U

understatement

emphasizing a point by deliberately representing it as smaller or less significant than it is. Understatement forces the reader to consider real conclusions and real consequences, thus reaching his or her own understanding of the full import of the item. Understatement joins **dissonance** and **absurdity** as key devices in sophisticated humor.

"Falling from a twentieth story window may negatively affect your physical health and well-being" is an example of understatement. The discerning reader may manage a wry smile (and a certain amount of awareness) as s/he contemplates the lethal consequences of such a fall.

Understatement can be used, paradoxically, to create a sense of authority or absoluteness not communicated by stronger phrasing. Bartleby's "I prefer not to" in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" carries more weight than would an "I refuse," or "I won't do it," perhaps because Bartleby's phrase provides little room for direct confrontation (indeed, Bartleby alone knows what he 'prefers' and it is the intent with which he follows his preference that creates conflict).

Unitarian

An adherent of a variety of Christianity that holds belief in a single unified deity (God) rather than a three-part monotheistic figure (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). Sir Isaac Newton was likely a unitarian, explaining why he did not take complete religious orders at Cambridge. Capitalized, the term refers to a specific religious body, of literary interest because the Unitarians of nineteenth century New England, having split off from the **Trinitarian** Calvinist churches, in a further split produced the **Transcendentalist** movement.

unities, dramatic

applied to stage pieces by eighteenth century critics, who found justification for the unities in Aristotle and their own minimal confidence in the ability of an audience to suspend disbelief. Underpinning the concept is the notion that a convincing play gives the audience the illusion that they are watching (and even part of) a real event. The unities included time (the general claim was that all action must take place within a 24 hour period); place (the stage should not be declared a drawing room in one scene and the deck of a ship in the next); and action (the plot should be unified and not broken by the clown scenes favored by Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare).

Samuel Johnson rejected the unities in his *Preface to the Works of William Shakespeare*, pointedly noting that the members of an audience are really in a theatre and could as easily imagine themselves in different places for different scenes as imagine themselves outside the theatre in the first place. Johnson suggested that audiences never become unaware that they are watching a performance rather than reality. Since viewers are not known to rush from theaters in terror following the appearance of dinosaurs, aliens, or predatory monsters on film, a modern should find good cause to agree with Johnson rather than the advocates of the unities. (We may note how contemporary 3-D films

enhance our image of reality in the movie theatre. However, the illusion does not replace reality; I recall how my daughter, when quite young, decided she was frightened by the proximity of a dinosaur in an I-MAX film and responded, quite logically, by removing her 3-D glasses, an act that sent the dinosaur back to the flat screen.)

Johnson refutes two of the three (unity of time and unity of place), casually ignoring Shakespeare's deviation from the third (action) as he both affirms its importance and holds Shakespeare's plays quite sufficiently unified in action through the presence of a continuous direction of plot.

unpromising hero (folklore term)

Based, doubtlessly, on the human desire to support the 'runt of the litter' or cheer for the underdog, the 'unpromising hero' is just that: a person of little apparent potential who manages a great success. He is a prominent figure in folklore: Jack in "Jack and the Beanstalk"; the miller's third son in "Puss 'n Boots"; and even the boy, Arthur, who pulled the sword from the stone and proved himself Arthur Pendragon, true ruler of Britain, are examples.

In literature, Victor Hugo's heroic convict, Jean Valjean (*Les Miserables*); Sir Walter Scott's "black sluggard" in the tournament in *Ivanhoe* (King Richard in disguise); and J.R.R. Tolkien's various heroic hobbits, particularly Bilbo in *The Hobbit* constitute excellent examples. Eowyn (*Lord of the Rings*), who destroys the Witch-king of Angmar while in the guise of a boy gives another slant to the concept. Historical "unpromising heroes" include the cross-dressing theme, notably in the person of the peasant girl who became Joan of Arc. Historical / mythic figures such as David, the shepherd boy who slew Goliath and became the great king of the Israelites, provide more standard examples.

While unpromising heroes are by far the exception in traditional epics and tragedy (heroes must be of proper noble blood, though it should be noted that Oedipus, much like Arthur, had an 'unpromising' upbringing and Shakespeare's Prince Hal delighted in unpromising behavior), unpromising heroes are more than common in literature after the Romantic period – so common they may not be all that 'unpromising.' The values of Victorian England are middle class; an ordinary child like *David Copperfield* (Charles Dickens) or an illegitimate one like Esther Summerson (Dickens's *Bleak House*) may be as heroic as any other. On the American side of the ocean, all success must be earned; the frontier is imagined as the great leveler from which the truly heroic may rise. The American Western movie highlights this tradition: drunken old Rooster Cogburn attains heroic success in "True Grit"; to considerably better purpose, the James Stewart eastern lawyer, incompetent with a gun, stands as the hero of John Ford's allegorical "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance."

unreliable narrator

Authors lie – and they're good at it. Beneath that truism can be found a literary technique, the use of the unreliable narrator, in which the narrative voice of a piece offers questionable or blatantly false information. The use is obvious and easy to discern in first-person narration. That Huck Finn's depiction of the 'beautiful' Grangerford parlor is aesthetically unreliable is obvious, and scarcely masks Mark Twain's contemptuous depiction of backwoods 'culture.' That

'Humbert Humbert,' the fictional voice behind Vladimer Nabakov's *Lolita*, offers an unreliable account of his interaction with the girl, Lo, should be more than obvious.

