

Literary Terms and Devices

AS we study literature this year, note what works use these techniques effectively. Also, welcome to your new vocabulary list!

Alliteration - the repetition of the same consonant sounds or different vowel sounds at the beginning of words or stressed syllables. For example, "seven silver swans swam" or "even Alice's otter ate the ice-cream"

Allusion- an indirect reference to another famous person, literary work, even or place.

Analogy- a point-by-point comparison of two like things. Usually used to introduce something unfamiliar.

Antagonist- principal character in opposition to the protagonist. Sometimes not a person but an obstacle such as a force of nature, society or inner conflict.

Aside – In drama, a moment when a character is not alone and speaks his or her thoughts aloud. He often turns his head to the side.

Assonance - The repetition of vowel sounds.

Autobiography-A true story of a person's life, written by the person.

Biography-The true account of a person's life, written by someone other than that person.

Blank verse-Poetry which does not rhyme but which does have meter, a rhythm pattern.
"Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once." Julius Caesar

Character- the people who take part in the action of a story, novel or drama. Sometimes animals or imaginary creatures.

- **Main/Minor**- the most important character is the main character. Others are minor and help to move the story along.
- **Dynamic/Static**- he character who changes in a story is dynamic; one who remains the same is static.
- **Round/Flat**- a character whose many personality traits are revealed is known as a round character while those more simply described are flat.

Characterization- The method a writer uses to reveal the personality of a character in a literary work. Methods may include what the character says about him or she, what others reveal about the character, and the characters own actions.

Chronology- The use of time order to create change or make a point in prose or poetry.

Climax- the turning point, the moment when the readers' interest and emotional intensity reach the highest point. Usually toward the end of a story. The point where the protagonist solves the conflict or realizes he must live with the conflict.

Conflict: In the plot of a drama, conflict occurs when some person or force in the play opposes the protagonist. Man vs. man, M vs. N, M vs. Self, M vs. Society

- **Internal-** a conflict within the character.
- **External-** the character pitted against an outside force, such as nature, obstacle, or another character.

Connotation- the attitudes and feelings associated with a word versus its dictionary meaning (denotation).

Comic relief- a humorous scene, incident or speech that is included in a drama to provide a change from the emotional intensity.

Couplet- a rhyming pair of lines.

Denotation- the literal dictionary meaning of a word.

Denouement – Literally, the untying of the knot. Often a part of the resolution where loose ends are tied up and questions explained.

Description- this is writing that helps a reader to picture scenes, event and characters. To create descriptions writers use imagery and figurative language. The use of precise nouns, verbs, etc. and carefully selected details create a clear description.

Dialogue- conversation between two or more characters in either fiction or non-fiction. The words of the speakers are set off by [" "].

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.

Exposition- the early part of a story that normally sets the tone, establishes setting, introduces characters and gives important background information.

Falling action- in a plot structure this occurs after the climax. Sometimes also called a resolution, this ties up the loose ends of a story.

Fiction- works of prose that have imaginary elements. SOMETIMES based on true events but primarily from the authors imagination, including plot, characters, setting and theme.

Flashback: This is a writers' technique in which the author interrupts the plot of the story to recreate an incident of an earlier time (goes back in time; like giving the reader a memory). This device is often used to provide additional information to the reader.

Foreshadowing: This is a writers' technique in which the author provides clues or hints as to what is going to happen later in the story. It's like the music in a scary movie when we know that something bad is about to happen.

Figurative Language: A strategy that authors use to employ literary devices such as metaphor, simile, repetition, etc.

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.

Form- The way a poem is laid out on the page, length, placement and grouping of lines.

Free verse- Poetry, which does not have either meter or rhyme.

Splinter

The voice of the last cricket

Across the first frost

Is one kind of good-bye.

It is so thin a splinter of singing. By Carl Sandburg

Genre: A literary type or form. Drama is a genre of literature.

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. The use of images serves to intensify the impact of the work. Words or phrases that appeal to any sense or any combination of senses.

Irony- a special kind of contrast between appearance and reality- usually one in which reality is the opposite of what one expects.

- **Situational-** contrast between what a reader and/or the character expects and what actually happens or exists.
- **Dramatic-** where the reader or viewer knows something that a character does NOT know.
- **Verbal-** when someone knowingly exaggerates or says one thing and means another.

Line- one single unit of poetry. Lines are counted based on line breaks.

Metaphor - a comparison made by calling one item another item
For example, "the evening of life" or "sunshine of our love".

