A GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

FIFTH EDITION

M. H. ABRAMS

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Preface to the Fifth Edition ❧

This book defines and discusses terms, concepts, and points of view that are commonly and profitably used in the history, analysis, interpretation, and criticism of works of literature. The level of discussion and the guides to further reading are oriented especially toward undergraduate students of English, American, and other literatures; over the decades, however, the book has proved its usefulness as a reference work for advanced literary students as well.

The *Glossary* is organized as a series of succinct essays in the alphabetic order of the title word or phrase. Terms that are subsidiary, or that denote subclasses of a topic, are discussed under the title heading of the major or generic term, and words that are commonly used in conjunction or as contraries (*distance and involvement, empathy and sympathy, objective and subjective, primitivism and progress*) are discussed in the same essay. The alternative organization—a dictionary of single terms defined in isolation—is not only forbidding to the reader and repetitive in content, but may be misleading as well, because the application of many terms becomes clear only in the context of other concepts to which they are related, subordinated, or opposed. The essay presentation also makes it possible to supplement the standard, or the most useful, definition of a technical word with enough indications of its changes of meaning over time, and of its diversity in current usage, to help students steer their way through the shifting references and submerged ambiguities in historical and critical treatments of literature. In addition, this discursive way of treating literary terms provides the author with the opportunity to write discussions that are readable as well as useful. Each essay prints in **boldface** the terms for which it supplies the principal discussion; it prints in *italics* other terms that occur in the course of this discussion but are treated more fully elsewhere in the *Glossary*.

This new edition has been prepared in response to recent changes in the literary scene, to important new books on literature and literary criticism, and to a constant stream of suggestions for improvements or additions, some of them solicited and others contributed by generous users of the *Glossary*. The revision has provided the opportunity to rewrite all the articles, some of them drastically, in order to clarify the exposition, to take account of recent innovations, and to add further references and illustrations, especially from American literature and from women and Black authors; to such references and illustrations, a date or temporal indication has now in most instances been affixed, in order to give the student some sense of their place in literary history. The suggested readings in each essay have also been expanded and made current; books written in French and German are listed in their English translations.

Following the suggestions of many users, a number of terms have been added, either as entries themselves or within other entries, including *American Renaissance, aubade, automatic writing, baroque, Black writers, caricature,*

décor, echoism, fabulation, golden age, Harlem Renaissance, ideology, ivory tower, jeremiad, kenning, lampoon, magic realism, malapropism, positivism, the Shakespearean *problem play, proscenium,* and *solecism.* There are also extensive new essays, with illustrative references and suggested readings, on the *canon of literature, negative capability, periods of American literature,* and *Transcendentalism in America.*

I follow the advice of several consultants by introducing an important change in format. Ours is an age of many and varied new "theories" of literature, literary language, and literary criticism. In the attempt to record these innovations, recent editions of the *Glossary* have tended to submerge treatments of the traditional and enduring literary terms and concepts amid fairly lengthy discussions of recent critical modes. These latter essays are now printed in a separate section of the *Glossary,* pp. 201–247, under the heading "Modern Theories of Literature and Criticism," together with new essays on *feminist criticism, Marxist criticism,* and *psychological and psychoanalytic criticism.* The general introduction to the topic of *criticism* remains in the body of the text. The new section includes seventeen essays on the innovative critical views and procedures of the last half-century, ranging from *New Criticism* and *archetypal criticism* through *phenomenology* and *reader-response criticism* to *deconstruction* and *semiotics;* the section is preceded by a list of the approximate dates at which each of these critical modes was developed. There is a double advantage in this rearrangement. Students can now read the treatment of the more traditional literary and critical terms—whether sequentially or by selected assignments adapted to the subject matter of a course—without impediment by what are, inescapably, fairly abstruse discussions of modern theory. On the other hand, reading through the section on "Modern Theories" can provide a terse yet inclusive overview of all the major developments in this lively era of competing points of view and modes of literary analysis and evaluation. And despite this division, the place of the discussion of any literary term or critical mode, whether traditional or new, can readily be located by reference to the inclusive Index.

