

Fiction Literary Terms

Allegory	A story in which persons, places, and things form a system of clearly labeled equivalents. In a simple allegory, characters and events often stand for definite meanings, often abstractions (e.g. Love, Faith, Perseverance). Allegories are usually of a moral, religious, or political nature.
Allusion	A reference to a person, event, or literary work outside the story to evoke an atmosphere, a greater concept, a historical era, or an emotion.
Ambiguity	A phrase, statement, or situation that can be interpreted in two or more ways. These multiple meanings and confusion, often deliberate, leave the reader uncertain about the intended significance.
Analysis	The division of a literary work into its various parts or elements in order to better understand the entire work.
Archetype	An image, character, or event recurrent in literature that suggests a mythological pattern of experience or universal meaning (i.e. a dark forest for confusion, the sun for illumination, the sea for change).
<i>Bildungsroman</i>	German for a “novel of growth or development.” Also called the apprenticeship novel, with one or more characters reaching maturity.
Connotation	Emotional or cultural associations surrounding words or phrases (not the dictionary definition).
Denotation	The explicit meaning of a word (the dictionary definition).
Diction	The selection of words and vocabulary in a literary work. Good diction is characterized by accuracy of word choice to subject matter and weak diction is the use of inappropriate, vague, or trite words.
Epiphany	A moment of insight or revelation by which a character’s life is greatly altered, a realization or sudden understanding.
Epistolary Novel	A novel composed almost entirely of fictional letters written by one or more characters, or fictional diary entries. Richardson’s epistolary novel <i>Pamela</i> was the first novel of any kind ever published in 1740.
Euphemism	Fine speech or nice words used to express something unpleasant.
Fable	A story that includes beasts or animals behaving like humans, usually to express a moral or teach a lesson.
Figurative language	The use of words and phrases in a way that gives new or unusual meanings to the language, used to add freshness and suggest associations and comparisons that create effective images. Major figures of speech include hyperbole, metaphor, metonymy, personification, simile, and synecdoche.
Foreshadowing	When an author arranges events and information in such a way that later events are prepared for in advance, often unifying the work and heightening the reader’s anticipation.
Genre	An established literary form. A kind or type of literature (e.g. novel, epic poetry, sonnet, satire, fiction, drama, etc.).
Hyperbole	Extreme exaggeration used for either comic or dramatic effect (e.g. dying for love, or hungry as a horse).
Hypertext	A kind of fiction that gives the impression of an inexhaustible text since it can be read in a nonsequential way and the reader can freely move from one place in the text to another to trace an idea or follow a character. Also called hyperfiction, most of this writing is published on CD-ROMs or online.
Irony	From the Greek <i>eiron</i> , a stock comic character who misled his listeners. A verbal device that implies an attitude opposite from that which is literally expressed. What is said and what is meant are different, or what happens and what is expected to happen are different. Frequently used in satire.
Legend	Any old and popularly repeated story, usually false or exaggerated.

Myth	A narrative that attempts to explain human motivations and the nature of the world, usually through supernatural terms; they explain rituals, traditions, and cultural assumptions long forgotten, or are based on popular stories.
Narrator	The one who tells the story (not the author), whose point of view we see and interpret events through. Narrators can be omniscient (all knowing), partial, biased, limited, or even unreliable. Contemporary authors often use unreliable narrators who are deliberately deceptive or biased, in order to show that truth is uncertain or even impossible.
Novel	Realistic studies of social relationships, dealing generally with the middle class or strata of society (less fantastical than a romance).
Oxymoron	A contradictory phrase, putting two words together that would normally contradict one another (e.g. darkness visible, pure sin, sweet pain, thunderous silence, controlled hysteria).
Parable	A brief story or observation with one-dimensional characters that makes a strong moral point or explains an abstract idea.
Parody	An amusing imitation of another piece of literature. A device of ridicule that mocks another work, genre, or style of writing.
Pathos	The feeling of sympathy, pity, or sorrow aroused by a literary work using emotive language or emotional appeals.
Personification	Attributing human qualities or abilities to an inanimate object (e.g. the ground thirsts for rain, or the sunlight danced on the water).
Picaresque Novel	From the Spanish term <i>pícaro</i> , meaning “rascal” or “rogue.” A novel tracing the adventures and misadventures of a likable scoundrel, such as <i>Don Quixote</i> or <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> .
Plot	The episodes in a narrative or dramatic work, both what happens and how the author chooses to present the events to the reader.
Protagonist	The leading character of a story, drama, or poem, often in conflict with the antagonist. These terms do not guarantee good or evil, in fact often one or both can be non-human (e.g. man vs. nature).
Romance	A narrative of adventure, following a hero through the episodes of a quest towards his chosen or appointed goal, sometimes involving love.
Sarcasm	A bitter form of irony, with a more deliberate and harsh reversal of meanings. Crudely mocking or contemptuous language.
Satire	A literary method of diminishing a subject by making it laughable or contemptible, poking fun at a person or subject to effect reform. Used to criticize human misconduct and ridicule vice and stupidity.
Style	The way language is used. How an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences and lines, and develops actions, ideas, and forms.
Symbol	When an image is used to represent a concept or idea that is abstract (e.g. a fish representing Christianity, a snake symbolizing evil). An object or action that suggests a meaning beyond the mere literal meaning. This is different from allegory, because symbolism is not always definite; symbols often suggest multiple meanings.
Synesthesia	Images drawn from one sense and applied to another, as when descriptions of a certain sound are applied to a color; a fusion of senses in writing.
Syntax	The arrangement and order of words within a sentence or paragraph.
Theme	The general issue(s) the work explores, recurring subjects, or ideas.
Tone	The implied attitude, the manner in which the writer communicates his or her attitude towards the subject matter, often via diction and style. The author’s tone should not be confused with the narrator’s (e.g. the narrator may regard an event as sad, but there’s a sense that the author finds it funny). To understand the tone of a story, one must look beyond what the characters or the narrator explicitly states.

