

# AP ENGLISH GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

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## 1. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

There are several kinds of figurative language, also known as “figures of speech,” with **metaphor** and **simile** being the most common and best known. Other figures of speech include:

- **hyperbole** (deliberate overstatement, i.e., calling a paper cut “a gaping wound.”)
- **understatement** (the opposite of hyperbole, i.e., calling a gaping wound “a paper cut.”)
- **oxymoron** (apparent contradiction, i.e., calling love “a sweet anguish.”)
- **personification** (giving human characteristics to a nonhuman object, i.e., “the laughing brook,” or presenting an abstraction as a person: i.e., Justice as a blindfolded woman holding a set of scales.)
- **synecdoche** (substituting a part for a whole, i.e., referring to a hundred ships as “a hundred sails,” or saying “We have fifteen head of cattle” when you, hopefully, have the entire animals, not just their heads.)
- **metonymy** (referring to something in terms of a closely-associated object, i.e., referring to a businessman as “a suit,” or to a king as “the crown,” or a preppy guy as “so J. Crew.”)

(Fuller definitions of each of these can be found in the *Bedford Glossary of Literary Terms* and in Abrams’ *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, or in the online sources listed above.)

**On the difference between “figurative” and “literal”:** with the exception of oxymoron, figures of speech are not meant to be taken as statements of fact—for instance, the metaphor “Bob was lightning on the track” is not meant to imply that Bob is *actually* a bolt of charged particles descending from the sky. If you say “His lawyer is a shark,” you don’t mean to say that he’s being represented by a cartilaginous fish with hundreds of rows of teeth. What you’re trying to say is that Bob is *fast*, or that the lawyer is *ruthless*. When you speak “figuratively,” then, you’re making an analogy: you’re borrowing a quality from a familiar thing, and saying it applies to whatever you’re describing. The opposite of “figurative” is “literal,” a term which means “in fact, actually,” but which is often misused as a simple intensifier. If you say “Pete is literally as big as a house!,” you are actually saying Pete is *really, truly* the size of a house (say, 30 feet tall and spread over a quarter-acre).

Another exciting fact: metaphors are said to have two components, the *vehicle* and the *tenor*. The vehicle is the term actually used, like “lightning” or “shark” or “house” in the examples above. The vehicle is the part that is NOT LITERALLY TRUE. The tenor is the implied meaning, i.e., “fast” or “predatory” or “enormous.”

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## 2. IMAGERY

Images in literature are verbal evocations of the senses. Virtually any description of something that, in real life, could be *seen, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted* can be called an “image.” Imagery can come in the form of direct description (i.e., “the waves roiled across the surface of the sea, heavy and gray”) or figurative language (“he huddled in his overcoat like a disgruntled bear.”)

Imagery is everywhere in writing. In fact, it’s hard to imagine how someone could write a literary text *without* images, without evoking some physical object or scene. For that reason, when you do close-reading

timed writes in AP during the year, and when you take the national AP test, if a particular passage leaves you feeling stumped about what to say, you can always at least find some imagery to talk about. (Though whether or not you find something meaningful to say about it is another matter.)

When considering the importance of imagery, ask yourself what sorts of images an author is filling your mind with as you read the text. Often, especially when there is a strong pattern of related images, imagery is a window into an author's central imaginative and thematic concerns. In Chapters Two and Three of *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, Vendler offers valuable models for discussing the importance of patterns of imagery in poetry.

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### 3. DICTION

Diction refers to the word *choices* a writer makes. Diction may refer to the connotations of individual word choices—i.e., the sorts of differences in meaning or implication you hear between various ways of referring to the same thing. (For instance, all these terms refer to one's spouse, but they imply very different feelings about that spouse: "my wife," "my sweetheart," "my partner in life," "my better half," "the old ball and chain," "my old lady." Similarly, the English language has many terms for someone who is very thin, but they can imply very different opinions about what the person looks like: "svelte," "trim," "lithe," "skinny," "scrawny," "anorectic").

Diction may also refer to the cumulative effect of a writer's chosen vocabulary; a writer's diction may be described as *formal* or *informal*, *ornate* or *plain*, *high-brow* or *low-brow*, *abstract* or *concrete*, *esoteric* or *colloquial*. When considering the importance of diction in a text, think about how the word choices contribute to the overall impression the text makes on a reader. In *Huckleberry Finn*, for instance, the vernacular, slangy, racially-offensive language used by Huck is central to the novel's ability to depict Huck as a real, complex human being who has grown up in the nineteenth-century American South. Imagine how different that novel would be if Huck's story were told in highbrow, "proper," sanitized English.

Remember, diction is about word *CHOICE*. It's about the *connotations* of words, not just their denotations (if you don't know the difference between connotation and denotation, check a dictionary right now.) Just because a text uses the words "despair," "sadness," "death," and "depressed" doesn't mean you can claim "The writer's diction choices show that he is writing about unhappiness." You can only discuss the effect of diction if you're saying that the effect of the piece would be *different* if the author used different synonyms for those same words—that is to say, the author used words that have the same denotation, but different connotations.

