

List of Literary and Poetic Terms

Adage

Wise saying; proverb; short, memorable saying that expresses a truth and is handed down from one generation to the next; short saying that expresses an observation or experience about life; maxim; aphorism; apothegm.

Allusion

A reference in one literary work to a character or theme found in another literary work. T. S. Eliot, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" alludes (refers) to the biblical figure John the Baptist in the line *Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter*, . . . In the New Testament, John the Baptist's head was presented to King Herod on a platter.

Ambiguity

A statement which can contain two or more meanings. For example, when the oracle at Delphi told Croesus that if he waged war on Cyrus he would destroy a great empire, Croesus thought the oracle meant his enemy's empire. In fact, the empire Croesus destroyed by going to war was his own.

Anachronism

Use of historically inaccurate details in a text; for example, having a 19th century character using a computer.

Analogy

Comparison of two things that are alike in some respects; metaphors and similes are both types of analogies.

Anecdote

A very short tale told by a character in a literary work. In Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," "The Miller's Tale" and "The Carpenter's Tale" are examples.

Aphorism

A brief statement which expresses an observation on life, usually intended as a wise observation. Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac" contains numerous examples, one of which is *Drive thy business; let it not drive thee*. which means that one should not allow the demands of business to take control of one's moral or worldly commitments.

Apostrophe

A figure of speech wherein the speaker speaks directly to something nonhuman. In these lines from John Donne's poem "The Sun Rising" the poet scolds the sun for interrupting his nighttime activities:

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?

Avant-garde

means "advance guard" or "vanguard" and is used to refer to people or works that are experimental or innovative, particularly with respect to art, culture, and politics. Avant-garde represents a pushing of the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo,

Bildungsroman

A novel or story whose theme is the moral or psychological growth of the main character.

Catharsis

In literature and art, a purification of emotions. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) used the term to describe the effect on the audience of a tragedy acted out on a theater stage. This effect consists in cleansing the audience of disturbing emotions, such as fear and pity, thereby releasing tension. This purgation occurs as a result of either of the following reactions: (1) Audience members resolve to avoid conflicts of the main character—for example, Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* and Creon in *Antigone*—that arouse fear or pity or (2) audience members transfer their own pity and fear to the main character, thereby emptying themselves of these disquieting emotions. In either case, the audience members leave the theater as better persons intellectually, morally, or socially. They have either been cleansed of fear of pity or have vowed to avoid situations that arouse fear and pity. In modern usage, catharsis may refer to any experience, real or imagined, that purges a person of negative emotions.

Characterization

The method a writer uses to reveal the personality of a character in a literary work: Methods may include (1) by what the character says about himself or herself; (2) by what others reveal about the character; and (3) by the character's own actions. Direct characterization occurs when the audience learns character details through explicit presentation. Indirect characterization occurs when the reader must infer character traits by interpreting actions and speech.

Flat – characters with only one dominant trait or aspect, such as greed or anger.

Round- characters that have many traits or aspects to their personality.

Static- characters that do not change during the course of a story.

Dynamic- characters that change during the course of a story.

Classicism

A movement or tendency in art, music, and literature to retain the characteristics found in work originating in classical Greece and Rome. It differs from Romanticism in that while Romanticism dwells on the emotional impact of a work, classicism concerns itself with form and discipline.

Cliché

Overused expression. Examples: *raining cats and dogs*, *snug as a bug in a rug*, *chills running up and down my spine*, *warm as toast*, *short and sweet*. Writers should avoid using clichés whenever possible.

Colloquialism

A **colloquialism** is a phrase that is common in everyday, unconstrained conversation, rather than in formal speech, academic writing, or paralinguistics. Some examples of informal colloquialisms can include words (such as "y'all" or "gonna" or "wanna"), phrases (such as "old as the hills" and "graveyard dead"), or sometimes even an entire aphorism ("There's more than one way to skin a cat").

Connotation and Denotation

The denotation of a word is its dictionary definition. The word **wall**, therefore, denotes an upright structure which encloses something or serves as a boundary. The connotation of a word is its emotional content. In this sense, the word **wall** can also mean an attitude or actions which prevent becoming emotionally close to a person. In Robert Frost's "Mending Wall," two neighbors walk a property line each on his own side of a wall of loose stones. As they walk, they pick up and replace stones that have fallen. Frost thinks it's unnecessary to replace the stones since they have no cows to damage each other's property. The neighbor only says "Good fences make good neighbors." The wall, in this case, is both a boundary (denotation) and a barrier that prevents Frost and his neighbor from getting to know each other, a force prohibiting involvement (connotation).