Dramatic Literary Terms

Action	The plot of a drama, usually physical events, but also mental changes. Action is both what happens and how attitudes change.
Anagnorisis	The moment of recognition or discovery, especially in Greek tragedy when the hero gains insight into the cause of his or her downfall.
Antagonist	A character or force that opposes the protagonist (main character).
Anticlimax	An unsatisfying ending that occurs either because the playwright fails to deliver a genuine climax or because of a deliberate shift in tone to create an ironic or humorous effect.
Apostrophe	Addressing an absent person or abstraction, like when a character speaks to God, Death, Love, or another idea (i.e. William Blake's "Ah! Sun-flower").
Aside	Words spoken by a character in the presence of other characters, but directed to the audience alone. See Dramatic Monologue.
Catastrophe	The concluding action, especially in a tragedy.
Catharsis	A feeling of release after the catastrophe. A purgation or purification of the pity, fear, and terror experienced when watching a tragedy unfold.
Climax	The culmination of tension and conflict, a turning point in the plot, often involving a decision. The moment of greatest intensity, often near the end of the play, poem, or story and followed by the resolution or dénouement.
Comedy	A play with a happy ending, usually involving humor. Traditional comedies often end with a ceremony such as a marriage, indicating that the world is at peace and harmony is restored.
Conflict	A clash of actions, ideas, desires, or wills that result in the struggle of the protagonist, with forces that must be opposed or subdued, creating suspense (i.e. another person, the antagonist, society, natural forces, fate, or some element of the protagonist's own nature). The conflict may be physical, emotional, mental, or moral.
Dénouement	The resolution, conclusion, or "untying" of the complicated plot. The calm after the storm of the climax when all the details are resolved.
Deus ex machina	Latin for "a god from a machine." Ancient Greek playwrights often mechanically lowered a god character down from the roof of the stage to resolve human conflict with judgments and commands. Now, the term refers to any forced or improbable device used to resolve conflict.
Dialogue	Exchange of words or speech between characters. Dialogue can serve to characterize the speakers, create a mood or atmosphere, advance the plot, or develop the theme or main idea of the work.
Dramatic Irony	When a character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or to other characters.
Dramatic Monologue	An extended speech by a single character. A solo speech with listeners, as opposed to an aside or a soliloquy, which are to the audience only.
Exposition	Introductory material that introduces characters and the situation, setting the scene and giving background information and details. It could be provided at the beginning of the play, in a flashback, in a letter read by a character, etc.
Flashback	A device that allows authors to fill in events that happened earlier by presenting memories, dream sequences, stories told by characters, or summary by the author.
Foil	A minor character who either complements or contrasts sharply with the protagonist, to reveal his or her nature more clearly. Events or settings may also be used as foils.
Hubris	Excessive pride or arrogance, characteristic of Greek tragedies in which the protagonist exhibits a tragic flaw, transgressing moral or divine law.