For instance, had the writer used words like "feeling down" and "bummed out" (which mean the approximately same thing on the surface, but have a different feel or tone), you could say "The diction suggests that the speaker has a relatively flip or casual attitude towards his unhappiness." Or if the writer used phrases like "engulfed in a bottomless pit of hopelessness," you could say that the word choices are "melodramatic."

You might consider the poetic effect of the hard-edged, blunt Anglo-Saxon diction of *Beowulf*. (You will actually be reading *Beowulf* in Modern English translation, but the poet, Seamus Heaney, made a point of choosing words with Anglo-Saxon origins). As you consider the importance of diction in *Beowulf*, look up the meanings of the terms **epithet** and **kenning** in a dictionary—preferably *The Bedford Glossary* or other dictionary of literary terms—as these are essential features of Anglo-Saxon poetic diction.

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#### 4. ALLUSION

An allusion is a reference made in a literary text to another text, or to a myth, historical or contemporary event, person, place, artwork, or element of popular culture. In literature classes, the most important kind of allusion is literary allusion—i.e., a reference to another literary text. For example, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne makes many direct allusions (references) to the Bible. In *The Woman Warrior*, the “White Tigers” section alludes to the traditional folktale of Fa Mu Lan.

Here’s a more detailed example: In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, when McMurphy and Harding discuss whether or not Nurse Ratched is attractive, and McMurphy asks, “could you get it up over her even if she wasn’t old, even if she was young and had the beauty of Helen?” he is making a literary allusion to Greek mythology—specifically, to the story of the incomparably beautiful Helen of Troy. Of course, literary allusions are only really effective for readers who are familiar with the text being referred to. In *Cuckoo’s Nest*, Harding apparently hasn’t read much Greek mythology, and instead substitutes a popular culture allusion with the same basic meaning: “I don’t know Helen, but I see what you’re drivin’ at. . . . I couldn’t get it up over old frozen face in there even if she had the beauty of Marilyn Monroe.”

Allusions can, admittedly, be a bit frustrating when you’re still in the earlier stages of your serious reading career, since you have to constantly check out the footnotes or—if there *aren’t* footnotes—be left in the dark, or be forced to guess at the meaning. But the more you read, the more literary allusions you’ll recognize, and the more depth and richness of meaning they’ll add to your reading experience. (As an analogy, think of the way someone who’s followed a sports team for years gets much more out of watching a game than a newcomer could because he or she knows all the players, their past records, their personal playing styles, and the obstacles they’ve overcome. Or the way a serious dance fan sees more in a modern dance piece, because he or she knows how the choreography plays with and against the traditional conventions of dance). Allusions also tell you a great deal about an author’s literary influences and aspirations, as well as about the author’s philosophical, intellectual, and political concerns.

Some literary allusions are more challenging than others. Most readers have at least some vague knowledge of Helen of Troy, and understand the allusion McMurphy makes. It takes a more experienced reader, though, to recognize the literary allusion in the final sentence of Chapter 25 of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, which reads, “The end was in the beginning.” As readers of the poet T. S. Eliot recognize, this is an echo of a key line from Eliot’s long poem *Four Quartets*, and it triggers a wave of thematic associations about the individual’s painful search for identity and philosophical meaning. (Eliot himself loved to exploit the power of allusion: his famous poem *The Waste Land*, which we may read in AP next year, is essentially a collage of allusions from literary, historical, mythological, and popular culture sources; the resulting footnotes take up as much space on the page as the “poem” itself.)

FYI: Another artistic form which depends greatly on allusion is **parody**. According to the *Bedford Glossary of Literary Terms*, parody in literature “imitates a specific literary work or the style of an author for comic effect, usually to ridicule or criticize that work, author, or style” (268). If you’ve ever seen *Saturday Night Live*, you’ve seen parody (of television, rather than literature): i.e., whenever they do a mock version of a game show, talk show, or news broadcast. The movie *Spaceballs* is a parody of *Star Wars*. Mark Morris’ ballet *The Hard Nut* is a parody of *The Nutcracker*. *The Simpsons* do lots of parodies of great literary texts, from *The Lord of the Flies* to *Hamlet*. In all these cases, the parody is only funny if you get the allusions (or references) to the original.

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## 5. IRONY

Despite what Alanis Morissette might have you believe, irony does not refer to mildly unpleasant surprises like “rain on your wedding day.” Irony can take many forms, and is notoriously difficult to define, but it virtually always involves some sort of contrast between *two layers* of something: between a surface layer and an underlying layer, or between two opposites.

