**Common Literary Forms and Genres**

**Allegory:** A narrative in which literal meaning corresponds clearly and directly to symbolic meaning. For example, the literal story in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—Christian’s journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City—is an allegory for the spiritual journey from sin to holiness.

**Anecdote:** The brief narration of a single event or incident.

**Aphorism:** A concise expression of insight or wisdom: “The vanity of others offends our taste only when it offends our vanity” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*).

**Autobiography:** The nonfictional story of a person’s life, told by that person. St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is an early, canonical work in this genre (*see* also **memoir,***below*).

**Ballad:** Traditionally, a folk song telling a story or legend in simple language, often with a refrain. A number of poets outside the folk tradition have adopted the ballad form, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge did in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

**Biography:** The nonfictional story of a person’s life. James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* is one of the most celebrated works of biography. When the author of a biography is also its subject, the work is an **autobiography** (*see above*).

**Black comedy:** Disturbing or absurd material presented in a humorous manner, usually with the intention to confront uncomfortable truths. Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is a notable example.

**Burlesque:** A humorous imitation of a serious work of literature. The humor often arises from the incongruity between the imitation and the work being imitated. For example, Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* uses the high diction of epic poetry to talk about a domestic matter.

**Confessional poetry:** An autobiographical poetic genre in which the poet discusses intensely personal subject matter with unusual frankness. The genre was popular from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, due in part to Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959).

**Didactic literature:** Literature intended to instruct or educate. For example, Virgil’s *Georgics* contains farming advice in verse form.

**Dirge:** A short poetic expression of grief. A dirge differs from an **elegy** (*see below*) in that it often is embedded within a larger work, is less highly structured, and is meant to be sung. Ariel’s song “Full fathom five thy father lies” in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is an example of a dirge.

**Drama:** A composition that is meant to be performed. The term often is used interchangeably with **play** (*see below*), but drama is a broader term that includes some forms that may not strictly be defined as plays, such as radio broadcasts, comedy sketches, and opera.

**Dramatic monologue:** A poem that contains words that a fictional or historical character speaks to a particular audience. Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “Ulysses” is a famous example.

**Dystopic literature:** A genre of fiction that presents an imagined future society that purports to be perfect and utopian but that the author presents to the reader as horrifyingly inhuman. Usually the author intends to warn contemporary readers that their own society resembles, or is in danger of resembling, this flawed future world. George Orwell’s 1984 and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* are well-known works of dystopic literature.

**Eclogue:** A short **pastoral** poem (*see below*) in the form of a **soliloquy** (*see below*) or dialogue between two shepherds. Virgil’s *Eclogues* is the most famous example of this genre.

**Elegy:** A formal poem that laments the death of a friend or public figure, or, occasionally, a meditation on death itself. In Greek and Latin poetry, the term applies to a specific type of meter (alternating hexameters and pentameters) regardless of content, but only some elegies in English obey that meter. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem “Adonais,” which mourns the death of John Keats, is an example of an elegy.

**Epic:** A lengthy narrative that describes the deeds of a heroic figure, often of national or cultural importance, in elevated language. Strictly, the term applies only to verse narratives like *Beowulf* or Virgil’s *Aeneid,* but it is used to describe prose, drama, or film works of similar scope, such as Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* or Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables.*

**Epigram:** A succinct, witty statement, often in verse. For example, William Wordsworth’s observation “The child is the father of the man.”

**Essay:** A form of nonfictional discussion or argument that Michel de Montaigne pioneered in the 1500s. Essays are flexible in form: although they usually are short prose works, there are also examples of book-length essays (by John Locke) and verse essays (by Alexander Pope).

**Fable:** A short prose or verse narrative, such as those by Aesop, that illustrates a moral, which often is stated explicitly at the end. Frequently, the characters in a fable are animals that embody different human character traits.

**Fiction:** An invented narrative, as opposed to one that reports true events.

**Legend:** A story about a heroic figure derived from oral tradition and based partly on fact and partly on fiction. The terms legend and **myth** (*see below*) are often used interchangeably, but legends are typically rooted in real historical events, whereas myths are primarily supernatural. The stories of King Arthur and Robin Hood are examples of legends.