How to Use the *Glossary*

Always look up the word or phrase you are investigating in the alphabetic Index at the end of the volume. Although the essays in the *Glossary* are in the alphabetic order of their title terms, by far the larger number of terms are discussed within the body of these essays. In the Index readers will find, in **boldface,** the page number of the principal discussion of the term; this is sometimes followed, in *italics,* by the page numbers of its occurrences in other essays which serve further to clarify and exemplify the ways in which the word or expression is in fact used. Note that the word referred to by an italicized entry may be a modified form of the index-term; thus the forms "parodies" and "parodied" are listed under the entry "parody." Note also that those terms in the Index (mainly foreign in origin) which are most likely to be mispronounced by a student are followed by simplified guides to pronunciation; the key to these guides is on the first page of the Index.

Some of the more general entries in the Index are also supplemented by a

list of references to closely related specific or analytic terms. These secondary references not only expedite the fuller exploration of a topic but make it easy to locate items that serve the needs of a particular course in literature. They identify, for example, the separate essays in the *Glossary* that deal with particular types and movements of literary *criticism*, the terms most relevant to the analysis of *style*, the separate entries defining classes of *figurative language* or literary *genres*, and the many essays which treat the form, component features, history, and criticism of the *drama*, *lyric*, and *novel*.

This edition owes a great deal to the counsel of teachers at many colleges and universities who suggested changes and additions that would make the book more useful to students in a wide variety of courses in American, English, and foreign literatures. I am especially grateful for advice by A. R. Ammons, Walter Cohen, Jonathan Culler, Nelly Furman, Mary Jacobus, and Cushing Strout at Cornell University; and for many and detailed suggestions by Nina Baym, University of Illinois; Martha Woodmansee, Case Western Reserve University; Ray Craig, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign; Christopher Herbert, Northwestern University; Owen Jenkin, Carleton College; James M. Kee, College of the Holy Cross; Steven Strang, Wheaton College; Nathaniel Strout, Hamilton College; Linda Venis, University of California, Los Angeles. Dianne Ferriss has been an unfailingly cheerful and helpful research assistant and secretary; Kate Morgan, Associate Editor at Holt, Rinehart and Winston, has instigated this revision; and Jean Ford, Senior Project Editor at Holt, has excellently supervised its accomplishment. All these friends and advisers have helped me come closer to the goal I announced in the original edition: to write the kind of handbook that I would most have valued when I was myself a college student of literature.

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Contents

Literary Terms

Absurd, Literature of the. The name is applied to a number of works in drama and prose fiction which have in common the sense that the human condition is essentially and ineradicably absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd. This literature has its roots in the movements of *expressionism* and *surrealism,* as well as in the fiction, in the 1920s, of James Joyce (*Ulysses*) and of Franz Kafka (*The Trial, Metamorphosis*). The current movement, however, emerged after World War II as a rebellion against the essential beliefs and values both of traditional culture and traditional literature. Central to this earlier tradition had been the assumptions that human beings are mainly rational creatures who live in an at least partially intelligible universe, that they are part of an orderly social structure, and that they may be capable of heroism and dignity even in defeat. Since the 1940s, however, there has been a widespread tendency, especially prominent in the *existential philosophy* of men of letters such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to view a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent human truth, value, or meaning, and to represent human life, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end, as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. As Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942),

> In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile. . . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.

Or as Eugène Ionesco, a leading writer of the drama of the absurd, has put it in an essay on Kafka: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."

Samuel Beckett, the most eminent and influential of writers in this mode, is an Irishman living in Paris who writes in French and then translates many of his own works into English. His plays project the irrationalism, helplessness, and absurdity of life, in dramatic forms that reject realistic settings, logical reasoning, or a consistently evolving plot. *Waiting for Godot* (1955) presents two tramps in a waste place, fruitlessly and all but hopelessly waiting for an unidentified person, Godot, who may or may not exist and with whom they sometimes think they remember that they may have an appointment; as one of

them remarks, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful." Like most works in this mode, the play is "absurd" in the double sense that it is grotesquely comic as well as irrational and nonconsequential; it is a deliberate parody not only of the traditional assumptions of Western culture, but of traditional drama, and even of its own inescapable participation in the dramatic medium. The lucid but eddying and pointless dialogue is often funny, and pratfalls and other modes of slapstick are used to project metaphysical alienation and anguish. Beckett's prose fiction, such as *Malone Dies* (1958) and *The Unnamable* (1960), present an *antihero* who plays out the absurd moves of the end game of civilization in a nonwork which tends to undermine the coherence of its own medium, language itself. See *unstable irony.*

