American Literature – Exploring the Text

**Step 1**: Read and annotate “O Captain! My Captain!” by Walt Whitman

**Step 2**: At your table, divide the questions below and answer them in your notebook after your notes on Walt Whitman AND adding to your annotations as necessary.

**Step 3**: Make sure you are comfortable with the bold words on the back of this handout. Quiz on Wednesday.

1. Who is the speaker? Is it the poet or a character/persona the poet takes on?  What is the tone of voice adopted? Can you detect any irony\*? How precisely is the speaker defined?  (Note:  You should refer to the speaker as "the speaker" and not as "the poet," even if the voice seems to be the poet's own.
2. Who is the speaker's audience? Does the audience help to define the speaker?
3. What is the poem's literal meaning?
4. What is the poem's theme? Is the theme stated explicitly or implicitly?
5. What is the poem's structure\*? Does it develop in a straightforward manner to a logical conclusion? Is there a shift or turn in its development? How is the shift indicated? Why does a shift take place?
6. How is the poem organized? How does its organization contribute to the development of the poem's subject or theme?
7. What is the poem's meter\*? How does it contribute to the development of the poem's subject or theme? Are there any strategic points where the poem breaks with its rhyme scheme\*? Why?
8. What is the poem's rhyme scheme? How does it contribute to the development of the poem's subject or theme?  Is there any evidence of internal rhymes\*, slant rhymes\*, etc.?
9. Do the lines end with a completion of a thought or closed punctuation (i.e., are they end-stopped\*)? Or do the lines flow without pause, from one to the next (i.e., are they enjambed\*)? If enjambed, does it occur from one couplet\* to the next, one quatrain\* to the next, etc.?
10. How would you characterize the poem's language or diction\*? What effect does this choice of language have on your response to the poem and its speaker?
11. What imagery\* is developed in the poem? Does the poet use metaphor, simile, personification\*, etc.? Does he/she use symbolism\*? Considering the poem's subject matter, are these images obvious ones, or are they unusual and unexpected? Do they contribute to the poem's subject or theme? If so, how?
12. Is there any evidence of repetition, alliteration\*, onomatopoeia\*, or other sound effects in the poem? What do they contribute?
13. Is there any significance to the placement of words in the poem? Is the rhythm of any particular words or lines noteworthy?
14. Is there any significance to the poem's punctuation or the capitalization and spelling of words? (Note:  These features are often the result of modern editing and not original to the author)

Literary Terms (Quiz on Wednesday, 11/21)

***Irony*** is a way of speaking that implies a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, or between what appears to happen and what actually happens.  Ironic speech consists of saying one thing and meaning another.  ***Verbal irony*** occurs when the actual words used are ironic.  ***Dramatic irony*** arises from the situation; frequently, this occurs when the audience knows or understands something that the characters in a drama do not.  ***Cosmic irony*** occurs when an outside force, such as fate, seems to be operating despite the best efforts or intentions of the speaker or a character.

***Structure/Form*** refers to the overall design of a poem, including the patterning of its rhyme, meter, and stanzas.  Form can be ***open*** in form or ***closed*** (highly structured).  ***Blank verse*** is verse written in unrhymed iambic pentameter; it is the poetic form that is closest to spoken English. A ***couplet*** is two consecutive lines of poetry that rhyme.  An ***heroic couplet*** consists of two rhyming lines of iambic pentameter.  A ***tercet*** has three rhyming lines.  A ***quatrain*** has four. Common closed forms include the [*sonnet*](https://www.nku.edu/~rkdrury/poetryexplication.html#Sonnet), [*limerick*](https://www.nku.edu/~rkdrury/poetryexplication.html#Limerick)*,* [*villanelle*](https://www.nku.edu/~rkdrury/poetryexplication.html#Villanelle)*,* [*sestina*](https://www.nku.edu/~rkdrury/poetryexplication.html#Sestina)*,* [*odes*](https://www.nku.edu/~rkdrury/poetryexplication.html#Ode)*,* and [*ballad*](https://www.nku.edu/~rkdrury/poetryexplication.html#Ballad).

***Meter*** is a unit of rhythm in poetry, the pattern of the beats. It is also called a foot. Each foot has a certain number of syllables in it, usually two or three syllables. The difference in types of meter is which syllables are accented and which are not.

[***Meter***](https://www.nku.edu/~rkdrury/poetryexplication.html#Meter), ***rhyme***, and subject are used to identify form in poetry.  Often, deviations from the expected form are more important to the poet's artistry than a poem's regularity.  A ***rhyme scheme*** is the overall pattern of rhyme in a poem.  A pair of rhymed lines is called a ***couplet***. ***Alliteration*** refers to the repetition of similar consonant sounds. Repeated consonant sounds at the beginning of words is called *initial alliteration*.  Repeated consonant sounds in the middle or at the ends of words is called *internal alliteration*. Repetition of vowel sounds is called ***assonance.***  Although definitions differ, ***slant rhyme*** can be said to occur in near rhymes (for instance, *cat* and *cot*, but not *cat* and *coat*). ***Consonance*** is a repetition of consonant sounds.  A line is said to have a ***masculine ending*** when the line ends with a stressed syllable (either a one syllable word, or a word of multiple syllables with emphasis on the last syllable).  A line is said to have a ***feminine ending*** when the line ends on an unstressed syllable.

***End-stopped***--a line of poetry which ends with a period or other punctuation

***Enjambed***--a line of poetry which carries over syntactically to the next line

***Caesura***--a strong pause in the middle of a line of poetry, often marked by punctuation

***Diction*** is the term used to refer to the poet's choice of words in a poem. Words vary in their levels of abstraction, and we can speak of words as being *concrete* or *abstract*.  Words also vary in their formality, and some genres, such as epic and tragedy, call for use of ***elevated*** rather than ***colloquial*** or ***plain*** language.  Words also have specific or direct definitions (***denotations***), as well as implied meanings (***connotations***) associated with their use.  Connotations as well as denotations of words can vary in meaning historically and geographically.

***Imagery*** refers to words used to evoke a sensory experience, including sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste.  Consequently, although *image* seems to refer to something that can be seen, *imagery* is also the term used to describe anything in a poem that appeals to the senses. ***Euphony*** refers to words that sound harmonious together. ***Cacophony*** refers to words that jar against one another.

***Figurative language*** occurs whenever a poet uses words in ways that deviate from their usual meaning.  A ***metaphor*** is a comparison between two things that are otherwise unrelated.  A ***simile*** is a kind of metaphor that uses *like* or *as*in the comparison.  A *mixed metaphor* occurs when the metaphor used produces an incongruous or impossible image; such metaphors are often unintentionally funny.  ***Metonymy*** occurs when the name of one thing is replaced by the name of something closely associated with it. ***Synecdoche*** occurs when a part of something is used to describe the whole. *Overstatement* ***(hyperbole)***may be used to exaggerate what is being described; ***understatement*** describes something as less than it is*.* Both can be used [ironically](https://www.nku.edu/~rkdrury/poetryexplication.html#Irony). ***Personification*** occurs when a non-human animal, object, or abstraction is given human qualities. ***Apostrophe*** is a direct address to something not actually present or without actual human form; consequently, an apostrophe tends to personify its object. ***Onomatopoeia*** is used describe a word or words that sound like the thing they describe.  A ***pun*** is a word that refers to two very different meanings simultaneously.  A ***paradox*** is a statement that simultaneously contradicts itself and makes sense.