Humours	The 4 liquids in the human body affecting behavior according to medieval physiology, each associated with one of the four elements of nature. (Blood/air: joyful, amorous. Phlegm/water: cold, cowardly. Yellow bile/fire: angry, vengeful. Black bile/earth: melancholy, lazy.) When not balanced, the character is flawed.
In medias res	Latin for “in the midst of things.” When a story or play begins without much exposition, beginning with an exciting event or right in the middle of the plot. The past is then often filled in with flashbacks.
Lampoon	A crude, often bitter satire ridiculing the personal appearance or character of a person.
Magic Realism	Works in which mundane reality is displaced by fantastic, bizarre, or supernatural occurrences for dramatic effect. See Realism and Surrealism.
Melodrama	Musical plays or operas in which music heightens the emotional effects of the story. A tragedy in which characters are extremes of good and evil, and emotional effects are achieved through violence and intrigue (much like a soap opera) at the expense of realism.
Mise-en-scène	The articulation of cinematic space, literally what is “put in the scene.” Everything that goes into the composition of a scene, including characters, objects, framed space (or lack thereof), lighting, set design, props, sound, and even movement (of the camera in film, onstage in the theater).
Motif	A recurrent image, word, phrase, represented object or action that unifies the literary work or that represents a general theme. Also, a situation, incident, idea, image, or character type that is found in many different literary works, folktales, or myths.
Peripeteia	A sudden turn of events or an unexpected reversal in a literary work. In ancient Greek tragedy, this often follows anagnorisis.
Protagonist	The main or central character. Also called the hero, but the protagonist is not necessarily brave or virtuous.
Pun	A play on words for comedic effect.
Realism	A 19 th century literary movement that aimed to depict life as it is without artificiality or exaggeration. It uses ordinary language and focuses on ordinary people, events, and settings. See Magic Realism and Surrealism.
Setting	The place and time of the story or play. Often this determines the behavior of characters, sets the mood for the story, and/or contributes significantly to the total impact of the story.
Soliloquy	A speech in a play in which a character alone on the stage speaks his or her thoughts aloud, often meditative or emotional in nature.
Stage Directions	A playwright's instructions for what the stage should look like and how the actors should move and behave (i.e. what directions to move in, facial expressions, body movements, etc.).
Stock Character	A type of character that has become conventional in particular genres through repeated use. Stereotypical and not developed, as opposed to more rounded characters (e.g. the mad scientist, the vain beauty queen).
Subplot	A sequence of events that resembles or parallels the main story.
Surrealism	A movement in modern literature and art that emphasizes the expression of the imagination as manifested in dreams; stresses the subconscious, often through the unexpected juxtaposition of symbolic objects in mundane settings. See Magic Realism and Realism.
Tragedy	A serious play showing the protagonist moving from good to bad fortune and ending in death or a deathlike state. The main character usually exhibits a tragic flaw or commits a tragic error. See Hubris.

Poetic Literary Terms

Alliteration	Repetition of the same or similar consonant sounds within a passage for poetic effect (e.g. “A sable, silent, solemn forest stood”).
Anaphora	Repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginnings of successive clauses, establishing emphasis for emotional effect.
Anastrophe	Inversion of the normal syntactic order of words for poetic effect.
Antithesis	Placing opposite ideas in parallel for greater effect (e.g. Death is the mother of beauty).
Assonance	Repetition of the same or similar vowel sounds within a passage, usually in accented syllables (e.g. “time” and “mind,” or “fate” and “make”).
Aubade	A love lyric in which the speaker dreads the arrival of dawn when he and his lover must part – often concerned with immortality.
Blank Verse	Unrhymed iambic pentameter (five iambic feet per line). Shakespeare.
Cacophony	A harsh, discordant combination of sounds, often used to create a sense of disorder or an unpleasant feeling in the reader.
Caesura	A strong pause within a line of verse. The pause could be indicated by punctuation, or the grammatical construction of the sentence, or the placement of lines upon a page.
Canon	Often referred to as the literary canon, this is a body of literature that has been accepted as literary and important. The canon is always changing and is the source of great controversy. Contemporary critics challenge the exclusion of or underrepresentation of women, minorities, and non-Western authors.
Chiasmus	A reversal in the order of words in two otherwise parallel phrases that creates a balanced, symmetrical line (e.g. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” or “The bough of summer and the winter branch”).
Conceit	A fanciful or elaborate comparison used by many poets, such as comparing a loved one to the wonders and beauties of the world.
Consonance	Repetition of a pattern of consonants with changes in intervening vowels (e.g. “linger,” “longer,” and “languor”). Also called slant rhyme.
Couplet	The simplest form of stanza, two rhyming verses. The use of many repeating couplets in epic poetry is also called “heroic couplets.”
Didactic Poetry	Poetry that teaches a lesson, usually of a practical, religious, or moral nature.
Ekphrasis	Writing that comments upon another art form, for instance a poem about a photograph or a novel about a film (e.g. Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" concerns the appearance and meaning of an ancient piece of pottery).
Elegy	A poem of lamentation for the dead, most often very formal in style.
Enjambment	From the French word meaning “to stride.” When there are no strong punctuation marks to end each line of verse, and one line runs over onto the next without a pause. Lines are not “end-stopped.”
Epic	A long narrative poem dealing with gods, heroes, and adventures, framed in a worldwide or cosmic setting, sometimes involving supernatural forces (e.g. Homer’s <i>The Iliad</i> and <i>The Odyssey</i> and the Anglo-Saxon epic <i>Beowulf</i>).
Epigram	A witty, ingenious saying or expression, or a short, satirical poem dealing concisely with a single subject and ending with a witty turn of phrase.
Epigraph	A brief quotation preceding prose or poetry that often sets the tone or highlights a particular theme of the work that follows.
Eulogy	A work of praise, in prose or poetry, for a person either very distinguished or recently dead.
Euphony	A pleasant combination of sounds, harmony.
Explication	A detailed explanation of a passage of poetry or prose. It literally means “to unfold,” and an effective explication pays close attention to how the author’s use of language helps unfold the meaning of the work.