In a third person narration the technique creates more ambivalence, particularly when the narrator appears to offer an 'objective' voice rather than one centering on the viewpoint of the protagonist. Henry James is considered a master of use of the 'unreliable narrator,' with even his apparently straight-forward "Daisy Miller" leaving unanswered questions. The narrator simultaneously knows too much and too little about Winterbourne, leaving the reader's mind full of gossip and half-truths about the protagonist. Vladimir Nabakov's narrator in *Pnin* is a "friend" of Pnin's, and the narrator's view appears distorted by their petty rivalries.

One of the most effective uses of the unreliable narrator is that in William Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," as the narrator argues with a little girl who insists she plays with two children whose tombstones are found in the churchyard – and remains unaware that the other five refer to two "at sea" (lost or dead), two in a seaport town (embarking on the journey of death) and herself, who lives with her mother a mere few steps away (presumably in the 'potter's field' of the indigent dead outside the churchyard, as she describes a location far too close to indicate the presence or any corporeal dwelling). The narrator reaches the end still trying to convince the girl that she cannot play with the dead, and unaware that she has described herself as one of them.

utopia

a piece depicting a future or separate civilization in which all is delightful, wonderful, fulfilling, and generally near perfect.

Sir Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (meaning 'nowhere') is the source of the name as Moore describes a society which he might deem perfect. Several pieces place utopias in inaccessible valleys (notably James Hilton's *Lost Horizons* featuring the imaginary Shangri La based on Priester John legends from medieval Europe). H.G. Wells uses a similar device in his dystopic "The Country of the Blind." The jewel-filled land in Voltaire's *Candide* is likewise inaccessible. Unknown islands and cities of the future also provide convenient locations for these 'nowheres.' H.G. Wells is among the authors who peopled the future with superior realms.

V

Victorian literature

British literature written during the long reign of Queen Victoria, a period covering much of the nineteenth century. The term may be generally used to refer to literature written from the end of the Romantic period up to the **Decadent** and **naturalistic** writings of the end of the century, which separated the 'late Victorian period' from the 'high Victorian.'

Major high Victorian writers include poets Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Matthew Arnold; novelists Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackery and Anthony Trollope; critics Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, and John Ruskin; not to mention the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Pre-Raphaelite writers, and many others. Tennyson is often held as

a figurehead of Victorian writing, his less thoughtful pieces (*The Idylls of the King*, "A Higher Pantheism") joining Matthew Arnold's prose (*Culture and Anarchy*) as models of the Victorian sensibility. The era's underlying intellectual tensions and social contradictions can be seen in Tennyson's deeper poems ("In Memoriam"), Arnold's and Browning's verse, Dickens's and Eliot's fiction, and Carlyle's and Ruskin's prose, as well as in lesser read authors.

Victorian writers often considered themselves Romantics, Browning, not quite accurately, believing himself a direct descendent of the tradition of Wordsworth and Shelley. The label Romantic can accurately be applied to some Victorians, particularly the Pre-Raphaelites as well as their patron, John Ruskin.

Late Victorian writers included naturalistic novelists such as Samuel Butler, heirs to the Victorian period who moved toward naturalistic ideals such as George Gissing, and the 'decadents,' including Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson, and the like. The 'drift' from the late Victorian to the Edwardian period marks a less extreme shift in prevailing styles than found in the delineation of the high Victorian and late Victorian writing.

visual poetry

poems in which the physical shape of the poem add to the meaning or even provide the central focus of the poem.

John Hollander's "Swan and Shadow" is an excellent example, as the words are arranged to form a picture of a swan and its reflection. Seventeenth century English poet George Herbert wrote a number of pieces of visual poetry, including "Easter Wings" in the form of a set of angel wings and "The Altar" in the form of an altar.

voice, active

that employing 'active' verb forms, forms in which the verb ascribes agency to the sentence's subject: "He *pushed* the book off the table onto the floor." Active voice gives writing a sense of directness, passion, and commitment. It ascribes responsibility. Active voice is the recommended style for editorials and for much scholarly writing in the humanities. Active verb forms include direct present, past, and future tenses and some uses of the present participle (he *was pushing* …).

voice, passive

that employing 'passive' verb forms, forms in which the verb's subject is the object of the action and the agent is undescribed or indirectly described: "The book *was pushed* from the corner of the table." Passive voice creates writing that is dispassionate, emphasizing facts or events while de-emphasizing causal responsibility. Passive voice is preferred in much writing in the social sciences, as it creates a desired sense of distance and objectivity, as events are described in terms of empirically observed and recorded elements. Passive verb forms include the past participle form.