Another French playwright of the absurd is Jean Genet (who combines absurdism and diabolism); some of the dramatic work of the Englishman Harold Pinter and the American Edward Albee are recognizably in a similar mode. The plays of Tom Stoppard, such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) and *Travesties* (1974), exploit the devices of absurdist drama more for comic than philosophical ends. There are also affinities with this movement in the numerous recent works which exploit black comedy: baleful, naive, or inept characters in a fantastic or nightmarish modern world play out their roles in what Ionesco called a "tragic farce," in which the events are often simultaneously comic, horrifying, and absurd. Examples are Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963), John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978), and some of the novels by the German Günter Grass and the Americans Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and John Barth.

See *wit, humor, and the comic,* and refer to: Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (rev., 1969); David Grossvogel, *The Blasphemers: The Theatre of Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett, Genet* (1965); Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *The Absurd* (1969); Charles B. Harris, *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* (1972); and Max F. Schultz, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (1980).

Act. A major division in the action of a play. Such a division was introduced into England by Elizabethan dramatists, who imitated the Roman playwright Seneca by structuring the action so that it fell into five acts. Late in the nineteenth century, a number of writers followed the example of Chekhov and Ibsen by constructing plays in four acts. In the present century the most common form for nonmusical dramas has been three acts.

Acts are often subdivided into scenes, which in modern plays usually consist of units of action in which there is no change of place or break in the continuity of time. (Some recent plays dispense with the division into acts, and are structured as a sequence of scenes, or episodes.) In the conventional theater with a **proscenium arch** that frames the front of the stage, the end of a scene is usually indicated by a dropped curtain, and the end of an act by a dropped curtain and an intermission.

Aestheticism and Decadence. Aestheticism, or "the Aesthetic Movement," was a European phenomenon during the latter nineteenth century that had its chief philosophical headquarters in France. Its roots lie in the German theory,

proposed by Kant in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (1790), that the pure aesthetic experience consists of a "disinterested" contemplation of an object without reference to reality or to the "external" ends of its utility or morality; it was also influenced by the view of Edgar Allan Poe (in "The Poetic Principle," 1850) that the supreme work is a "poem *per se*," a "poem written solely for the poem's sake." In defiance of the indifference or hostility of the society of their time to any art that did not inculcate utilitarian and social values, French writers developed the doctrine that a work of art is the supreme value among human products precisely because it is self-sufficient and has no aim beyond itself: the end of a work of art is simply to exist in its formal perfection, and to be beautiful.

French Aestheticism, as a self-conscious movement, is often said to date from Théophile Gautier's witty defense of his claim that art lacks all utility (Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, 1835), and it was developed by Baudelaire, Flaubert, Mallarmé, and many other writers. A rallying cry of Aestheticism became the phrase "l'art pour l'art"—art for **art's sake**. This claim often involved also the view of life for art's sake, with the artist envisioned as a priest who renounces the practical and self-seeking concerns of ordinary existence in the service of what Flaubert and others called "the religion of beauty."