The phrase “ironic twist” is a good one to have in mind, since the word “twist” captures the dynamic, multi-layered nature of irony: irony puts a bend or kink or crimp in a situation or story. It takes two opposite ends of something and lays them together; it exploits paradoxes and contradictions. (Contrast the phrase “ironic twist” with the phrase “I’m being straight with you.” In the latter, “straightness” is used to imply sincerity, straightforwardness, “meaning exactly what you say”—in other words, being *non-ironic*.)

Here are a few familiar examples of irony: In *The Matrix*, it’s ironic that Neo has to believe he’s *not* The One in order to *become* The One. In *Romeo and Juliet*, it’s ironic that Romeo’s efforts to *save* Mercutio from Tybalt’s sword lead directly to the *death* of Mercutio. In *Huckleberry Finn*, it’s ironic that Huck and Jim have to use the Mississippi as an *escape route*, since it actually takes them towards the heart of the *slave trade*. See how each of these is a “twist”?

Several sub-species of irony have specific names, including the following, but don’t worry too much about making precise distinctions between them, as they sometimes overlap. In practice, professional literary critics rarely make distinctions between the categories. We’re including the terms mostly so you can get a handle on the many different forms irony can take. Use the specific terms if you like, but be aware that it’s always acceptable just to describe something as “ironic,” as long as you are clear and specific about *why* it’s ironic.

“**Verbal irony**” occurs when a speaker’s literal words (and their surface meaning) are at odds with his or her actual meaning. Hannibal Lector is using verbal irony when he says, “I’m having a friend for dinner,” because his listener assumes the phrase means (as it usually does) “I’m serving dinner to a friend,” but *he* means “I’m going to *consume* my friend.” Teenagers are notorious for using lots of verbal irony, as in, “Five hours of homework tonight? I can’t *wait* to get started!”

The most blatant form of verbal irony is **sarcasm**—in which the underlying intention of the speaker has a distinctly hostile edge, and cannot be mistaken except by the most clueless listener. The Greek roots of the word mean “**flesh-tearing**,” and sarcasm almost always takes the form of surface praise that is actually meant to be insulting. For instance, when the school fashion queen tells you, in a sneering tone, “I just *love* your outfit—grungy sweatpants are all the *rage* this year,” she’s using sarcasm. Sarcasm is often described as “dripping,” which is a fitting description of how its verbal irony overflows or oozes or leaks out unmistakably through the surface meaning.

In contrast to sarcasm, more subtle forms of verbal irony are often described as “dry,” a term which (in contrast to the “dripping” quality of sarcasm) indicates that the underlying irony may be hard for a casual reader to detect. “Dry” verbal irony often involves understatement, as when the English refer to World War II as “the late unpleasantness” or refer to the U.S. as being “across the pond.”

If you’re an Austen fan, you’ll find lots of verbal irony in *Pride and Prejudice* (in which it tends to be very dry indeed). The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is a famous example of verbal irony of a particularly sophisticated, subtle kind. The narrator tells us, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” Intelligent readers will realize, of course, that this “universally acknowledged truth” is in fact a self-serving fiction insisted upon by single young women (and

their families) who are eager to secure marriage with a wealthy man; they could care less whether *he* is actually interested in marriage or not. This kind of sly but biting verbal irony is often described as “witty” or “arch.” (Note: readers who have a tin ear for verbal irony tend to think *Pride and Prejudice* is a very silly, superficial, boring novel. The better your ear for irony, the more you’ll realize how smart, funny, and socially-critical the novel really is.)

“**Situational irony**” involves a difference between expectation (what appears to be about to happen) and actual events, or a difference between a character’s intentions and actual results of his / her actions. For instance, you have situational irony in a story in which a character purchases a hand-gun to protect his family, and one of his children is fatally shot while playing with it. You should all be familiar with the situational irony in *Macbeth*, as the Macbeths’ efforts to raise their social station ultimately bring about the exact opposite of what they intended: their vilification and destruction. For those of you who’ve seen the movie *Memento*: the shocking revelation in the final few minutes of that movie is a big, big situational irony (big enough and horrible enough to perhaps count as “cosmic irony” — see below). You will run into a big situational irony about half-way through *Jane Eyre* (we won’t tell you what it is, but you’ll recognize it when you get there.) For those of you who want to do some supplementary reading this summer: If you read Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, you will see situational irony in what happens with Pip’s “expectations.” You can also find it in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, with reference to Victor’s intentions in building the creature.

When considering situational irony, always ask yourself *why* intentions / expectations turn out badly. What *point* is the author trying to make about the flaws in the hero’s plans?

