

GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

Allegory

A symbolic narrative in which the surface details imply a secondary meaning. Allegory often takes the form of a story in which the characters represent moral qualities. The most famous example in English is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the name of the central character, Pilgrim, epitomizes the book's allegorical nature.

Alliteration

The repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words. Example: "Fetched fresh, as I suppose, off some sweet wood." Hopkins, "In the Valley of the Elwy."

Antagonist

A character or force against which another character struggles.

Assonance

The repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sentence or a line of poetry or prose, as in "I rose and told him of my woe" or "on a proud round cloud in a white high night" - e.e. cummings

Ballad

A narrative poem written in four-line stanzas, characterized by swift action and narrated in a direct style.

Character

An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change). In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona is a major character, but one who is static, like the minor character Bianca. Othello is a major character who is dynamic, exhibiting an ability to change.

Characterization

The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions.

Climax

The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work.

Conflict

A struggle between opposing forces in a story or play, usually resolved by the end of the work. The conflict may occur within a character as well as between characters. Lady Gregory's one-act play *The Rising of the Moon* exemplifies both types of conflict as the Policeman wrestles with his conscience in an inner conflict and confronts an antagonist in the person of the ballad singer.

Connotation

The associations called up by a word that goes beyond its dictionary meaning. Poets, especially, tend to use words rich in connotation.

Convention

A customary feature of a literary work, such as the use of a chorus in Greek tragedy, the inclusion of an explicit moral in a fable, or the use of a particular rhyme scheme. Literary conventions are defining features of particular literary genres, such as novel, short story, ballad, sonnet, and play.

Couplet

A pair of rhymed lines that may or may not constitute a separate stanza in a poem. Shakespeare's sonnets end in rhymed couplets, as in "For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

Denotation

The dictionary meaning of a word. Writers typically play off a word's denotative meaning against its connotations, or suggested and implied associational implications.

Denouement

The resolution of the plot of a literary work. The denouement of Hamlet takes place after the catastrophe, with the stage littered with corpses. During the denouement Fortinbras makes an entrance and a speech, and Horatio speaks his sweet lines in praise of Hamlet.

Dialogue

The conversation of characters in a literary work. In fiction, dialogue is typically enclosed within quotation marks. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names.

Elegy

A lyric poem that laments the dead. Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" is elegiac in tone. A more explicitly identified elegy is W.H. Auden's "In Memory of William Butler Yeats" and his "Funeral Blues."

Epic

A long narrative poem that records the adventures of a hero. Epics typically chronicle the origins of a civilization and embody its central values. Examples from western literature include Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid, and Milton's Paradise Lost.

Exposition

The first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot, in which necessary background information is provided. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, for instance, begins with a conversation between the two central characters, a dialogue that fills the audience in on events that occurred before the action of the play begins, but which are important in the development of its plot.

Falling action

In the plot of a story or play, the action following the climax of the work that moves it towards its denouement or resolution. The falling action of *Othello* begins after Othello realizes that Iago is responsible for plotting against him by spurring him on to murder his wife, Desdemona.

Fiction

An imagined story, whether in prose, poetry, or drama. Ibsen's *Nora* is fictional, a "make-believe" character in a play, as are Hamlet and Othello. Characters like Robert Browning's Duke and Duchess from his poem "My Last Duchess" are fictional as well, though they may be based on actual historical individuals. And, of course, characters in stories and novels are fictional, though they,

too, may be based, in some way, on real people. The important thing to remember is that writers embellish and embroider and alter actual life when they use real life as the basis for their work. They fictionalize facts, and deviate from real-life situations as they "make things up."

Figurative language

A form of language use in which writers and speakers convey something other than the literal meaning of their words. Examples include hyperbole or exaggeration, simile and metaphor.

Flashback

An interruption of a work's chronology to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time frame of a work's action. Writers use flashbacks to complicate the sense of chronology in the plot of their works and to convey the richness of the experience of human time.

Foreshadowing

Hints of what is to come in the action of a play or a story.

Free verse

Poetry without a regular pattern of meter or rhyme. The verse is "free" in not being bound by earlier poetic conventions requiring poems to adhere to an explicit and identifiable meter and rhyme scheme in a form such as the sonnet or ballad. Modern and contemporary poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries often employ free verse, see Emily Bishop's 'The Fish'.

Hyperbole

A figure of speech involving exaggeration. Wordsworth uses hyperbole in 'The Daffodils': 'ten thousand saw I at a glance.'

Imagery

The pattern of related comparative aspects of language, particularly of images, in a literary work. Images of nature pervade Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.

Irony

A contrast or discrepancy between what is said and what is meant or between what happens and what is expected to happen in life and in literature. In verbal irony, characters say the opposite of what they mean. In irony of circumstance or situation, the opposite of what is expected occurs. In dramatic irony, a character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or to the other characters.