Some proponents of Aestheticism, especially Baudelaire, also espoused views and values which developed into a movement called the **Decadence**. The term was based on qualities attributed to the literature and art of the later Roman Empire, and of Greece in the Byzantine era, which were said to possess the refinements and subtle beauties of a culture and art which have passed their vigorous prime and fallen into the sweet savor of decay. Such was also held to be the state of European civilization in the later nineteenth century. The precepts of the Decadence were summarized by Gautier in the "Notice" he prefixed to an edition of Baudelaire's poems, *Les Fleurs du mal* ("Flowers of Evil"), in 1868. Central to this movement was the view that art is totally opposed to "nature," both in the sense of biological nature and of the standard, or "natural," norms of morality and sexual behavior. The thoroughgoing Decadent writer cultivates high artifice in his style and, often, the bizarre in his subject matter, recoils from the fecundity and exuberance of instinctual and organic life, prefers elaborate dress over the living form and cosmetics over the natural hue, and sometimes sets out to violate what is "natural" in human experience by resorting to drugs, depravity, or sexual deviation in the attempt to achieve (in a phrase echoed from the French poet Rimbaud) "the systematic derangement of all the senses." The movement reached its height in the last two decades of the century; extreme products were the novel *À rebours* ("Against the Grain"), written by J. K. Huysmans in 1884, and some of the paintings of Gustave Moreau. This period is also known as the *fin de siècle* (end of the century); the phrase connotes the lassitude, satiety, and ennui expressed by many writers of the Decadence.

The doctrines of French Aestheticism were introduced into England by Walter Pater, with his emphasis on painstaking artifice and stylistic subtlety, his recommendation to crowd one's life with the maximum of exquisite sensations, and his concept of the supreme value of beauty and of "the love of art for its own

sake." (See his Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, 1873.) Both the Aesthetic and Decadent modes are manifested in some of Swinburne's early poems of the 1860s, and in the 1890s by writers such as Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, and Lionel Johnson and by the artist Aubrey Beardsley. In the search for strange sensations, a number of English Decadents in this period experimented with drugs and with illicit or deviant amours; several of them died young. Representative literary products are Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), his play *Salomé* (1893), and the poems of Ernest Dowson.

The influence of certain ideas of Aestheticism—such as the view of the "autonomy" (self-sufficiency) of art, the concept of the poem or novel as an isolated object with inherent value, the derogation of spontaneous "nature" as against art and artifice—has been important in the writings of such prominent recent authors as W. B. Yeats, T. E. Hulme, and T. S. Eliot, as well as in the theory of the *New Critics*. And the emphasis in the Decadence on drugged perception, extreme or deviant sexuality, and the deliberate inversion of conventional moral and social values has recently reappeared, with modern variations, in the *Beat* poets and novelists and in various writers of *black humor* and other modes of experimental prose fiction (see *novel*).

See *ivory tower*, and refer to Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913); Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (1933); William Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure* (1945); A. E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830–1900* (1958); Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (1957); Enid Starkie, *From Gautier to Eliot* (1960); Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (1979).

Affective Fallacy. In an essay published in 1946, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley defined the affective fallacy as the error of evaluating a poem by its effects—especially its emotional effects—upon the reader. As a result of this fallacy "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear," so that criticism "ends in impressionism and relativism." Beardsley has since modified the earlier claim by the admission that "it does not appear that critical evaluation can be done at all except in relation to certain types of effect that aesthetic objects have upon their perceivers." So modified, the doctrine becomes a claim for *objective criticism*, in which the critic does not describe the effects of a work upon himself, but concentrates upon the analysis of the attributes, devices, and form of the work by which such effects are achieved. For an extreme reaction against this view, see *reader-response criticism*; compare also *intentional fallacy*.

Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," reprinted in W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (1954); Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958), p. 491 and Chap. 11.

Allegory. An allegory is a narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived so as to make coherent sense on the "literal," or primary, level of signification, and also to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events. We can distinguish two main types:

(1) Historical and political allegory, in which the characters and actions that are signified literally in turn signify, or "allegorize," historical personages and events. So in Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), King David represents Charles II, Absalom represents his natural son the Duke of Monmouth, and the biblical plot allegorizes a political crisis in contemporary England. (2) The allegory of ideas, in which the literal characters represent abstract concepts and the plot incorporates and exemplifies a doctrine or thesis. Both types of allegory may either be sustained throughout a work, as in *Absalom and Achitophel* and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), or else serve merely as an episode in a nonallegorical work. A famed example of episodic allegory is the encounter of Satan with his daughter Sin, as well as with Death—who is represented allegorically as the son born of their incestuous relationship—in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book II (1667).