“**Dramatic irony**,” occurs when a character naively speaks what he or she believes to be the truth, and/or acts on what he or she believes to be the truth, while the audience knows that he or she has got it all wrong. If a character declares, “I will be safe from my enemies as soon as I jump over this wall,” and the reader (but not the character) knows that a horde of ravenous man-eating tigers are waiting for him on the other side, that’s dramatic irony. The big difference between situational and dramatic irony is that, with situational irony, readers usually don’t know more than the characters know about what’s coming (and they sense the irony only when the nasty surprise comes at the end). But with dramatic irony, they know more than the characters know, and therefore sense the irony *before* the character suffers. For that reason, while situational irony can be heartbreaking, dramatic irony can be *excruciating* for an audience. In many cases, dramatic irony makes readers want to shout, “No! Stop! Go back! Wake up! Don’t trust him! Don’t go in there! You’ve got it all wrong!” You’ve all seen a powerful instance of dramatic irony in *Romeo and Juliet*, when the audience has to watch Romeo make his long suicide speech and swallow poison while they know Juliet is actually alive and within moments of waking up. (Cynical readers/viewers tend not to be big fans of this form of dramatic irony. They’re the ones you’ll hear muttering, “Sheesh, what a moron! This is so stupid. He deserves to die.”)

For those of you who’ve read Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, King Oedipus’ vow to catch and punish the killer of his father, even if the killer turns out to live in his own household, is a whopping instance of dramatic irony (Sophocles’ original audience would already have known Oedipus’ secrets before watching the play.) Again, if you do some supplemental reading over the summer, you might look for a sophisticated instance of dramatic irony in Marlow’s conversation with the “intended” at the end of *Heart of Darkness*.

“**Cosmic irony**”: This form of irony was a favorite of the ancient Greeks, and is a central feature of many of their tragedies, including *Oedipus Rex*. In essence, “cosmic irony” occurs when divine forces (gods or Fates) conspire against human beings to destroy them. When the outcome of a story seems like a “cruel joke,” or implies that fate is harsh and unforgiving, you may be dealing with cosmic irony. In cases of cosmic irony, the tragic hero is usually an essentially good man who does most things right but who is guilty of “hubris” (excessive pride in his own worthiness, or excessive confidence in his own ability to control what happens to

him). Cosmic irony occurs when the gods / Fates show him that his goodness and all his talents are irrelevant, because *they* are in control, and *they* are nasty.

To give credit to Alanis Morissette, her line about the guy who finally conquers his supposedly irrational fear of flying only to have his plane actually go down could be seen as an instance of cosmic irony. The guy didn't deserve to die; in fact he was doing 'the right thing' by overcoming his 'irrational' fear. Fate punished him anyway. (You could also term this "situational irony," since the opposite of what he was expecting occurred. But "cosmic irony" is cooler.)

If you do the supplemental reading from the summer reading list, look for hints of cosmic irony (though of a somewhat debased kind) in Gregor's fate in *The Metamorphosis*. Cosmic irony is also central to the events in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which would be another excellent supplement.

**"Structural irony":** Sometimes writers incorporate irony as a "structural" feature of a work— i.e., the entire text contains a central irony in the way it is constructed. The most common kind of structural irony involves texts with first-person speakers. When the first-person "speaker" is made to say things that are clearly in opposition to the *author's* true beliefs, the distance between the author and the speaker can be referred to as "structural irony." In structural irony, the speaker is speaking sincerely, communicating what he or she believes to be the truth. The irony therefore has to be *inferred* by the careful reader, who sees the flaws in the speaker's presentation of reality, and therefore perceives the author's true underlying attitude. For readers new to ironic literature, structural irony tends to be the hardest form of irony to detect. Consulting an author's letters, interviews, or other independent statements often provides useful clues for detecting and appreciating structural irony. (For an example of structural irony, see the third paragraph of the section on Point of View, below. Perhaps the greatest masterpiece of structural irony ever written in English is Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," which we may read in AP next year.)

**Postmodern irony:** This category of irony (which you won't find in any of the dictionaries of literary terms) relates more to social behavior than to any of the texts you're likely to read in AP, but it's a central feature of our youth culture at the moment. You can find the term "postmodern" by itself in the Bedford or Abrams. "Postmodern" is too complex to define in its entirety here, but the relevant aspect for this discussion is the tendency of "postmodern" art or "postmodern" behavior to make allusions to elements from traditional or mainstream culture, but to strip those elements of their traditional or mainstream meanings, or to put an ironic "twist" on them. Postmodern irony involves the playful use of such elements, with an attitude that says, "I'm not really taking this seriously. I know it's hokey or geeky or tacky or uncool, but I'm hip enough to use it and seem cool anyway." At the PHS Senior Ball a few years ago, there was a trend towards postmodern irony in fashion: a girl wearing elbow-length white gloves and a tiara, a guy in a powder blue polyester tux with a ruffled shirt, a guy in a tasseled fez. Chances are these people weren't being serious with these fashion choices; they were being playful, they were wearing them "with quotation marks," they were "*being ironic*." The irony is all in the attitude. There's a touch of postmodern irony in the recent fad for guys wearing 70s-style "fros," and in movies like *Scream* which make ironic allusions to the conventions of earlier films. If a modern hipster wears a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles sweatsuit, or carries a Hello Kitty purse, you're probably seeing postmodern irony at work. During ASB elections a couple years ago, Senior Class President-Elect Tyler Law promised on his campaign posters that you would "see unicorns" if you elected him; we're assuming this was postmodern irony. For subspecies of postmodern irony, look up the terms **kitsch**, **camp**, and **pastiche**.

