JAMES G. TAAFFE

a student's guide to
Literary Terms

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A Student's Guide to Literary Terms

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Preface

From Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755):

LEXICOGRAPHER: A harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.

Dr. Johnson's intention was to produce "a dictionary by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened." Hopefully this glossary reflects instead contemporary literary usage and will guide the student as well as the common reader through the often difficult matters of critical terminology.

JAMES G. TAAFFE

Cleveland, Ohio
February, 1967

A Note to the Student

Entries in this guide have been arranged alphabetically so that by following a simple cross-reference system that utilizes both **bold face** and *italics,* you can locate easily—and in detail—any problem of definition.

Terms printed in **bold face** within the individual discussions are defined elsewhere in their own separate entries and should also be consulted. For example: in defining *ACT* as a literary term, it is necessary to refer to **drama.** This second term is printed in **bold face** to point out that further information is available under the *DRAMA* entry.

Terms that either constitute something synonymous or provide greater depth of meaning, and to which you may want to refer, follow the initial entry. They are preceded by "See" and are set in *italics.* For example: after reading the entry for *ACT,* it is suggested that you also read another entry (See *Scene*) for a fuller understanding of the term.

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ABSTRACT: A brief statement of the essential thought of a book, article, or speech; *to abstract* is to summarize briefly the essential thoughts of a work. Usually the word refers to a concise summary of a critical work, biography, or essay; one *summarizes* or *paraphrases* a novel or narrative poem, but he *abstracts* a critical work about the poem or novel.

As adjective, *abstract* designates an argument or concept apart from any particular instance or material object. For instance, a theoretical discussion of morality, patriotism, justice, or beauty without concrete and specific examples may be considered an abstract argument. Often the word is used in the phrase, *in the abstract,* to indicate an argument or position according to theory rather than to practice.

See *Paraphrase; Summary.*

ABSURD: See *Theater of the Absurd.*

ACCENT: The emphasis given a particular syllable or word in

speaking it by force of utterance, loudness, pitch, duration, or a combination of these factors. Specifically, in English, the emphasis given by force of utterance and loudness, also known as *stress* or *stress accent.*

See *Hovering Accent; Metrical Accent; Wrenched Accent.*

ACCENTUAL VERSE: Verse whose **rhythm** is determined by the number of **accents** in a line. Old English verse and Gerard Manley Hopkins' **sprung rhythm** are basically accentual with their frequently juxtaposed stresses.

ACROSTIC: An arrangement of words in which certain letters in each line (usually the first or last), when taken in order, spell out a word, motto, or other phrase; or a word arrangement that reads the same vertically and horizontally:

M A R Y
A R E A
R E A L
Y A L E

or a sentence that reads the same forwards and backwards: "Able was I ere I saw Elba," or "Madam, I'm Adam."

ACT: One of the main structural divisions of a **drama**; a play may consist of one or more acts. Elizabethan editors and playwrights were the first to divide the plays of their time into five acts. Drama was performed, however, without curtain and without intermission in Shakespeare's England. Today plays are usually divided into three or four acts. Plays may also contain divisions of acts known as **scenes**. One act may contain a number

of scenes, these shorter divisions being signaled by a dimming of the lights or dropping of the curtain, which usually marks a progress in time or a change in locale.

See *Scene.*

ACTION: The events that take place in **drama** or **narrative.** In drama, *stage action* refers to any event that occurs on the stage (e.g., the actual physical movements of the actors, their positioning, entrances and exits, etc.). There are certain traditional movements for the chorus in Greek drama, and the complications of the third actor introduced by Sophocles allowed for greater sophistication in the interaction of characters and their stage movements.

The action of a **novel** or **narrative poem** is usually both external and internal. *External action* comprises those physical events that actually occur in relation to the characters, actions which affect them or in which they participate. *Internal action* refers to a character's thoughts and feelings as they are reported by the author.

ADAGE: An old saying or **proverb**; a **maxim.**

See *Aphorism.*

AESTHETIC DISTANCE or *PSYCHICAL DISTANCE:* The distance that, according to some critics, ought to exist between the perceiver and the work of art: maintaining that distance, the reader gains the advantage of looking upon the work as an art object and not as an extension of his personal life. His own fears and anxieties could be a disadvantage to him and might interfere with his interpretation and enjoyment of the art work.

For detailed discussion, see Edward Bullough, " 'Psy-

chical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," in the *British Journal of Psychology,* V (1912–13), and Eliseo Vivas and Murray Kreiger, eds., *Problems of Aesthetics* (New York: Rinehart, 1953).