Meter - The recurrence of a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

- **Iambic**- foot of two syllables, accented on the second:
"The sun that cold December day
Rose cheerless over hills of gray"
- **Trochaic**- foot of two syllables, accented on the first:
"Double, double, toil and trouble,
Fire burn and caldron bubble."
- **Anapestic**- foot of three syllables, accented on the third:
"'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house."
- **Dactylic**- foot of three syllables, accented on the first:
"Take her up tenderly."

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.

Narrator- the character or voice from whose point of view events are told.

Non-fiction- Any writing based entirely on facts, real and true events.

Onomatopoeia: A literary device wherein the sound of a word echoes the sound it represents. The words "splash," "knock," and "roar" are examples. The following lines end Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill:"

Out of the whinnying green stable
On to the fields of praise.

The word "whinnying" is onomatopoeic. "Whinny" is the sound usually selected to represent that made by a horse.

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. These lines from John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 14" provide 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.

Personification - A figure of speech, which endows animals, ideas, or inanimate objects with human traits or abilities. to think of or represent an inanimate object as a person. For example, "The rocks will cry out his name" or "the planets danced in their orbits"

Plot: The structure of a story. Or 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 an 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.

Poetry- Three main types

- **Lyrical-** a short poem in which a single speaker expresses personal thoughts and feelings.
- **Narrative-** poetry that is meant to tell a story.
- **Dramatic-** poetry that is meant to be performed, as in a play.

Point-of-view - The author's point-of-view concentrates on the vantage point of the speaker, or "teller", of the story or poem.

- **1st person:** the speaker is a character in the story or poem and tells it from his/her perspective (uses "I")
- **3rd person limited:** the speaker is not part of the story, but tells about the other characters but limits information to what one character sees and feels.
- **3rd person omniscient:** the speaker is not part of the story, but is able to "know" and describe what all characters are thinking. Ry

Protagonist- the central character or hero in a narrative or drama, usually, the one with whom the audiences identifies with.

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.

Resolution- see falling action.

Rising action- the events in a story that move the plot along by adding complications or expanding the conflict. Builds suspense to the climax or turning point.

Repetition - the repeating of words, phrases, lines, or stanzas.

Rhyme - The similarity of ending sounds existing between two words.

Internal- rhyming within the line of poetry.

- **End-** rhyming at the end of a line of poetry.
- **Slant-** approximate or near rhyme. When the words don't quite rhyme but come very close as in care and dear.

Rhyme scheme - The sequence in which the rhyme occurs. The first end sound is represented as the letter "a"; the second is "b", etc.

Setting: The time and place in which a story unfolds. The setting in Act 1, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," for example, is on a Sunday in a public square in Verona, Italy. A drama may contain a single setting, or the setting may change from scene to scene.

Simile - a comparison using "like" or "as". For example, "As snug as a bug in a rug" or "he drinks like a fish"

Soliloquy: In drama, a moment when a character is alone and speaks his or her thoughts aloud.

Sonnet- A fourteen-line poem usually written in iambic pentameter.

Stanza - a grouping of two or more lines of a poem in terms of length, metrical form, or rhyme scheme.

Style- particular way in which a piece of literature is written. Style is not what is written but how it is written. Style can be formal, conversational, journalistic, wordy, ornate, poetic or dynamic. 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.

Suspense- in fiction results primarily from two factors: the reader's identification with and concern for the welfare of a convincing and sympathetic character, and an anticipation of violence. The following line from Elizabeth Spencer's "The Name of the Game" is an example of a suspense maker:

He was an innocent, this boy; the other boys were out to get him.

Symbolism: A character, an action, a setting, or an object representing something else can be a symbol. Most often, the symbol in a story is an object that represents its owner's character or situation, or both. For example, a secluded, near-empty apartment might represent the alienation and emotional emptiness of the tenant. Symbols are usually recognizable by the amount of emphasis they receive. Objects intended to be viewed as symbolic may be described in detail, be included in the title, be referred to frequently, or emphasized at the beginning or ending of the story. When we recognize a symbol and understand its meaning or meanings we see more clearly what the writer chose to emphasize.

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: 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.

Tragedy- a dramatic work that presents a downfall of a dignified character or characters who are involved in historically or socially significant events. Events in a tragic plot are set in motion by a decision that is often an error in judgment. Succeeding events are linked by cause and effect eventually leading to a disastrous conclusion, usually death.