurence's soliloquy at the opening of Act II, Scene 3 (page 774); Juliet's at the end of Act IV, Scene 3 (page 824); and Romeo's in Act V, Scene 3 (page 841).

SONNET Fourteen-line lyric poem that is usually written in iambic pentameter and that has one of several rhyme schemes. The oldest kind of sonnet is called the **Italian sonnet,** or **Petrarchan sonnet,** after the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch. The first eight lines, or **octet,** of the Italian sonnet pose a question or problem about love or some other subject. The concluding six lines, or **sestet,** are a response to the octet. The octet has the rhyme scheme *abba abba;* the sestet has the rhyme scheme *cde cde.*

Another important sonnet form, widely used by Shakespeare, is called the **Shakespearean sonnet.** It has three four-line units, or **quatrains,** followed by a concluding two-line unit, or **couplet.** The most common rhyme scheme for the Shakespearean sonnet is *abab cdcd efef gg.*

See also *Lyric Poetry.*

SPEAKER Voice that is talking to us in a poem. Sometimes the speaker is identical with the poet, but often the speaker and the poet are not the same. The poet may be speaking as child, a woman, a man, a whole people, an animal, or even an object. For example, the speaker of "The Lesson of the Moth" by Don Marquis (page 140) is a cockroach.

See page 526.

STANZA Group of consecutive lines in a poem that form a single unit. A stanza in a poem is something like a paragraph in prose: It often expresses a unit of thought. A stanza may consist of any number of lines. The word *stanza* is Italian for "stopping place" or "place to rest." Emily Dickinson's poem "I Never Saw a Moor" (page 522) consists of two four-line stanzas, or **quatrains,** each one expressing a unit of thought.

STEREOTYPE Fixed idea or conception of a character that does not allow for any individuality. Stereotypes are often based on racial, social, religious, sexist, or ethnic prejudices. Some common stereotypes are the ideas that all football players are dumb, all New Yorkers are rude, all Texans are rich. Stereotypes are often used in comedies for laughs.

SUSPENSE Uncertainty or anxiety the reader feels about what is going to happen next in a story. In "The Most Dangerous Game" (page 13) our curiosity is aroused at once when we hear about Ship-Trap Island and sailors' fear of it. When Rainsford lands on that very island and is hunted by the sinister General Zaroff, suspense keeps us on the edge of our seats. We wonder: Will Rainsford be another victim who is hunted down and killed by the evil and weird Zaroff?

See page 80.
See also *Foreshadowing, Plot.*

SYMBOL Person, place, thing, or event that stands for itself and for something beyond itself as well. For example, a scale has a real existence as an instrument for measuring weights, but it also is used as a symbol of justice. Other familiar symbols are the cross that symbolizes Christianity, the six-pointed star that symbolizes Judaism, and the bald eagle that symbolizes the United States. These are symbols that most people know, but in literature, writers sometimes create new symbols that can be understood only from their context. One of the great symbols in literature is Herman Melville's great

white whale, used as a symbol of the mystery of evil in the novel *Moby-Dick*.

See page 314.

TALL TALE Exaggerated, far-fetched story that is obviously untrue but is told as though it should be believed. Most tall tales are humorous. Tall tales are especially popular in the United States. As tall tales are passed on, they often get taller and taller—more and more exaggerated. The tales told about Paul Bunyan, the superheroic logger of the Northern forests, are tall tales. Paul dug the Great Lakes so that his ox, Babe, could have a watering trough. The griddle he used to make his morning pancakes was two city blocks wide. (To grease the griddle, five men skated on it with slabs of bacon on their feet.) And so on and so on. The tales about old Paul get taller and taller each time they are retold!

See also *Folk Tale*.

THEME Central idea of a work of literature. A theme is not the same as a subject. The subject of a work can usually be expressed in a word or two: love, childhood, death. The theme is the idea the writer wishes to reveal *about* that subject. The theme is something that can be expressed in at least one complete sentence. For example, one theme of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (page 735) might be stated as Love is more powerful than family loyalty. Theme is not usually stated directly in a work of literature. Most often, the reader has to think about all the elements of the work and use them to make an inference, or educated guess, about what its theme is.

See pages 264–265, 266, 292, 303.

TONE Attitude a writer takes toward the audience, a subject, or a character. Tone is conveyed through the writer's choice of words and details. For example, Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory" (page 145) is affectionate and nostalgic in tone. Charles Kuralt's "Misspelling" (page 469) is humorous and lightly mocking in tone.

See pages 586–587.
See also *Connotation, Diction, Irony, Satire*.

TRAGEDY Play, novel, or other narrative that depicts serious and important events in which the main character comes to an unhappy end. In a tragedy the main character is usually dignified and courageous. His or her downfall may be caused by a character flaw, or it may result from forces beyond human control. The tragic hero or heroine usually wins some self-knowledge and wisdom, even though he or she suffers defeat, perhaps even death.

See page 732.
See also *Comedy*.