

many traditional concepts in the classification and analysis of plots. The *archetypal critic* Northrop Frye reduced all plots to four types that reflect the myths corresponding to the four seasons of the year. Structuralist critics, who conceive diverse plots as sets of alternative conventions and codes for constructing a fictional narrative, analyze and classify these conventional plot forms on the model of linguistic theory. (See *structuralist criticism* and *narratology*, and the discussion of plots in Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 1975, pp. 205–24.) And some recent critical theorists have undertaken to explode entirely the traditional treatments of plots, on the ground that any notion of the “unity” of a plot and of its “teleological” progress toward a resolution are illusory, or else that the resolution itself is only a facade to mask the irreconcilable conflicts and contradictions (whether psychological or social) that are the true components of any literary text. See under *poststructuralism*.

For recent developments in the concept of plot, see *narrative and narratology*. Refer to Aristotle, *Poetics*; E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927); R. S. Crane, “The Concept of Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*,” in Crane, ed., *Critics and Criticism* (1952); Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961); Elder Olson, *Tragedy and the Theory of Drama* (1966); Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (1966); Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967); Eric S. Rabkin, *Narrative Suspense* (1974); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (trans., 1977); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1980); Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Invention in Narrative* (1984).

Poetic Diction. The term **diction** signifies the types of words, phrases, and sentence structures, and sometimes also of figurative language, that constitute any work of literature. A writer’s diction can be analyzed under a great variety of categories, such as the degree to which the vocabulary and phrasing is abstract or concrete, Latin or Anglo-Saxon in origin, colloquial or formal, technical or common. See *style* and *poetic license*.

Many poets in all ages have used a distinctive language, a “poetic diction,” which includes words, phrasing, and figures not current in the ordinary discourse of the time. In modern discussion, however, the term **poetic diction** is applied especially to poets who, like Edmund Spenser in the Elizabethan age or G. M. Hopkins in the Victorian age, deliberately employed a diction that deviated markedly not only from common speech, but even from the writings of other poets of their era. And in a frequent use, “poetic diction” denotes the special style developed by *neoclassic* writers of the eighteenth century who, like Thomas Gray, believed that “the language of the age is never the language of poetry” (letter to Richard West, 1742). This **neoclassic poetic diction** was in large part derived from the characteristic usage of admired earlier poets such as the Roman Virgil, Edmund Spenser, and John Milton, and was based on the reigning principle of *decorum*, according to which a poet must adapt the “level” and type of his diction to the mode and status of a particular genre (see *style*). Formal satire, such as Alexander Pope’s *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735), because it represented a poet’s direct

commentary on everyday matters, permitted—indeed required—the use of language really spoken by urbane and cultivated people of the time. But what were ranked as the higher genres, such as epic, tragedy, and ode, required a refined and elevated poetic diction to raise the style to the level of the form, while pastoral and descriptive poems, which necessitated reference to what were considered lowly materials, used a special diction to invest these materials with a dignity and elegance appropriate to poetry.

Prominent characteristics of eighteenth-century poetic diction were its *archaism* and its use of recurrent *epithets*; its preference for resounding words derived from Latin (“refulgent,” “irriguous,” “umbrageous”); the frequent *invocations* to, and *personifications* of, abstractions and inanimate objects; and the persistent use of *periphrasis* (a roundabout, elaborate way of saying something) to avoid what were perceived as low, technical, or commonplace terms by means of a substitute phrase that was thought to be of higher dignity and decorum. Among the many periphrases in James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1726–30) are “the finny tribe” for “fish,” “the bleating kind” for “sheep,” and “from the snowy leg . . . the inverted silk she drew” instead of “she took off her silk stocking.” The following stanza from Thomas Gray’s excellent period piece, “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” (1747), manifests all these devices of neoclassic poetic diction. Contemporary readers took special pleasure in the ingenuity of the periphrases by which Gray, to achieve the stylistic elevation appropriate to an ode, managed to describe schoolboys at play while evading the use of common, hence what were considered to be unpoetic, words such as “swim,” “cage,” “boys,” “hoop,” and “bat”:

Say, Father Thames, for thou hast seen
Full many a sprightly race
Disporting on thy margent green
The paths of pleasure trace;
Who foremost now delight to cleave
With pliant arm thy glassy wave?
The captive linnet which enthrall?
What idle progeny succeed
To chase the rolling circle’s speed,
Or urge the flying ball?