**One last note on irony:** Hypocritical behavior is inherently ironic because there is a distance between a character's stated beliefs and that character's behavior. Hypocrisy is the behavioral equivalent of verbal irony. In verbal irony, there's a gap between what a character says and what that character *means*. In hypocrisy, there's a gap between what a character says (in his or her expressed values or beliefs) and what that character *does*. Be on the lookout for this kind of irony—it's often a chief component in satire.

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## 6. SATIRE

Satire is a form of literary social critique that depends on the use of irony. Traditionally, satire is understood to be a humorous but deeply moral genre, which seeks to change bad behavior, on the part of individuals or by society as a whole, by mocking it. As stated above, satires often focus ironic attention on hypocritical behavior, and exposes the difference between what a character (or society) *should* be doing and what a character (or society) *does*.

The pre-AP PHS curriculum doesn't feature a lot of satire, but one could argue that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Great Gatsby*, and even *Huckleberry Finn* all have strong elements of satire (the first two poking serious fun at flaws in the "mental health care" system and the idle rich, respectively, and the last poking serious fun at just about every aspect of American culture, including racism, Romanticism, puritanical moralism, and popular notions of how to raise children.)

Works of satire sometimes indulge in moments of sarcasm, but for the most part, in high-quality satire, the irony tends more towards the "dry" side. On the supplemental reading list are two largely satirical works, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Pride and Prejudice*. You can also find a lot of (fairly good-hearted) satire in *Great Expectations*. If you want to find satire, look for *irony-laced humor* that offers *criticism of social conventions / institutions or individual character flaws*.

*Jane Eyre* also has elements of satire. Look for passages that expose hypocrisy or make fun of unethical or irresponsible behavior, especially by Aunt Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst. If you've got the Norton version of *Jane Eyre*, check out Brontë's dedication to William Makepeace Thackeray, and the definition she gives for satire, which is very serious indeed in its vision of satire as a force for moral reform. Satire does not have to be knee-slappingly hilarious, though it is certainly embarrassing to be the target of satire. Satirists hope that their readers will, out of fear of being scorned or laughed at, henceforth avoid the bad behavior being satirized.

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## 7. POINT OF VIEW

Point of view (often abbreviated POV) refers to the perspective from which a story is told.

Of all the characters involved in a story, whose eyes are we looking through? Point of view may be "**first person**" (in which the narrator or main character speaks directly for him or herself, and says things like, "I walked down the street") or "**third person**" (in which the narrator describes the characters from an outside perspective, saying things like, "He walked down the street").

Like *Huck Finn*, *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* are in first-person. *Heart of Darkness* has two different first-person narrators, an anonymous frame narrator (a member of the company who hears Marlow tell his story), and then Marlow himself. Many other novels, like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Pride and Prejudice* are written in third-person. On very rare occasions, novels have been written in the **second person**, in which "you" is used instead of "I" or "he / she." Such works, of which Jay McInerney's 1980s novel *Bright Lights, Big City*, is probably the most famous example, have the disconcerting, voyeuristic effect of speaking as if the reader is doing everything the main character is actually doing, as in "You make a line of cocaine on the back of the pay toilet and snort it quickly." The effect, which at first feels intimate, soon becomes alienating, a sort of literary out-of-body experience. Not surprisingly, few authors imitate McInerney's experiment.

Within a single text, point of view may remain constant, or it may shift from character to character. Sometimes several characters get to tell their stories in the first person (as in *The Joy Luck Club*). More rarely, there are some sections told in third person, and some in first (as in *The Woman Warrior*, or in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which we may read during the year in AP). In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick serves as a first-person narrator, but he spends a great deal of time telling about Jay Gatsby in the third person. (Which raises the question of why Fitzgerald didn't just tell Gatsby's story in regular old third-person. What does the story *gain* by having Gatsby's life filtered through Nick's perceptions?)

If you do some supplemental reading, check out the importance of point-of-view in *Frankenstein*, in which we are presented with several layers of first-person narration. The novel starts with an explorer named Walton telling his own story in letters to his sister, then Walton reciting Victor Frankenstein's oral account of *his* own life story, then Walton reciting Victor's report of the *creature's* account of the creature's life. It gets a bit confusing, with all the concentric circles of narration, but Shelley is clearly trying to communicate something about the importance of one's point of view in the moral judgments one makes.

