*Oxford: Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*

**metaphor**

a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. (dictionary.com)

“Grass” by Carl Sandburg

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.

Shovel them under and let me work –

I am the grass; I cover all.

The metaphor “I am the grass” in Carl Sandburg’s “Grass” indicates that a dangerous oblivion occurs after time passes after a war. When a nation moves on and finds a sense of normalcy after deadly conflicts, the grass, or art, needs to remind people of the lessons learned from war.

**simile**

An explicit comparison between two different things, actions, or feelings, using the words ‘as’ or ‘like’. (*Oxford: Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*)

“The Fish” by Elizabeth Bishop

Here and there

his brown skin hung in strips

like ancient wallpaper

The speaker describes a fish, an old man with much life experience. The man has endured many hardships as evidenced by its worn skin, which the speaker compares to “ancient wallpaper”, transforming the fish’s appearance from degraded to beautiful.

**pathetic fallacy**

the endowment of nature, inanimate objects, etc., with human traits and feelings (dictionary.com) (type of metaphor and personification)

“In My Craft or Sullen Art” Dylan Thomas

Not for the proud man apart

From the raging moon I write

On these spindrift pages

The speaker writes poetry from the “raging moon”, normally considered a beautiful place when viewed from the earth, but a distant and isolated place in reality. This pathetic fallacy expresses how his alienation and solitude give his words that appear “on these spindrift pages” life and beauty.

**metonymy**

Substitution of thing with related thing (type of metaphor)

“The Tyger” by William Blake

When the stars threw down their spears,

And watered heaven with their tears,

Did he smile his work to see?

The “stars” or destiny, “threw down their spears” or created hardship for the speaker. The speaker wonders why “he” or God, might “smile” after a travesty caused by “spears”, a metonymy that speaks to the obstacles and difficulties of life.

**synecdoche**

Part used to represent whole or whole used to represent part (type of metaphor and metonymy)

“Preludes” T.S. Eliot

One thinks of all the hands

That are raising dingy shades

In a thousand furnished rooms.

In T.S. Eliot’s “Preludes”, the speaker sees a synecdoche “hands” instead of people “raising dingy shades” because he believes unconscious thought, habits, and routines can consume people and lead to a meaningless life.

**personification**

A figure of speech by which animals, abstract ideas, or inanimate things are referred to as if they are human. (*Oxford: Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*) (type of metaphor)

“Sestina” by Elizabeth Bishop

It’s time for tea now; but the child

is watching the teakettle’s small hard tears

dance like mad on the hot black stove,

the way the rain must dance on the house.

The speaker in “Sestina” personifies “the teakettle’s small hard tears” that “dance like mad” as a way to express the creativity and imagination of a child. The child turns tears and rain, normally thought to represent sadness, into something lively and celebratory. Art and poetry, including this sestina, has the same uplifting power.

**oxymoron**

A figurative use of language in which two opposite qualities are conjoined, as in bitter-sweet (litencyc.com)

Claude McKay “America”

“I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.”

The speaker describes America as a “cultured hell”, an oxymoron that contains the sophistication and beauty of America, and its cruelty and injustices.

**alliteration**

the repetition of the same or a similar sound at or near the beginning of each word in a series (dictionary.com)

“Facing It” Yusef Komunyakaa

My black face fades,

hiding inside the black granite.

As the speaker gazes at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, his “black face fades”. The alliteration “face fades” shows that he wonders if his service to his country is insignificant and will be forgotten by the general population.

**rhyme**

identity in sound of some part, especially the end, of words or lines of verse (dictionary.com)

“The Chimney Sweeper” by William Blake

When my mother died I was very young,

And my father sold me while yet my tongue

Could scarely cry ‘weep! ‘weep! ‘weep! ‘weep!

So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

The rhyme “young” and “tongue” indicate how the chimney sweeper’s age accounts for their lack of voice or power, and control over their own destiny.

**parallel structure**

The arrangement of similarly constructed clauses, sentences, or verse lines in a pairing or other sequence suggesting some correspondence between them. (*Oxford: Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*)

“The Fly” William Blake

Am not I

A fly like thee?

Or art not thou

A man like me?

The parallel structure in this stanza connects the speaker to the fly, an insignificant, powerless, free, and innocent creature.