In William Wordsworth’s famed attack on the neoclassic doctrine of a special language for poetry, in his preface of 1800 to *Lyrical Ballads*, he claimed that there is no “essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition”; decried the poetic diction of eighteenth-century writers as “artificial,” “vicious,” and “unnatural”; set up as the criterion for a valid poetic language that it be, not a matter of artful contrivance, but the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”; and, by a drastic reversal of the class-hierarchy of linguistic decorum, claimed that the best model for the natural expression of feeling is not upper-class speech, but the speech of “humble and rustic life.”

See Thomas Quayle, *Poetic Diction: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Verse* (1924); Geoffrey Tillotson, “Eighteenth-Century Poetic Diction” (1942), reprinted in *Eighteenth-Century English Literature*, ed. James L. Clifford (1959);

J. Arthos, *The Language of Natural Description in Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (1949); M. H. Abrams, "Wordsworth and Coleridge on Diction and Figures," in *The Correspondent Breeze* (1984). For general treatments of the diverse vocabularies of poets, refer to Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (rev., 1973), and Winifred Novotny, *The Language Poets Use* (1962).

Poetic Justice was a term coined by Thomas Rymer, an English critic of the later seventeenth century, to signify the distribution, at the end of a literary work, of earthly rewards and punishments in proportion to the virtue or vice of the various characters. Rymer's view was that a poem (in a sense that includes dramatic tragedy) is an ideal realm of its own, and should be governed by ideal principles of *decorum* and morality and not by the random way things often work out in the real world. No important critics or literary writers since Rymer's day have acceded, in any but a highly qualified way, to his rigid recommendation of poetic justice; it would, for example, destroy the possibility of tragic suffering, which exceeds what the protagonist has deserved because of his or her *tragic flaw*.

See Introduction to *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (1956); M. A. Quinlan, *Poetic Justice in the Drama* (1912).

Poetic License. John Dryden in the late seventeenth century defined poetic license as "the liberty which poets have assumed to themselves, in all ages, of speaking things in verse which are beyond the severity of prose." In its most common use the term is confined to *diction* alone, to justify the poet's departure from the rules and conventions of standard spoken and written prose in matters such as syntax, word order, the use of archaic or newly coined words, and the conventional use of *eye-rhymes* (wind-bind, daughter-laughter). The degree and kinds of linguistic freedom assumed by poets have varied according to the conventions of each age, but in every case the justification of the freedom lies in the success of the effect. The great opening sentence of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), for example, departs radically, but with eminent success, from the colloquial language of his time in the choice and order of words, in idiom and figurative construction, and in syntax, to achieve a distinction of language and grandeur of announcement commensurate with Milton's high subject and the tradition of the epic form.

In a broader sense "poetic license" is applied not only to language, but to all the ways in which poets and other literary authors are held to be free to violate, for special effects, the ordinary norms not only of common discourse but also of literal and historical truth, including the devices of meter and rhyme, the recourse to literary *conventions*, and the representation of fictional characters and events. In *1 Henry IV*, for example, Shakespeare follows Samuel Daniel's history in verse of the Wars of the Roses by making the valiant Hotspur much younger than he was in fact, in order to serve as a more effective *foil* to the apparently dissolute Prince Hal. A special case is **anachronism**—the placing of an event or person or thing outside of its historical era. Shakespeare described his Cleopatra as wearing Elizabethan corsets; and in *Julius Caesar*,