**Lyric:** A short poetic composition that describes the thoughts of a single speaker. Most modern poetry is lyrical (as opposed to dramatic or narrative), employing such common forms as the ode and sonnet.

**Memoir:** An autobiographical work. Rather than focus exclusively on the author’s life, it pays significant attention to the author’s involvement in historical events and the characterization of individuals other than the author. A famous example is Winston Churchill’s *Memoirs of the Second World War.*

**Metafiction:** Fiction that concerns the nature of fiction itself, either by reinterpreting a previous fictional work or by drawing attention to its own fictional status. Examples of the former include John Gardner’s *Grendel,* which retells the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* from a new perspective, and Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours,* which portrays three women connected to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway,* including Woolf herself. An example of the latter is Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* in which the narrator tells the story and simultaneously comments on his own telling of the story.

**Myth:** A story about the origins of a culture’s beliefs and practices, or of supernatural phenomena, usually derived from oral tradition and set in an imagined supernatural past. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is a famous early example. Some writers, such as William Blake and William Butler Yeats, have invented their own myths. Myths are similar, but not equivalent, to **legends** (*see above*).

**Noir:** A fiction genre, popularized in the 1940s, with a cynical, disillusioned, loner protagonist. Noir often involves crime or the criminal underworld. The term stems from “film noir,” which describes films of similar style and content. Classic examples of noir fiction include Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* and Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon.*

**Nonfiction:** A narrative work that reports true events.

**Novel:** A fictional prose narrative of significant length. Since the novel form became popular in the 1700s, however, the term has come to describe other works—nonfiction novels, novels in verse, short novels, and others—that do not necessarily fit this strict definition.

* **Autobiographical novel:** A novel that tells a nonfictional, autobiographical story but uses novelistic techniques, such as fictionalized dialogue or anecdotes, to add color, immediacy, or thematic unity. Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an autobiographical novel.
* **Bildungsroman:** A German term, meaning “formation novel,” for a novel about a child or adolescent’s development into maturity, with special focus on the protagonist’s quest for identity. James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a notable example.
* **Epistolary novel:** A novel written in the form of letters exchanged by characters in the story, such as Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* or Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple.* This form was especially popular in the 1700s.
* **Historical novel:** A novel set in an earlier historical period that features a plot shaped by the historical circumstances of that period. Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient,* written in the early 1990s, portrays a tragic romance set against the backdrop of World War II.
* **Novel of ideas:** A novel, such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea,* that the author uses as a platform for discussing ideas. Character and plot are of secondary importance.
* **Novel of manners:** A novel that focuses on the social customs of a certain class of people, often with a sharp eye for irony. Jane Austen’s novels are prime examples of this genre.
* **Picaresque novel:** Originally, a realistic novel detailing a scoundrel’s exploits. The term grew to refer more generally to any novel with a loosely structured, episodic plot that revolves around the adventures of a central character. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* is a classic picaresque novel.
* **Social protest novel:** A novel in which the author’s aim is to tell a story that illuminates and draws attention to contemporary social problems with the goal of inciting change for the better. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* which exposed the horrors of African- American slavery, and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath,* which popularized the plight of penniless migrant workers during the Great Depression, are examples.
* **Verse novel:** A full-length fictional work that is novelistic in nature but written in verse rather than prose. Examples include Aleksandr Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* and Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate.*

**Novella:** A work of fiction of middle length, often divided into a few short chapters, such as Henry James’s *Daisy Miller.*

**Ode:** A serious lyric poem, often of significant length, that usually conforms to an elaborate metrical structure. An example is William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality.”

**Parable:** A short narrative that illustrates a moral by means of **allegory** (see above).

**Parody:** A humorous and often satirical imitation of the style or particular work of another author. Henry Fielding’s *Shamela* is a parody of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela.*

**Pastiche:** A work that imitates the style of a previous author, work, or literary genre. Alternatively, the term may refer to a work that contains a hodgepodge of elements or fragments from different sources or influences. Pastiche differs from **parody** in that its imitation is not meant as a form of mockery. For example, John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* was written in the 1960s but imitates the style of the Victorian novel.