Sometimes a first-person narrator is said to be an "**unreliable narrator**," meaning either that s/he is naïve or highly biased, or that s/he is deliberately distorting the "truth." (There's an essay on "The Unreliable Narrator" in David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction*, and both the Bedford and Abrams' glossaries give definitions.) When discussing point of view in a first-person text, consider the relationship between the speaker and the author, and look for signs of "unreliability" on the speaker's part. Thinking back on *The Great Gatsby*, do you regard Nick as an entirely reliable narrator, or not? If you read *Gulliver's Travels*, be on the lookout for signs that Gulliver's perspective is at times quite different from Swift's. What clues are there that Swift may actually be critical of things that Gulliver says (or critical of Gulliver's moral values, or critical of Gulliver's assumptions about England and the larger world?) FYI: At least in places, *Gulliver's Travels* provides a good example of **structural irony**.

As for "third person narration," it can be either "**omniscient**" or "**limited**." In "omniscient third person narration," the story is told from an all-knowing perspective, with the narrator able to peer inside the minds of all the characters. In "limited third person narration," the narrator has access to the mind of only one (or perhaps a very small number of characters), while all the other characters are known only by their spoken words and visible actions. In extreme versions of "limited" POV, *all* of the characters are known only by their spoken words and visible actions; the narrator never tells us anything directly about any character's thoughts or feelings. In novels, since communication of the thoughts and feelings of characters is usually essential to the work's impact on readers, such an extremely limited POV is rare.

## 8. TONE

Tone refers to the attitude an author conveys towards the subject matter he or she is writing about. Literary "tone" is to written works what "tone of voice" is to speech. When describing an author's tone, literary critics refer to emotional states, using words like "bitter," "sincere," "enthusiastic," "affectionate," "whimsical," "critical," "celebratory," "despairing," "flippant," "wry," "serious," "lighthearted," "mysterious," "diffident," "vicious," "outraged," "delighted," "puckish," "tongue-in-cheek," "straightforward," "frank," "unsparing," "apologetic," "unforgiving," "amused," "anxious," and, of course, "ironic" and "sarcastic."

Unfortunately, since authors don't generally read their books out loud for us, it can be tricky to try to decipher an author's true attitude in any given piece of writing. It's doubly difficult if any level of irony is involved, especially structural irony, in which the *speaker's* attitude / tone may be very different from the

*author's* underlying attitude /tone. When trying to get a handle on tone, we must look for subtle clues to the author's real perspective, in diction, syntax, imagery, figurative language, and so on. Even seasoned literary critics sometimes disagree vehemently about an author's tone. Readers new to complex literature are often "tone deaf"; they read everything as "straight" or sincere, and miss the subtleties and nuances of meaning created by carefully-crafted writing. One of the things the AP Exam is most eager to test is your sensitivity to nuances of tone. Rest assured we'll spend time during the school year talking about tone.

In first-person narratives, you need to talk about the *speaker's* tone (i.e., Jane's tone, or Marlow's, as opposed to Brontë's or Conrad's) because the "voice" speaking is that of a fictional characters. Because both Jane and Marlow have intense emotional reactions to the people and the world around them, both novels create strong effects with tone.

## 9. MOOD

Closely related to tone, mood refers to the overall emotional effect or "atmosphere" of a literary work. If tone refers to the emotions the *author* expresses in the writing of the work, mood refers to the kinds of emotions the work evokes in the *reader*.

Much like tone, mood is usually described in terms of emotional states: "dreamy," "menacing," "romantic," "anxiety-provoking," "humorous," "light-hearted," "gloomy," "tense." One way to think about the mood of a work is to think of it as a text's emotional "weather." What does it feel like to step (imaginatively) into the world of this book? As with tone, judgments about mood are somewhat subjective; what's depressing to one reader may seem funny to another, and what feels achingly romantic to one may seem overblown or schmaltzy to another.

*Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre* are both famously "moody" novels; in her introduction to her novel, Shelley even describes exactly how she wants to make readers feel. (For both these novels, check out the definition of "gothic" in *The Bedford Glossary* or another dictionary of literary terms. *Frankenstein* is pretty much straight-out gothic, but *Jane Eyre* plays with gothic conventions in a fascinating way, alternately intensifying and undermining them.)

Those of you who are fans of the Harry Potter novels have surely experienced the profound difference in mood between the first couple of books (*Sorcerer's Stone*, *Chamber of Secrets*), which remain fairly lighthearted and whimsical throughout, and the much "darker," more "intense" later books (*Order of the Phoenix*, *Half-Blood Prince*). Although the same major characters and settings are used throughout the books, and J.K.Rowling's tone does not change all that significantly, the "emotional weather" becomes much stormier as you go along.

*Heart of Darkness* is also powerfully moody, as it takes readers deeper into Congo, and deeper into painful insights about human nature. If you read it, ask yourself as you read how you're feeling, and also ask yourself what words and phrases are making you feel that way.

Any time you look up from a novel and feel vaguely surprised to find yourself in your own familiar, brightly-lit living room, there's a good chance you've been caught up by the influence of *mood*.