Diction

An author's choice of words. Since words have specific meanings, and since one's choice of words can affect feelings, a writer's choice of words can have great impact in a literary work. The writer, therefore, must choose his words carefully. Discussing his novel "A Farewell to Arms" during an interview, Ernest Hemingway stated that he had to rewrite the ending thirty-nine times. When asked what the most difficult thing about finishing the novel was, Hemingway answered, "Getting the words right."

Epic

In literature generally, a major work dealing with an important theme. "Gone with the Wind," a film set in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) and Civil War South, is considered an epic motion picture. In poetry, a long work dealing with the actions of gods and heroes. John Milton's "Paradise Lost" is a book length epic poem consisting of twelve subdivisions called books. Homer's "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" are epic poems, the former concerning the Greek invasion of Troy; the latter dealing with the Greek victory over the Trojans and the ten-year journey of Odysseus to reach his island home. **Epigraph**

A brief quotation which appears at the beginning of a literary work.

Epithet

In literature, a word or phrase preceding or following a name which serves to describe the character. Consider the following from Book 1 of Homer's "The Iliad:"

Zeus-loved Achilles, you bid me explain

The wrath of **far-smiting** Apollo.

Euphemism

A mild word or phrase which substitutes for another which would be undesirable because it is too direct, unpleasant, or offensive. The word "joint" is a euphemism for the word "prison."

Figurative Language

In literature, a way of saying one thing and meaning something else. Take, for example, this line by Robert Burns, *My luv is a red, red rose*. Clearly Mr. Burns does not really mean that he has fallen in love with a red, aromatic, many-petaled, long, thorny-stemmed plant. He means that his love is as sweet and as delicate as a rose. While, figurative language provides a writer with the opportunity to write imaginatively, it also tests the imagination of the reader, forcing the reader to go below the surface of a literary work into deep, hidden meanings.

Figure of Speech

An example of figurative language that states something that is not literally true in order to create an effect. Similes, metaphors and personification are figures of speech which are based on comparisons. Metonymy, synecdoche, synesthesia, apostrophe, oxymoron, and hyperbole are other figures of speech.

Foil

A character in a play who sets off the main character or other characters by comparison. In Shakespeare's "Hamlet" Hamlet and Laertes are young men who behave very differently. While Hamlet delays in carrying out his mission to avenge the death of his father, Laertes is quick and bold in his challenge of the king over the death of his father. Much can be learned about each by comparing and contrasting the actions of the two.

Genre

A literary type or form. Drama is a genre of literature. Within drama, genre include tragedy, comedy and other forms.

Hamartia

Serious character flaw of the main character (protagonist) of a Greek tragedy. Often, this flaw is great pride, or [hubris](#). But it may also be prejudice, anger, zealotry, poor judgment, an inherited weakness, or any other serious shortcoming.

Hubris

Greek word for PRIDE, which generally is the root of the tragic flaw/hamartia of a hero in a tragedy.

Hyperbole

A figure of speech in which an overstatement or exaggeration occurs.

Imagery

A word or group of words in a literary work which appeal to one or more of the senses: sight, taste, touch, hearing, and smell.

Inference

A judgment based on reasoning rather than on direct or explicit statement. A conclusion based on facts or circumstances.

In Medias Res

Latin phrase for *in the middle of things*. It means that a story begins in the middle of the plot, usually at an exciting part. The writer of the story later uses [flashback](#) to inform the reader of preceding events.

The Greek poet Homer originated this technique in his two great epics, [The Iliad](#) and [The Odyssey](#).

Invective

The use of angry and insulting language.

Irony

Irony takes many forms. In **irony of situation**, the result of an action is the reverse of what the actor expected. Macbeth murders his king hoping that in becoming king he will achieve great happiness.

Actually, Macbeth never knows another moment of peace, and finally is beheaded for his murderous act. In **dramatic irony**, the audience knows something that the characters in the drama do not. For example, the identity of the murderer in a crime thriller may be known to the audience long before the mystery is solved. In **verbal irony**, the contrast is between the literal meaning of what is said and what is meant. A character may refer to a plan as brilliant, while actually meaning that (s)he thinks the plan is foolish.

Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony. Pervasive irony created by a structural feature such as a naive

protagonist whose viewpoint is consistently wrong, shared by neither author nor reader is known as **structural irony**. The repeated use of a catch phrase and other similar phrases gives the novel an ironic vocabulary, another device that can create structural irony. The title of a story or novel is also an element of **structural irony**. When situational irony is associated with the notion of fate, or a deity, manipulating events so as to “frustrate and mock” a character in a literary work, situational irony has become its near-twin, cosmic irony.

Jargon

Vocabulary understood by members of a profession or trade but usually not by other members of the general public.

Juxtaposition

Placing of two items side by side to create a certain effect, reveal an attitude, or accomplish some other purpose.

Literary Theory

Systematic study of the nature of literature and the methods for analyzing literature. There are many schools of literary criticism such as: Cultural Studies, Deconstruction, Gender Studies/Feminism, Marxist, Modernism, New Historicism, Post-Colonialism, Post-Moderism, Psychoanalytic, Reader-Response, and Structuralism. All of these schools view literature through a particular paradigm and interpret its meaning

Malapropism

Unintentional use of an inappropriate word similar in sound to the appropriate word, often with humorous effect. The word derives from the name *Mrs. Malaprop*, a character in *The Rivals*, a 1775 play by Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Sheridan invented her name from the French words *mal à propos*, loosely translated as *badly chosen, not right for the occasion, or not appropriate*. Mrs. Malaprop has the habit of using near-miss words. For example, she observes that she does not have much *affluence* over her niece and refers to *contiguous* countries as *contagious* countries.

Metaphor

A figure of speech wherein a comparison is made between two unlike quantities without the use of the words "like" or "as." Jonathan Edwards, in his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," has this to say about the moral condition of his parishoners:

There are the black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm and big with thunder;

The comparison here is between God's anger and a storm. Note that there is no use of "like" or "as" as would be the case in a simile

Metonymy

A figure of speech in which a word represents something else which it suggests. For example in a herd of fifty cows, the herd might be referred to as fifty **head** of cattle. The word "head" is the word representing the herd.

Modernism

Modernism was a revolt against the conservative values of realism. Arguably the most paradigmatic motive of modernism is the rejection of tradition and its reprise, incorporation, rewriting, recapitulation, revision and parody in new forms. Modernism rejected the lingering certainty of Enlightenment thinking and also rejected the existence of a compassionate, all-powerful Creator God.

Mood

The atmosphere or feeling created by a literary work, partly by a description of the objects or by the style of the descriptions. A work may contain a mood of horror, mystery, holiness, or childlike simplicity, to name a few, depending on the author's treatment of the work.

Motif

A distinctive feature or repeated theme or idea in a piece of literature.

Myth

An unverifiable story based on a religious belief. The characters of myths are gods and goddesses, or the offspring of the mating of gods or goddesses and humans. Some myths detail the creation of the earth,

while others may be about love, adventure, trickery, or revenge. In all cases, it is the gods and goddesses who control events, while humans may be aided or victimized.

Narrator

The voice and implied speaker of a fictional work, to be distinguished from the actual living author. For example, the narrator of Joyce's "Araby" is not James Joyce himself, but a literary fictional character created expressly to tell the story. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" contains a communal narrator, identified only as "we." See [Point of view](#).

Naturalism

In literature, an extreme form of [realism](#) that developed in France in the 19th Century. It was inspired in part by the scientific determinism of Charles Darwin, an Englishman, and the economic determinism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, both Germans.

Nihilism

Nihilism (a term derived from the Latin word *nihil*, meaning *nothing*) is a philosophy that calls for the destruction of existing traditions, customs, beliefs, and institutions and requires its adherents to reject all values, including religious and aesthetic principles, in favor of belief in nothing.

Oxymoron

A combination of contradictory terms, such as used by Romeo in Act 1, scene 1 of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet:"

Why then, O brawling love! O loving hate!
O heavy lightness, serious vanity;
Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms!
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health!

Paradox

A situation or a statement that seems to contradict itself, but on closer inspection, does not. This line from John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 14" provides an example:

That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me,

The poet paradoxically asks God to knock him down so that he may stand. What he means by this is for God to destroy his present self and remake him as a holier person.

Parallel Structure

A repetition of sentences using the same structure. This line from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address provides an example:

The world will little not nor long remember what we say here,
but it can never forget what they did here.