The central device in the second type, the sustained allegory of ideas, is the personification of abstract entities such as virtues, vices, states of mind, modes of life, and types of character; in the more explicit allegories, such reference is specified by the names given to characters and places. Thus Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* allegorizes the doctrines of Christian salvation by telling how Christian, warned by Evangelist, flees the City of Destruction and makes his way laboriously to the Celestial City; en route he encounters characters with names like Faithful, Hopeful, and the Giant Despair, and passes through places like the Slough of Despond, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and Vanity Fair. A passage from this work will indicate the nature of a clear-cut allegorical process:

> Now as Christian was walking solitary by himself, he espied one afar off come crossing over the field to meet him; and their hap was to meet just as they were crossing the way of each other. The Gentleman's name was Mr. Worldly-Wiseman; he dwelt in the Town of Carnal-Policy, a very great Town, and also hard by from whence Christian came.

Works which are primarily nonallegorical may introduce **allegorical imagery** (the personification of abstract entities who perform a brief allegorical action) in short passages. Familiar instances are the opening lines of Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (1645). This device was exploited especially in the *poetic diction* of authors in the mid-eighteenth century. An example—so brief that it presents an allegoric tableau rather than a narrative—is the passage in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751):

> Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
> Or Flatt'ry sooth the dull cold ear of Death?

Allegory is a strategy which may be employed in any literary form or genre. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a moral and religious allegory in a prose narrative; Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590–96) fuses moral, religious, historical, and political allegory in a verse romance; the third book of Swift's *Gulliver's*

Travels, the voyage to Laputa and Lagado (1726), is an allegorical satire directed primarily against philosophical and scientific pedantry; and William Collins' "Ode on the Poetical Character" (1747) is a lyric poem which allegorizes a topic in literary criticism—the nature, sources, and power of the poet's creative imagination. John Keats makes a subtle use of allegory throughout his ode "To Autumn" (1820), most explicitly in the magnificent second stanza, which represents autumn personified as a female figure amid the scenes and activities of that season.

Sustained allegory was a favorite form in the Middle Ages, when it produced masterpieces—especially in the mode of the *dream vision,* in which the narrator falls asleep and experiences an allegoric dream—including, in the fourteenth century, Dante's *Divine Comedy,* the French *Roman de la Rose,* Chaucer's *House of Fame,* and Langland's *Piers Plowman,* as well as, early in the sixteenth century, the drama *Everyman.* (See *morality play.*) But sustained allegory has been written in all literary periods, and is the form of such major nineteenth-century poetic works as Goethe's *Faust, Part II,* Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound,* Hardy's *The Dynasts,* and in the present century the stories and novels of Franz Kafka.

Various literary *genres* may be classified as special types of allegory, in that they all narrate, though in varied forms, one coherent set of circumstances which signify a second order of correlated meanings. A **fable** is a short story that exemplifies an abstract moral thesis or principle of human behavior; usually in its conclusion either the narrator or one of the characters states the moral in the form of an *epigram.* Most common is the **beast fable,** in which animals talk and act like the human types they represent. In the familiar fable of the fox and the grapes, the fox—after vainly exerting all his wiles to get the grapes hanging beyond his reach—concludes that they are probably sour anyway: the express moral is that human beings belittle what they cannot get. An early set of beast fables was attributed to Aesop, a Greek slave of the sixth century B.C.; in the seventeenth century a Frenchman, Jean de La Fontaine, wrote a set of witty fables in verse which are the classics of this literary kind. Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale," the story of the cock and the fox, is a beast fable; the American Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908) wrote many Uncle Remus stories which are beast fables, told in Black southern dialect and based on Black *folktales;* James Thurber's *Fables for Our Time* (1940) is a recent set of short fables; and in *Animal Farm* (1945) George Orwell expanded the beast fable into a sustained satire on the political and social conditions of our era.

A **parable** is a short narrative presented so as to stress the tacit analogy between its component parts and a thesis or lesson that the narrator is trying to bring home to his listeners or readers. The parable was one of Christ's favorite devices as a teacher; examples are His parables of the good Samaritan and of the prodigal son. Here is Christ's parable of the fig tree, Luke 13:6–9:

> He spake also this parable: A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, "Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and

find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" And he answering said unto him, "Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it. And if it bears fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down."