## 10. POETIC FORM

Poetic form refers to any or all of the “building blocks” of poetry—including such elements as use of stanzas, rhyme scheme, rhythm, meter, caesura, enjambment, alliteration, consonance, assonance, and more. (The list also includes such things as point of view, tone, mood, imagery, figurative language, and symbolism.) The first few chapters of Vendler’s *Poems, Poets, Poetry* provide an excellent introduction to most of these building blocks, and we encourage you to read the appendices at the back of her book for even more useful terms. You will also find useful information in the Bedford or Abrams glossaries, or in the online sources listed above.

Before you read *Beowulf*, check out the introductory section in the *Norton Anthology* about Anglo-Saxon poetry, to learn about the basics of Anglo-Saxon meter, the importance of alliteration, and the use of kenning.

There are several highly structured poetic forms—like the **sonnet**, the **sestina**, and the **villanelle**—in which such things as meter, rhyme scheme, number of lines and structure of stanzas are pre-determined. Other, poetic forms—like **heroic couplets** and **blank verse**—specify the meter and / or grammatical structure of individual lines, but do not specify the overall length or stanza structure of the poem, so can be used for anything from short lyric poems to epic poems of many thousands of lines. Look for examples of all of these forms or structures as you read Vendler.

Obviously, individual poets may decide either to use or to ignore any or all of these traditional elements of poetic form, and absences are as significant as presences. (Keep this in mind as you read the poetry of Whitman and Dickinson in the Vendler. What’s *not* there can be as important as what is. Ask yourself why Whitman chooses to eschew certain conventions, and what effect that has on readers. You might want to check out Whitman’s own comments on what he thinks poetry should be like, in his preface to the original *Leaves of Grass*, which you can easily find online, or in the poem “By Blue Ontario’s Shores,” and elsewhere).

Free verse is poetry in which none of the elements listed are prescribed (i.e., none of them are pre-set or predetermined, and you will not see regular meter or rhyme). This does not mean, however, that free verse is formless; as you’ll see in Whitman, meter and rhyme scheme are not the only techniques a poet can use to give form and structure to a poem. What kinds of things *does* Whitman do to give his poems a sense of shape and cohesiveness? (As you’ll see, in Chapter Two of her book, Vendler does a wonderful reading of “shapes” in Whitman’s “Hours Continuing Long.”)

## 11. NARRATIVE FORM

Narrative form refers to any or all of the “building blocks” of narrative genres—i.e., novels or short stories, or any fictional work with a plot, *including epic, mock-epic, or other long narrative poetry*, though these last few can also be described in terms of their *poetic* form. The building blocks of narrative include such things as characterization, dialogue, interior monologue, division into chapters, presentation of chronology (linear? circular? fragmentary?), foreshadowing, rising action, climax, and denouement, to name just a few. Such things as point of view, tone, mood, imagery, figurative language, and symbolism are also part of narrative form.

As with poetic form, some particular types of narrative forms (or “genres”) have been given their own names, and have developed their own conventions. These include the **Bildungsroman**, the **Künstlerroman**, the **picaresque**, the **gothic**, the **epistolary novel**, **magical realism**, and **metafiction**, and you can find definitions for each online or in the Bedford and/or Abrams’ glossaries (plus essays on the last three in David

Lodge's *The Art of Fiction*.) FYI: *Great Expectations* is considered a classic example of the Bildungsroman ("growing-up novel" or "novel of moral formation"). You could think of *Jane Eyre*, or *Frankenstein*, both of which follow their main characters from childhood through many painful learning experiences, as species of the *Bildungsroman*. As mentioned in the section on mood, they both also belong to the genre of the "gothic." If you read *Gulliver's Travels* as part of the supplemental reading, it would be helpful to know the term "picaresque," and to think about the degree to which that work displays (or works against) elements of the picaresque.

As with the components of poetic form, the components of narrative form may or may not all appear in every work of narrative literature you read this summer. Again, what writers choose to ignore can be as revealing as what they choose to employ. When thinking about narrative form, look for places in which writers go against conventional expectations. In *Beowulf*, for instance, readers often are surprised that the narrative keeps going after the very satisfying conclusion to the fight with Grendel and his mother. Similarly, in *Jane Eyre*, about two-thirds of the way through the novel, there's a very distinct moment at which readers think they've reached a "happy ending" (I don't want to give away the plot, but don't worry, you'll know you're there when you get there). Then, suddenly, the narrative takes a wild twist and starts off in what at first feels like a whole unrelated story. In both these instances, ask yourself *why* the writers would want to mess with their readers this way. What's the *point* in each case? What are we supposed to *think* about?

As you think about narrative form, you may also want to check out some of the following sections of David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction*, since they may suggest interesting angles for discussing the various ways narratives can work: "Beginning," "The Intrusive Author," "Suspense," "The Epistolary Novel," "Introducing a Character," "Surprise," "The Reader in the Text," "The Comic Novel," "Epiphany," "The Title," and "Ending."