Literal language

A form of language in which writers and speakers mean exactly what their words denote. See Figurative language, Denotation, and Connotation.

Lyric poem

A type of poem characterized by brevity, compression, and the expression of feeling.

Metaphor

A comparison between essentially unlike things without an explicitly comparative word such as like or as. An example is "My love is a red, red rose,.". Metaphor is one of the most important of literary uses of language. Shakespeare employs a wide range of metaphor in his sonnets and his plays, often in such density and profusion that readers are kept busy analysing and interpreting

and unravelling them. Compare Simile.

Meter

The measured pattern of rhythmic accents in poems.

Metonymy

A figure of speech in which a closely related term is substituted for an object or idea. An example: "We have always remained loyal to the crown."

Narrative poem

A poem that tells a story. See Ballad.

Narrator

The voice and implied speaker of a fictional work, to be distinguished from the actual living author.

Octave

An eight-line unit, which may constitute a stanza; or a section of a poem, as in the octave of a sonnet.

Ode

A long, stately poem in stanzas of varied length, meter, and form. Usually a serious poem on an exalted subject.

Onomatopoeia

The use of words to imitate the sounds they describe. Words such as buzz and squelch are onomatopoeic.

Most often, onomatopoeia refers to words and groups of words, such as Tennyson's description of the "murmur of innumerable bees," which attempts to capture the sound of a swarm of bees buzzing.

Parody

A humorous, mocking imitation of a literary work, sometimes sarcastic, but often playful and even respectful in its playful imitation.

Personification

The endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities. An example: "The yellow leaves flaunted their color gaily in the breeze." Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" includes personification.

Plot

The unified structure of incidents in a literary work. See Conflict, Climax, Denouement, and Flashback.

Point of view

The angle of vision from which a story is narrated. See Narrator. A work's point of view can be: first person, in which the narrator is a character or an observer; objective, in which the narrator knows or appears to know no more than the reader; omniscient, in which the narrator knows everything about the characters; and limited omniscient, which allows the narrator to know some things

about the characters but not everything.

Protagonist

The main character of a literary work--Macbeth and Othello in the plays named after them for example.

Recognition

The point at which a character understands his or her situation as it really is. Sophocles' Oedipus comes to this point near the end of Oedipus the King; Othello comes to a similar understanding of his situation in Act V of Othello.

Resolution

The sorting out or unravelling of a plot at the end of a play, novel, or story. See Plot.

Reversal

The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the protagonist. Oedipus's and Othello's recognitions are also reversals. They learn what they did not expect to learn. See Recognition and also Irony.

Rhyme

The matching of final vowel or consonant sounds in two or more words.

Rhythm

The recurrence of accent or stress in lines of verse.

Rising action

A set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a play's or story's plot leading up to the climax. See Climax, Denouement, and Plot.

Satire

A literary work that criticizes human misconduct and ridicules vices, stupidities, and follies. Swift's Gulliver's Travels is a famous example.

Sestet

A six-line unit of verse constituting a stanza or section of a poem; the last six lines of an Italian sonnet. Examples: Petrarch's "If it is not love, then what is it that I feel," and Frost's "Design."

Setting

The time and place of a literary work that establish its context.

Simile

A figure of speech involving a comparison between unlike things using like, as, or as though. An example: "My love is like a red, red rose."

Sonnet

A fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter. The Shakespearean or English sonnet is arranged as three quatrains and a final couplet. The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet divides into two parts: an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet.

Stanza

A division or unit of a poem.

Style

The way an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences or in lines of dialogue or verse, and develops ideas and actions with description, imagery, and other literary techniques. See Connotation, Denotation, Diction, Figurative language, Image, Imagery, Irony, Metaphor, Narrator, Point of view, Syntax, and Tone.

Subject

What a story or play is about; to be distinguished from plot and theme. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is about the decline of a particular way of life endemic to the American south before the civil war. Its plot concerns how Faulkner describes and organizes the actions of the story's characters. Its theme is the overall meaning Faulkner conveys.

Sub plot

A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel plot in a play or story that coexists with the main plot. The story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forms a sub-plot with the overall plot of Hamlet.

Symbol

An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself.

Syntax

The grammatical order of words in a sentence or line of verse or dialogue. The organization of words and phrases and clauses in sentences of prose, verse, and dialogue. In the following example, normal syntax (subject, verb, object order) is inverted:

"Whose woods these are I think I know."

Theme

The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. See discussion of Dickinson's "Crumbling is not an instant's Act."

Tone

The implied attitude of a writer toward the subject and characters of a work, as, for example, Flannery O'Connor's ironic tone in her "Good Country People." See Irony.

Understatement

A figure of speech in which a writer or speaker says less than what he or she means; the opposite of exaggeration.