Parody

A literary work that imitates the style of another literary work. A parody can be simply amusing or it can be mocking in tone, such as a poem which exaggerates the use of alliteration in order to show the ridiculous effect of overuse of alliteration. (See [Satire](#) for related information.)

Pastoral

A literary work that has to do with shepherds and rustic settings. Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shephard to His Love" and Robert Burns' "Sweet Afton" are examples.

Pathetic Fallacy

A fallacy of reason in suggesting that nonhuman phenomena act from human feelings, as suggested by the word "pathetic" from the Greek *pathos*; a literary device wherein something nonhuman found in nature—a beast, plant, stream, natural force, etc.—performs as though from human feeling or motivation. In Jack London's *To Build a Fire*, "The cold of space," London writes, "smote the unprotected tip of the planet, . . ." The word "smote" suggests nature deliberately striking the northern tip of the earth with severe cold.

The poetry of William Wordsworth is replete with instances of pathetic fallacy—weeping streams, etc. Suggested by Richard Battin, Managing Editor - *The News-Sentinel* - Fort Wayne, Indiana. Definition agonized over by Sam McClintic and Tom Campbell, Bell High School.

Personification

A figure of speech in which something nonhuman is given human characteristics. Consider the following lines from Carl Sandburg's "Chicago:"

Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the big shoulders:

Carl Sandburg description of Chicago includes shoulders. Cities do not have shoulders, people do. Sandburg personifies the city by ascribing to it something human, shoulders. "Justice is blind." is another example.

Picaresque novel.

An episodic, often autobiographical novel about a rogue or picaresque (a person of low social status) wandering around and living off his wits. The wandering hero provides the author with the opportunity to connect widely different pieces of plot, since the hero can wander into any situation. Picaresque novels tend to be satiric and filled with petty details.

Plot

The structure of a story. The sequence in which the author arranges events in a story. The structure of a five-act play often includes the rising action, the climax, the falling action, and the resolution. The plot may have a protagonist who is opposed by antagonist, creating what is called, conflict. A plot may include flashback or it may include a subplot which is a mirror image of the main plot. For example, in Shakespeare's, "King Lear," the relationship between the Earl of Gloucester and his sons mirrors the relationship between Lear and his daughters.

Point of View

A piece of literature contains a speaker who is speaking either in the first person, telling things from his or her own perspective, or in the third person, telling things from the perspective of an onlooker. The perspective used is called the Point of View, and is referred to either as first person or third person. If the speaker knows everything including the actions, motives, and thoughts of all the characters, the speaker is referred to as omniscient (all-knowing). If the speaker is unable to know what is in any character's mind but his or her own, this is called limited omniscience.

Postmodernism

A movement away from the viewpoint of modernism. More specifically it is a tendency in contemporary culture characterized by the problem of objective truth and inherent suspicion towards global cultural narrative or meta-narrative. It involves the belief that many, if not all, apparent realities are only social constructs, as they are subject to change inherent to time and place. It emphasizes the role of language, power relations, and motivations; in particular it attacks the use of sharp classifications such as male versus female, straight versus gay, white versus black, and imperial versus colonial.

Protagonist

The hero or central character of a literary work. In accomplishing his or her objective, the protagonist is hindered by some opposing force either human (one of Batman's antagonists is The Joker), animal (Moby Dick is Captain Ahab's antagonist in Herman Melville's "Moby Dick"), or natural (the sea is the antagonist which must be overcome by Captain Bligh).

Pun

A play on words wherein a word is used to convey two meanings at the same time. The line below, spoken by Mercutio in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," is an example of a pun. Mercutio has just been stabbed, knows he is dying and says:

Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a **grave** man.

Mercutio's use of the word "grave" renders it capable of two meanings: a serious person or a corpse in his grave.

Realism

In literature, a movement that stressed the presentation of life as it is, without embellishment or idealization. However, it was not as extreme in this presentation as [Naturalism](#).

Romanticism

In literature, a movement that championed imagination and emotions as more powerful than reason and systematic thinking.

Satire

A piece of literature designed to ridicule the subject of the work. While satire can be funny, its aim is not to amuse, but to arouse contempt. Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" satirizes the English people, making them seem dwarfish in their ability to deal with large thoughts, issues, or deeds.