An exemplum is a story told as a particular narrative instance of the general theme of a sermon. The device was popular in the Middle Ages, when extensive collections of exempla were prepared for use by preachers. In Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" the Pardoner, preaching on the thesis "Greed is the root of all evil," incorporates as exemplum the tale of the three drunken revelers who set out to find Death, find a heap of gold instead, only after all to find Death by killing one another in the attempt to gain sole possession of the treasure. By extension the term "exemplum" is also applied to tales used in a formal, though nonreligious, exhortation. Thus Chaucer's Chanticleer, in "The Nun's Priest's Tale," borrows the preacher's technique in the ten exempla he tells in a vain effort to persuade his skeptical wife, Dame Pertelote the hen, that bad dreams forebode disaster.

See *didactic, symbol* (for the distinction between allegory and symbol), and (on the fourfold allegorical interpretation of the Bible) *interpretation: typological and allegorical.* On allegory in general, consult C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), Chap. 2; Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* (1959); Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (1964); Rosemund Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery* (1966); Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory* (1969); Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory* (1979). On the exemplum, see G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (2d ed., 1961), Chap. 4.

Alliteration   is the repetition of speech sounds in a sequence of nearby words; the term is usually applied only to consonants, and especially when the recurrent sound occurs in a conspicuous position at the beginning either of a word or of a stressed syllable within a word. In Old English **alliterative meter,** alliteration is the principal organizing device of the verse line; each line is divided into two half-lines of two strong stresses by a decisive pause, or *caesura,* and at least one, and usually both, of the two stressed syllables in the first half-line alliterate with the first stressed syllable of the second half-line. (In this versification a vowel was considered to alliterate with any other vowel.) A number of Middle English poems, such as *Piers Plowman* and *Gawain and the Green Knight* in the fourteenth century, continued to use and play variations upon the old alliterative meter. (See *strong-stress meters.*) In the opening line of *Piers Plowman,* for example, all four of the stressed syllables alliterate:

In a sómer séson, whan sóft was the sónne . . .

In later English versification, however, alliteration is used only for special stylistic effects, such as to reinforce the meaning, to link related words, or to provide tone color. An example is the repetition of the *s, th,* and *w* consonants in Shakespeare's Sonnet 30:

8 Allusion

> When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
> I summon up remembrance of things past,
> I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought
> And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste. . . .

Various other repetitions of speech sounds are identified by special terms. **Consonance** is the repetition of a sequence of two or more consonants, but with a change in the intervening vowel: live-love, lean-alone, pitter-patter. W. H. Auden's poem of the 1930s " 'O where are you going?' said reader to rider" makes prominent use of this device; the last stanza reads:

> "Out of this house"—said rider to reader,
> "Yours never will"—said farer to fearer,
> "They're looking for you"—said hearer to horror,
> As he left them there, as he left them there.*

Assonance is the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds—especially in stressed syllables—in a sequence of nearby words. Note the recurrent long *i* in the opening lines of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820):

> Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
> Thou foster child of silence and slow time.

The richly assonantal effect at the beginning of William Collins' "Ode to Evening" (1747) depends on a patterned sequence both of identical and of similar vowels:

> If aught of oaten stop or pastoral song,
> May hope, chaste Eve, to soothe thy pensive ear . . .

For a special case of the repetition of vowels and consonants in combination, see *rhyme*.

Allusion in a literary text is a reference, explicit or indirect, to a well-known person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage. In the Elizabethan Thomas Nashe's "Litany in Time of Plague,"

> Brightness falls from the air,
> Queens have died young and fair,
> Dust hath closed Helen's eye,

there is an explicit allusion to Helen of Troy. Most allusions serve to illustrate or enhance a subject, but some are used in order to undercut it ironically by the

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*From "O where are you going?" Copyright 1934 and renewed 1962 by W. H. Auden. Reprinted from *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957*, by W. H. Auden, by permission of Random House, Inc., and Faber and Faber Ltd.

discrepancy between the subject and the allusion. In the lines from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) describing a woman at her modern dressing table,

> The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
> Glowed on the marble,*

the ironic allusion, by the indirect mode of echoing some of Shakespeare's phrasing, is to Cleopatra's magnificent barge in *Antony and Cleopatra* (II. ii. 196 ff.):

> The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
> Burn'd on the water.