## 12. SYMBOLISM

A symbol is something which *exists literally* within the world of the story—a rose, a bird, a rainbow, a scarlet letter—but which comes to have *an abstract meaning beyond itself*. For instance, a rose given by one character to another may function as a symbol of their love. A caged bird might be a symbol of the longing for freedom. In *Lord of the Flies*, the conch shell is a symbol of the rule of law, while the pig's head on a stick is a symbol of the human impulse to savagery. In *The Great Gatsby*, the empty eyes of the optometrist's sign are a symbol of the lawlessness and spiritual vacancy of modernity. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the flowering fruit tree Janie sits under is a symbol of erotic vitality. An *action* can also be symbolic: in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Rose of Sharon's nursing of the dying old man is a rather mystical symbol of human interconnectedness and social responsibility. Characters can sometimes function as symbols, if they are extreme enough: you might read the creature in *Frankenstein* or Miss Havesham in *Great Expectations* as symbols—though they are both clearly very complex, and are fully-realized personalities in their own rights. It would be a shame to reduce them to being nothing *but* symbols.

BE CAREFUL when you're looking for symbols, however. Real symbols in literature are RARE. Many (perhaps most) texts HAVE NO SYMBOLS AT ALL. If you want to call something a symbol, it's really got to be BIG AND UNMISTAKABLE. Unless the text itself provides *obvious clues* that the item of concern is symbolic—namely, by means of significant emphasis, repetition, or position—you're probably not dealing with a genuine symbol and you're probably better off calling it something else.

Amateur analysts of literature tend “run wild” with symbols, finding symbols everywhere, but literary scholars are much more sparing with the term. In fact, literary critics typically draw a distinction between “conventional” (or “universal”) symbols, on the one hand, and “contextual” (or “literary”) symbols, on the other—a distinction that helps account for their more selective use of the term. We’ve underlined the definitions of “conventional” and “contextual” symbols in the following entry from Bedford’s online glossary. The gist of the matter is that the meaning of “conventional” (or “universal”) symbols is culturally fixed, widely agreed upon, and exists apart from (and prior to) any literary work. In contrast, “contextual” (or “literary”) symbols are aesthetically contingent, characteristic of particular artists, and only emerge in the *context* of a particular literary work.

Conventional symbols have meanings that are widely recognized by a society or culture. Some conventional symbols are the Christian cross, the Star of David, a swastika, or a nation’s flag. Writers use conventional symbols to reinforce meanings. Kate Chopin, for example, emphasizes the spring setting in “The Story of an Hour” as a way of suggesting the renewed sense of life that Mrs. Mallard feels when she thinks herself free from her husband. A literary or contextual symbol can be a setting, character, action, object, name, or anything else in a work that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meanings. Such symbols go beyond conventional symbols; they gain their symbolic meaning within the context of a specific story. For example, the white whale in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* takes on multiple symbolic meanings in the work, but these meanings do not automatically carry over into other stories about whales. The meanings suggested by Melville’s whale are specific to that text; therefore, it becomes a contextual symbol. See also allegory.

<[http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/literature/bedlit/glossary\\_p.htm](http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/literature/bedlit/glossary_p.htm)>

If you tend to confuse metaphors and symbols, remember that symbolic items actually exist in the story. In the metaphor “Bob was lightning on the track,” lightning is *mentioned*, but *no actual lightning is involved*. In contrast, in the movie *The Natural*, an *actual bolt of charged particles* splits a tree, and that bolt of lightning serves as a symbol of the forces of baseball destiny. In the stories mentioned above, there *really is* a conch shell, there *really is* a pig’s head on a stick, there *really is* an optometrist’s sign, there *really is* a flowering fruit tree. But, as symbols, these things *also* have meaning *beyond* their literal existence. Be aware also that the meaning of a specific symbol may grow or change over the course of a work.

Symbols (both subtle and blatant) can be found in *Beowulf*, *Frankenstein*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Great Expectations*, and *Jane Eyre* (for instance, the lightning-struck oak tree, which Jane herself reads symbolically). In *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, the picture is such a central object, and is freighted with such layered and intersecting meanings, it makes sense to call it a symbol—a symbol uniquely fashioned by Oscar Wilde for his culture’s obsession with youth and beauty, its undervaluing of moral decency. Likewise, you can read Conrad’s complex figure of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*—at once geo-political landscape and interior psychological terrain—as a symbol. *Gulliver’s Travels* is so jam-packed with symbols, it can, in parts, be referred to as “allegory.” An allegory is a work of literature which features a complex *network* of interrelated symbols, in which the surface story can be enjoyed for its own sake, but in which each piece also stands for a concept or counterpart in the real world. *Animal Farm* is an allegory. *The Faerie Queene*, which we sometimes read in AP, is an allegory. (You can find more detailed definitions of allegory in the Bedford, the Abrams, and in Lodge.)

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