W

Wandering Jew, the

In legend, a man refused to allow Jesus to rest for a moment in his doorway while carrying the Cross to Calvary; as punishment he was condemned to wander the

earth forever, eternally without a place of rest. This figure becomes representative of the Jews, a people without a homeland, condemned to roam the earth forever. The figure of the Wandering Jew appears often in minor roles in literature, such as the Jew with the diorama in Nathanael Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand." The Wandering Jew is sometimes equated to the legendary captain of the Flying Dutchman, condemned to ride the storms at sea forever. Elements of the unquiet wanderer may be found in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, condemned to his continuing penance. Prior to his redemption at the hands of the Bishop, the convict Jean Valjean of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* is treated as such a wanderer, refused a place of rest by all.

willing suspension of disbelief (from John Keats)

the suggestion that the reader must "willingly" accept events, characters, or accounts in a piece of literature that s/he knows are not reflective of real life. An internally consistent story allows "the willing suspension of disbelief," thus allowing the reader to enjoy a ghost story, a story featuring time travel, or potentially a film mentioning a U.S. President named Fred Mertz. Actually fans of "I Love Lucy" would find President Mertz a reach, though the actor who played Fred Mertz, William Fawley, might be found quite believable in such a role, so long as he was identified by any other name – it is this willing suspension of disbelief that allows us to separate Fawley as the blustering, quite serious, political boss of more than one drama from Fawley as the blustering, comic, landlord and neighbor of the Ricardos. We can even accept that Raymond Burr as Perry Mason and Raymond Burr as Ironside are two different persons, though the actor brings almost the same personality to both roles.

One need not believe in ghosts to find that a story about a haunted house creates symptoms of fear (heightened pulse near the climax, etc.). One can chuckle at and appreciate an ironically turned ghost story, even as it does not arouse fear. However, not even the most gullible believer in spirits over the age of 7 can tolerate a "Casper the Friendly Ghost" cartoon. Why? Because the plot inconsistencies prevent the viewer from suspending disbelief --- the viewer digresses from enjoying the piece into a dissatisfied critical mode.

We suspend disbelief regularly as we read, easily accepting the webs of relationships Charles Dickens curls into his fiction. We easily allow Lady Dedlock to be Esther Summerson's mother in *Bleak House*; with scarcely less ease we find ourselves allowing Mr. George to be Mrs. Rouncewell's lost son, old Krook to be old Smallweed's brother-in-law, and the spurned Boythorne's lost love to be Lady Dedlock's sister – a web of relationships progressively moving away from external probability but never breaking the internal structure of the novel.

XYZ

The Year without Summer

1816, the cold, misty summer the Shelleys spent with Byron at Geneva. The summer was famous for providing the atmosphere in which Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, but also for the scandalous domestic arrangements of the poets

Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. Shelley was still legally wed to Harriet Westbrook who was in England (and who committed suicide later in the year), though Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (Mary Shelley) had conducted herself as Shelley's wife for over a year. Byron was traveling with, and likely bedding, his physician, John William Polidari. Claire Claremont, Mary Shelley's stepsister, was traveling with the Shelleys and sometime over the course of the summer became pregnant. Byron took financial responsibility as the child's father, but stated that the child could as well have been Shelley's as his.

Mary Shelley began *Frankenstein* as part of a household contest. The Shelleys, Byron, and Polidari decided each should write a gothic story. Percy Shelley never finished his story; Byron and Polidari each wrote quite forgettable vampire stories; Mary Shelley, possibly inspired by a rumor that Erasmus Darwin had brought a strand of vermicelli to life, began a story about a doctor building a man out of dead parts, the story that became the novel *Frankenstein*.

Zeitgeist (from G.F.W. Hegel)

the Spirit of the Age; the pervasive idea or pattern of ideas of a given time-period. The central element or Hegelian *thesis* of the age. The Spirit of Liberty, by a Hegelian reading, infused the eighteenth century, its first manifestation being the **Glorious Revolution** in England in 1688, its height marked by the American Revolution beginning in 1776, and its collapse marked by the collapse of the French Revolution at the hands of the Parisian mobs at the end of the century. Torch-bearing Liberty, as stands in New York Harbor, is a representation of that Zeitgeist. She is also the goddess Liberty from the French Revolution, clad a bit modestly as the sculptor thoughtfully chose not to send puritanical America a bare-breasted statue.

Zoroastrianism

an originally Middle Eastern religion which adheres to the ideas of the prophet Zoroaster or Zarathrusta; the religion is dualistic, as the equally powerful forces of good and evil fight to control the world. The religion influenced Judaic, Christian, and Islamic theology, particularly regarding the nature ascribed to Satan. Following the ascendancy of Islam in the Middle East, adherents of Zoroastrianism (the Parsees) fled to India.

Fedallah, the fire-worshipping Parsee of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, is a Zoroastrian. He functions as a demon but also as an indication of Captain Ahab's lost moral compass, as Ahab has lost all bearing as to which 'side' is 'good' and which is 'evil.'