**Pastoral:** A celebration of the simple, rustic life of shepherds and shepherdesses, usually written by a sophisticated, urban writer. Christopher Marlowe’s poem “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” epitomizes pastoral themes.

**Play:** A story meant to be performed in a theater before an audience. Most plays are written in dialogue form and are divided into several **acts.** Many include stage directions and instructions for sets and costumes.

* **Comedy:** A lighthearted play characterized by humor and a happy ending.
* **Epic theater:** Bertolt Brecht’s Marxist approach to theater, which rejects emotional and psychological engagement in favor of critical detachment. His plays *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mother Courage* are two famous works in this genre.
* **Farce:** A form of high-energy comedy that plays on confusions and deceptions between characters and features a convoluted and fast-paced plot. Farce often incorporates buffoonery, slapstick, and stock characters to provoke uproarious laughter. Molière was a master of farce with such plays as *The Imaginary Invalid.*
* **Miracle play:** A play from the Middle Ages featuring saints or miraculous appearances by the Virgin Mary.
* **Morality play:** A play written in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries that presents an **allegory** (*see above*) of the Christian struggle for salvation.
* **Mystery play:** A short play based on a biblical story. Mystery plays, popular in the Middle Ages, often were presented in **cycles,** in which dozens of plays were performed at different locations throughout a city and collectively presented the most significant moments in the Bible.
* **Noh drama:** A ritualized form of Japanese drama that evolved in the 1300s involving masks and slow, stylized movement.
* **Problem play:** A play that confronts a contemporary social problem with the intent of changing public opinion on the matter. Henrik Ibsen popularized this form in plays such as *Hedda Gabler.*
* **Tragedy:** A serious play that ends unhappily for the protagonist. Sophocles’ *Antigone* is one of the best-known Greek tragedies.
* **Tragicomedy:** A play such as Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* that mixes elements of tragedy and comedy.
* **One-act play:** A play consisting of a single act, without intermission and running usually less than an hour. Edward Albee’s *Zoo Story* is a well-known example.

**Primitivist literature:** Works that express a preference for the natural over the artificial in human culture, and a belief that the life of primitive cultures is preferable to modern lifestyles. Primitivism is often associated with a nostalgia for the lost innocence of a natural, childlike past. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the foremost advocates of primitivism in works such as *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse.*

**Propaganda:** A work of didactic literature that aims to influence the reader on a specific social or political issue. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* is an example of propaganda instrumental in the American Revolution.

**Prose:** Any composition not written in verse. The basic unit of prose is the sentence, which distinguishes it from **free verse** (see **poetry,** above), in which the basic unit is a line of verse. Prose writing can be rhythmic, but on the whole, rhythm in prose is less pronounced than in verse. Prose works encompass everything from Henry James’s *The Ambassadors,* with its elaborate sentences, to Amy Tan’s interconnected stories in *The Joy Luck Club.*

**Prose poem:** A poetic work that features the strong rhythms of **free verse** (*see* **Rhythm and Meter,***above*) but is presented on the page in the form of prose, without line breaks. Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* is an example of a prose poem.

**Romance:** A nonrealistic story, in verse or prose, that features idealized characters, improbable adventures, and exotic settings. Although love often plays a significant role, the association of “romance” with “love” is a modern phenomenon. Romances, such as Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene,* were particularly popular in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

* **Chivalric romance:** A romance that describes the adventures of medieval knights and celebrates their strict code of honor, loyalty, and respectful devotion to women. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is an example of a chivalric romance.

**Satire:** A work that exposes to ridicule the shortcomings of individuals, institutions, or society, often to make a political point. Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is one of the most well known satires in English.

**Science fiction:** Fiction that is set in an alternative reality—often a technologically advanced future—and that contains fantastical elements. The genre traces its roots to the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells in the late 1800s. Notable 20th-century science fiction writers include Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov.

**Short story:** A work of prose fiction that is much shorter than a novel (rarely more than forty pages) and focused more tightly on a single event. Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden Party” is a masterful short story.

**Short-short story:** A particularly compressed and truncated short story. Short-short stories are rarely longer than 1,000 words.

**Soliloquy:** A speech, often in verse, by a lone character. Soliloquies are most common in drama, perhaps the most famous example being the “To be or not to be” speech in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet.*