For discussion of a poet who makes persistent and complex use of this device, see Reuben A. Brower, *Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion* (1959).

In older literature the author assumed that his allusions were well enough known to be recognized by the educated readers of the day. But a number of modern authors (including Joyce, Pound, and Eliot) often employ allusions that are highly specialized, or else are drawn from the author's private reading and experience, in the knowledge that very few readers will recognize them without the help of scholarly annotation. The current term *intertextuality* includes allusion among the many ways in which one text is interlinked with other texts.

Ambiguity. In ordinary usage "ambiguity" is commonly applied to a fault in style; that is, the use of a vague or equivocal expression when what is wanted is precision and particularity of reference. Since William Empson published *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), however, the term has been widely used in criticism to identify a poetic device: the deliberate use of a word or expression to signify two or more distinct references, or to express two or more diverse attitudes or feelings. **Multiple meaning** and **plurisignation** are alternative terms for this use of language; they have the advantage of avoiding the pejorative association with the word "ambiguity."

When Shakespeare's Cleopatra, exciting the asp to a frenzy, says (*Antony and Cleopatra;* V. ii. 306 ff.),

> Come, thou mortal wretch,
> With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate
> Of life at once untie. Poor venomous fool,
> Be angry, and dispatch,

her speech is richly multiple in significance. For example, "mortal" means "fatal" or "death-dealing," and at the same time signifies that the asp is itself mortal, or subject to death. "Wretch" in this context serves to express both contempt and pity (Cleopatra goes on to refer to the asp as "my baby at my

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*From *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot (1922). Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., and Faber and Faber Ltd.

breast,/That sucks the nurse asleep"). And the two meanings of "dispatch"—
"make haste" and "kill"—are equally relevant.

A special type of multiple meaning is the **portmanteau word**. The term
was introduced into literary criticism by Humpty Dumpty, the expert on seman-
tics in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). He is explicating to Al-
ice the meaning of the opening lines of "Jabberwocky":

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.

"Slithy," Humpty Dumpty explained, "means 'lithe and slimy' . . . You see it's
like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word." A port-
manteau word thus consists of a fusion of two or more existing words. James
Joyce exploited this device to the full in order to sustain the multiple levels of
meaning in his dream narrative *Finnegans Wake* (1939); an example is his com-
ment on girls who are "yung and easily freudened"; "freudened" fuses
"frightened" and "Freud," while "yung" fuses "young" and Sigmund Freud's
rival in depth psychology, C. J. Jung. (Compare *pun*.) "Différance," a key ana-
lytic term of the philosopher of language Jacques Derrida, is a portmanteau
noun which he describes as a fusion of two diverse meanings of the French verb
"différer": "to differ" and "to defer." (See *deconstruction*.)

William Empson (who named and enlarged upon a literary phenomenon
that had been noted by earlier writers) helped make current a mode of explica-
tion which has greatly expanded our sense of the complexity and richness of
poetic language. The risk, exemplified both by Empson and other recent critics,
is that the intensive search for ambiguities easily leads to **over-reading**: inge-
nious, overdrawn, and sometimes contradictory explications of multiple signifi-
cations.

For related terms see *connotation and denotation* and *pun*. Refer to Emp-
son, above, and to Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain* (1954), especially
Chap. 4. For critiques of Empson's theory and practice, see John Crowe Ran-
som, "Mr. Empson's Muddles," *The Southern Review*, 4 (1938), and Elder Ol-
son, "William Empson, Contemporary Criticism and Poetic Diction," in *Critics
and Criticism*, ed. R. S. Crane (1952).

Antithesis   is a contrast or opposition in the meanings of contiguous phrases or
clauses, emphasized by **parallelism**—that is, a similar order and structure—in
the *syntax*. An example is Alexander Pope's description of Atticus in his *Epistle
to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735), "Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike." In the
second line of Pope's description of the Baron's designs against Belinda, in *The
Rape of the Lock* (1714), syntactic parallelism is stressed by *alliteration* in the
correspondent nouns:

> Resolved to win, he meditates the way,
> By *force* to ravish, or by *fraud* betray.