Fixed form	A traditional form of verse with predetermined length, rhyme scheme, and meter, also called a closed form (i.e. sonnets must have 14 lines).
Free Verse	Poetry without a regular pattern of meter, rhyme, or line length. Rhythm is established through patterns in speech cadences.
Haiku	A Japanese verse form that has three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables. Traditional haikus are often serious and spiritual in tone.
Intertextuality	The influences of one literary text upon another, or references to a text that occurs in another. See Allusion.
Meiosis	An understatement of something in order to achieve a greater effect (e.g. "Building the pyramids took a little bit of effort.").
Metaphor	An implied comparison between essentially unlike things that omits the word of comparison (e.g. "My love is a red, red rose").
Metapoetry	Poetry that self-consciously takes poetry itself (the writing or reading of poetry) as its central theme.
Meter	A regular rhythm in poetic verse based on the alternation of long and short syllables, stressed and unstressed. See Poetic Foot.
Metonymy	The substitution of one suggestive term for what is actually meant (e.g. the crown for royalty, or the White House for the presidency).
Ode	A long, formal poem in stanzas of varied length, meter, and form. Usually a serious poem on an exalted subject.
Onomatopoeia	Direct verbal imitation of natural sounds, words that sound like what they mean (e.g. "bark", "boom," "crackle," "hiss," "groan," "murmur," "roar").
Paradox	A statement that at first seems self-contradictory or absurd, but on reflection reveals a deeper meaning, often achieved by a play on words (e.g. "Art is a form of lying in order to tell the truth." – <i>Pablo Picasso</i>).
Pastiche	A term often used to describe the blurring of genres in postmodern art or literature. A work that chiefly consists of motifs or techniques borrowed from one or more sources. An incongruous combination of forms and/or materials.
Pastoral	A type of poem set in idealized, often artificial, rural surroundings. From the Latin word for "shepherd," <i>pastor</i> . Usually, these rural poems set in the country reflect social issues and political themes.
Pathetic fallacy	Attributing human qualities to nature, often to mirror the mood or emotions of the poem (e.g. the skies wept, the wind howled in anger).
Persona	A term used to designate the speaker of a poem.
Poetic foot	The simple unit that is repeated to give steady rhythm to a poem. A simple pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. The major forms are the iamb (~ \), trochee (\ ~), anapest (~ ~ \), dactyl (\ ~ ~), and spondee (\ \).
Post-modernism	A term that refers to works that undercut or subvert traditional models of unity and coherence, using irony and allusion to create a sense of discontinuity. This term describes many works from the last half of the 20 th century until now.
Quatrain	Stanzas of four lines, rhyming alternately, usually (abab).
Refrain	A word, phrase, line, or stanza repeated at intervals in a song or poem.
Rhyme	Repetition of accented sounds in words, usually those falling at the end of verse lines (end rhyme), but also within lines (internal rhyme).
Simile	A comparison of two things using a word of similarity, such as "like" or "as" (e.g. he's as proud as a peacock).
Sonnet	A stanza of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, of Italian origin.
Stanza	A recurring unit of a poem, consisting of a number of verses.
Synecdoche	A figure of speech that substitutes a part for the whole, mentioning one part that implies the entire thing (e.g. lend a hand, forty head of cattle) or the whole for a part (e.g. the law meaning a police officer).