Short Story

A short fictional narrative. It is difficult to set forth the point at which a short story becomes a short novel (novelette/ novella), or the page number at which a novelette becomes a novel.

Simile

A figure of speech which takes the form of a comparison between two unlike quantities for which a basis for comparison can be found, and which uses the words "like" or "as" in the comparison, as in this line from Ezra Pound's "Fan-Piece, for Her Imperial Lord": *clear as frost on the grass-blade*. In this line, a fan of white silk is being compared to frost on a blade of grass. Note the use of the word "as" in the comparison.

Soliloquy

In drama, a moment when a character is alone and speaks his or her thoughts aloud. In the line "*To be, or not to be, that is the question:*" which begins the famous soliloquy from Act 3, scene 1 of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" Hamlet questions whether or not life is worth living, and speaks of the reasons why he does not end his life.

Sonnet

A lyric poem of fourteen lines whose rhyme scheme is fixed. The rhyme scheme in the Italian form as typified in the sonnets of Petrarch is abbaabba cdecde. The Petrarchian sonnet has two divisions: the first is of eight lines (the octave), and the second is of six lines (the sestet). The rhyme scheme of the English, or Shakespearean sonnet is abab cdcd efef gg. (See [Rhyme Scheme](#)). The change of rhyme in the English sonnet is coincidental with a change of theme in the poem. See [Theme](#). The meter is iambic pentameter.

Southern Gothic

Fictional genre with a setting in the Southern United States that vests its stories with foreboding and grotesquerie. Begun in the twentieth century, Southern Gothic replaces the romanticism of nineteenth-century Gothic works with realism. However, southern Gothic retains the disturbing elements of earlier Gothic works, whether in the form of a deranged character, a forbidding forest, or a sense of impending doom. Among the writers associated with this genre are Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Tennessee Williams.

Stream of Consciousness

A literary style in which one's thoughts and feelings are depicted in a continuous and uninterrupted flow

Style

Many things enter into the style of a work: the author's use of figurative language, diction, sound effects and other literary devices. Ernest Hemingway's style derives, in part, from his short, powerful sentences. The style of the Declaration of Independence can be described as elegant.

Symbolism

A device in literature where an object represents an idea.

Synecdoche

A figure of speech wherein a part of something represents the whole thing. In this figure, the head of a cow might substitute for the whole cow. Therefore, a herd of fifty cows might be referred to as "fifty head of cattle." In Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses" Ulysses refers to his former companions as *free hearts, free foreheads*.

Syntax

The way words are put together to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. It is sentence structure and how it influences the manner in which a reader perceives the writing.

Theme

An ingredient of a literary work which gives the work unity. The theme provides an answer to the question *What is the work about?* There are too many possible themes to recite them all in this document. Each literary work carries its own theme(s). The theme of Robert Frost's "Acquainted with

the Night" is loneliness. Shakespeare's "King Lear" contains many themes, among which are blindness and madness. Unlike plot which deals with the action of a work, theme concerns itself with a work's message or contains the general idea of a work.

Tone

Tone expresses the author's attitude toward his or her subject. Since there are as many tones in literature as there are tones of voice in real relationships, the tone of a literary work may be one of anger or approval, pride or piety—the entire gamut of attitudes toward life's phenomena. Here is one literary example: The tone of John Steinbeck's short novel "Cannery Row" is nonjudgmental. Mr. Steinbeck never expresses disapproval of the antics of Mack and his band of bums. Rather, he treats them with unflagging kindness.

Understatement

A statement which lessens or minimizes the importance of what is meant. For example, if one were in a desert where the temperature was 125 degrees, and if one were to describe thermal conditions saying "It's a little warm today." that would be an understatement. In Shakespeare's "Macbeth," Macbeth, having murdered his friend Banquo, understates the number of people who have been murdered since the beginning of time by saying "Blood hath been shed ere now." The opposite is **hyperbole**.

Verisimilitude

Having the appearance of truth; realism. In a fictional work, a writer creates unreal characters and situations and asks the reader to pretend that they are real. To help the reader in this task, the writer tells his tale in such a way that he makes it seem credible—that is, he gives it "verisimilitude." *Verisimilitude* is derived from the Latin words *veritas* (*truth*) and *similis* (*similar*). Thus, verisimilitude in a literary work confers on it the quality of appearing true or similar to the truth.

Vernacular

Language that is native to people (as opposed to learned language.) Language that is used by people as everyday speech.