**paradox**

A statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a possible truth (dictionary.com)

“Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent’s Narrow Room”

In truth the prison, into which we doom

Ourselves, no prison is …

The speaker depicts the power of perception and consciousness through the paradox “the prison, into which we doom ourselves, no prison is …”; a physical space or a job cannot truly limit one’s freedom because an individual can always create liberty with faith and belief.

**apostrophe**

a digression in the form of an address to someone not present, or to a personified object or idea, as “O Death, where is thy sting?” (dictionary.com) (type of metaphor and personification)

“The Sun Rising” by John Donne

Busy old fool, unruly sun,

Why dost thou thus,

Through windows, and through curtains call on us?

The speaker addresses the “unruly sun” using an apostrophe that reveals how he tries to slow down time and appreciate the moment. The speaker wants to stop the sun, or the passage of time.

**sensory imagery**

Uses of language in a literary work that evoke sense-impressions by literal or figurative reference to perceptible or concrete objects, scenes, actions, or states, as distinct from the language of abstract argument or exposition. (*Oxford: Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*)

“Twilight Train” by Eileen Myles

A woman

chewing gum by the window

of the train. Which heaves

its accordion on & we move.

They call it choo-choo

because of the faint chooing

sound as it starts. It’s

twee too & dit dit dit

eel & screech. All this as

the colors change.

The sensory images in “Twilight Train” depict how reality and identity cannot be labeled or defined by descriptive words.

**allusion**

An indirect or passing reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work, the nature and relevance of which is not explained by the writer but relies on the reader’s familiarity with what is thus mentioned. (*Oxford: Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*)

“The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be

The allusion “to be” references Hamlet’s soliloquy, connecting the speaker to a character that experiences self-doubt, suicidal thoughts, and a desire to find a way out of their suffering.

**irony**

a defiance of expectation

from *An Explanation of America: A Love of Death* by Robert Pinsky

Dissolved among the particles of the garden

Or into the motion of the grass and air,

Imagine the child happy to be a thing.

Imagine, then, that on the same wide prairie

Some people are threshing in the terrible heat

With horses and machines …

The speaker moves from “the motion of the grass and air” to “some people … threshing in the terrible heat” as a way

**repetition**

“Tintern Abbey” by William Wordsworth

Five years have past; five summers, with the length

Of five long winters! and again I hear

These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs

With a soft inland murmur.

The speaker repeats “five” to emphasize how their perspective has changed with the passage of time.

**tension**

The interplay of conflicting elements in a piece of literature (*Barron’s AP English*)

“Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent’s Narrow Room” by William Wordsworth

Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,

Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,

High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,

Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells

The images of “Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent’s Narrow Room” move between confinement and freedom; one can be physically confined but also mentally free at the same time.

**hyperbole**

Exaggeration for the sake of emphasis in a figure of speech not meant literally. (*Oxford: Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*) (type of metaphor)

“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” by William Wordsworth

Continuous as the stars that shine

And twinkle on the milky way,

They stretched in never-ending line

Along the margin of a bay

The hyperbole “never-ending line” captures the boundlessness of beauty and the limitlessness of the imagination; the speaker transforms nature into something wonderful.

**symbol**

Anything that stands for or represents something else beyond it – usually an idea conventionally associated with it. (*Oxford: Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*)

“A Small Moment” by Cornelius Eady

… They are about

To pull some sort of toast with cheese

From the oven. When I ask:

*What’s that smell*? I am being

A poet, I am asking

What everyone else in the shop

Wanted to ask, but somehow couldn’t

The question “*What’s that smell?*” symbolizes the poet’s attempt to discover mysteries and beauties of the small, but exciting details of life.

**juxtaposition**

The action of placing two or more things close together or side by side, or one thing with or beside another (Oxford English Dictionary)

from *An Explanation of America: A Love of Death by Robert Pinsky*

The child’s heart lightens, tending like a bubble

Towards the currents of the grass and sky,

The pure potential of the clear blank spaces.

The speaker juxtaposes “a bubble” with “clear blank spaces” to highlight how children, like optimistic Americans, gravitate toward a free and wild existence, “the currents of the grass and sky”. Even if they are contained and enclosed “like a bubble” with limited experiences, children believe in possibility of a great future, full of adventure.