AESTHETIC MOVEMENT: A movement that, in reaction against utilitarian emphasis upon the arts, stressed the beauty of an art object and criticized those who would subordinate art to moral, political, or other considerations. Its popular motto was, "Art for art's sake." Begun in France in the nineteenth century by Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire, the movement was identified in its later English stages with Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, and Aubrey Beardsley. Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) is the movement's most famous **apology**, while Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) represents the interest in the rare and the unusual prevalent at the close of the century. The extravagances of Wilde have their origins in Pater's theory that art recognizes no allegiances—especially no moral allegiances—outside itself.

For detailed discussion, see Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1922), and William Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945).

AFFECTIVE FALLACY: The critical error—in the view of some critics—of judging a work by its effects upon one's emotions. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley invented the phrase to refer to the critical fallacy of overvaluing the individual's emotions evoked by a work of art. One risks losing sight of the art object itself when he emphasizes only his feelings about it.

For detailed discussion, see their book, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

See *Impressionistic Criticism; Intentional Fallacy; New Criticism.*

ALEXANDRINE: A line of **iambic hexameter** (so called because used in Old French poems on Alexander the Great), as in the second of the following lines by John Donne:

If ev | er an | y beau | ty I | did see,
Which I | desired, | and got, | 'twas but | a dream | of thee.

The final line of the **Spenserian stanza** is an alexandrine.

ALLEGORY: A literary mode or work in which figures, events, settings, etc. represent abstractions or in which the characters and events correspond closely to actual persons and happenings. Often, as in Book I of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), the **narrative** parallels political and religious events and simultaneously projects itself as a representation of the myopia of all mankind. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), with its hero Christian journeying from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, *allegorizes* the lot of mortal man as he "journeys through life," meeting unexpectedly such figures as Worldly Wiseman, Ignorant, Faithful, and Talkative, and escaping the perilous allure of the city of Vanity Fair. More complicated allegory may be found in such poems as Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590) and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories, especially "Young Goodman Brown" and "Ethan Brand," Thomas Mann's

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The Magic Mountain (1924), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1924) are examples of various kinds of allegorical fiction.

For detailed discussion, see Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965).

See *Exemplum; Fable; Parable; Symbolism.*

ALLITERATION: The repetition of a sound, usually the initial sound and most often a consonant, in words of one line or successive lines of verse, as in these lines by Alexander Pope:

> See sin in state, majestically drunk;
> Proud as a peeress, prouder as a punk.

or the following by John Donne:

> . . . Bend
> Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

Alliteration is actually a kind of **internal rhyme** by which for a variety of effects (e.g., to establish tone) the poet builds up his sound patterns.

See *Assonance; Consonance; Rhyme.*

ALLUSION: Indirect reference to an event, person, thing, place, or quality. An allusion may serve, by suggestion, to extend the significance of a poetic image or prose passage. Sophisticated use of allusion is in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), a poem that contains hundreds of allusions—mythical, religious, literary, historical, biblical, and philosophical. William Blake's frequent allusions to the lamb in his *Songs of Innocence* (1789) serve to expand the significance of the seemingly simple lyrics when one realizes that the allusion implies

Christ as the Lamb of God. Milton's **pastoral** allusions in *Lycidas* (1637) create the image of an ideal world which never knew the tragedy of death. Often a single allusion (e.g., the reference to the Grail in James Joyce's short story "Araby") suggests a whole pattern the reader should have in mind as he considers the work.

AMBIGUITY: The use of a word, phrase, sentence, or passage with two or more separate, often contradictory, meanings in such a way that the sense of the statement remains in doubt; ambiguity may also imply that the meanings of that word or phrase are modified as one reads further in the work itself. For instance, in the final stanza of John Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" (1819) there is ambiguity about the antecedent of the pronoun "she": at one point it appears to be the mistress; at another, Melancholy herself. Keats depends upon the two possible meanings, for he wants to show a significant relationship of opposites. Often a passage itself may have elements of ambiguity created when an author wishes to suggest that an experience or event is characterized by conflicting elements. The final paragraph of James Joyce's "The Dead" (1914) presents the snow image so as to create an ambiguous moment, suggesting the contradictory nature of the image as it is used throughout the story.

For detailed discussion, see William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: Meridian Books [World Publishing Co.], 1955).

See *Paradox; Pun.*

AMPHIBRACH: A metrical unit, or **foot,** of three syllables, the first short or unaccented, the second long or accented, the third short or unaccented; marked ˘ – ˘.

AMPHIBRACHIC: Composed of **amphibrachs.**

Browning's "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" is in amphibrachic feet:

I sprang to | the stirrup, | and Joris, | and he;
I galloped, | Dirck galloped, | we galloped | all three.

ANACHRONISM: Something, as an occurrence, that is out of its historical time. Anachronism may be intentional or inadvertent. We usually remember an anachronism in a literary work when it creates an especially dramatic effect. For instance, for Hamlet and Laertes to exchange weapons in their famous duel, the swords had of necessity to be smaller and slimmer than would have been historically possible in the Denmark of their time. Mark Twain uses anachronism deliberately for comic effect in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1899).

ANACOLUTHON: A change from one grammatical construction to another within the same sentence, sometimes as a rhetorical device. The following example is from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (I, iii):

A man, young lady! Lady, such a man
As all the world—Why, he's a man of wax.

ANACREONTIC POETRY: Poems in imitation of those of the Greek lyricist Anacreon (572?–488? B.C.) on women, wine, and the fleeting pleasures of youth. Light **lyrics** in Anacreon's style were very popular in the seventeenth century; Ben Jonson, Abraham Cowley, and Robert Herrick are the most significant followers of

the mode. One of Cowley's most delightful Anacreontic poems is entitled "The Epicure":

> Fill the bowl with rosy wine,
> Around our temples roses twine,
> And let us cheerfully awhile,
> Like the wine and roses smile.
> Crown'd with roses, we contemn
> Gyges' wealthy diadem.
>
> Today is ours; what do we fear;
> Today is ours; we have it here.
> Let's treat it kindly, that it may
> Wish, at least, with us to stay.
> Let's banish business, banish sorrow.
> To the gods belongs tomorrow.

ANACRUSIS: The addition of one or more unaccented syllables at the beginning of a verse that would ordinarily begin with an accented syllable; a form of **hypermeter**. In the following quatrain from William Blake's "The Tiger," "could" in the fourth line is the extrametrical syllable:

> Tiger, tiger, burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

See *Catalexis.*

ANAGNORISIS: Aristotelian term for the discovery or recognition that occurs in the action of a **drama** or other literary work (e.g., a character's discovery of his own identity or of the identity of a relative, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus* or Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors).*

See *Denouement; Discovery Scene; Epiphany; Peripety.*

ANALOGUE: A literary work to which a work under discussion bears similarities (e.g., in theme or plot). Many of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1387), for instance, have analogues that have been traced and discussed by scholars in their attempts to establish the originality of Chaucers' tales.

ANAPEST: A metrical unit, or **foot,** containing three syllables, two unaccented or short followed by one accented or long, as in Byron's

Though the day | of my des | tiny's o | ver,
And the star | of my fate | hath declin'd.

ANAPESTIC: Composed of **anapests.**

ANAPHORA: The rhetorical device of repeating a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences. Walt Whitman often employed the device, as in the following lines from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking":

Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before.

ANATOMY: Any analysis or examination, literally a "cutting up" of a subject into its component parts for closer

study; frequently used as part of a title. John Lyly's *Anatomy of Wit* (1578), Philip Stubbes' *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), and Robert Burton's famous *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) are major examples. Burton's work is actually a medical treatise defining the causes, symptoms, and properties of melancholy, and its care; he discusses also the two "variant" diseases, religious and amorous melancholy. A modern example is Northrop Frye's study, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957).

ANECDOTE: Originally, little-known or (previously unpublished) entertaining facts of history or biography. A **narrative** is said to be anecdotal if it is made up of a series of short accounts of personal or biographical history. Joseph Spence's *Anecdotes* (1820), primarily about Alexander Pope, is an important literary collection. Wordsworth's lyric, "Anecdote for Fathers," uses the word in another sense, that of **exemplum** or moral lesson.

ANNALS: Historical records, usually the prose accounts of a parish, county, kingdom, etc., presented in chronological order. In the *Old English Annals* (the so-called King Alfred's *Chronicles*), however, there are also fourteen poems, some probably composed and inserted by the annalists themselves. Among these is a famous seventy-three-line poem, "The Battle of Brunanburh," in praise of King Athelstan and his brother Edmund.

ANNOTATE: To provide critical or explanatory notes (in footnotes, appendices, marginalia, etc.) to assist the reader. Often books owned by prominent people are

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