

Literary Terms

Aesthetic distance: Fiction, drama, and poetry involve the reader emotionally to different degrees. How close are we to the character?

Allegory: One thing (usually non-rational, abstract, religious) is implicitly spoken of in terms of something concrete, usually sensuous, but in an allegory the comparison is extended to include an entire work or large portion of a work.

a literary work in which all or most of the characters, settings and events symbolize ideas, qualities or figures beyond themselves.

- An allegory is sometimes used to teach a moral lesson.
- Characters may be given names such as Hope, Pride, Youth, and Charity; they have few if any personal qualities beyond their abstract meanings.
- Spirituals such as *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*—is on one level about the chariot of God that brings people to heaven but on another level can be read as being about the Underground Railroad that carries slaves to freedom

Allusion: A brief reference to a person, place, event, idea, object, phrase or work from history, pop culture, Bible, mythology, art or literature. The writer assumes you will recognize the reference. For instance, most of us would know the difference between a mechanic's being as reliable as George Washington or as reliable as Benedict Arnold. Or describing someone as a "Romeo" makes an allusion to William Shakespeare's famous young lover in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Ambiguity: A statement which has two or more possible meanings; a statement whose meaning is unclear.

Analogy: Comparison of two things, alike in certain aspects; something unfamiliar is explained or described by comparing it to something more familiar. A simile is an expressed analogy; a metaphor is an implied analogy.

Archetype: An inherited, often unconscious, ancestral memory or motif that recurs throughout history and literature. The notion of the archetype derives from the psychology of Carl Jung, who described archetypes as symbols from humanity's "collective unconscious." The term is often used, more generally, to refer to any element that recurs throughout the literature of the world. Thus a story of the journey, in which someone sets out on a path, experiences adventures, and emerges wiser, may be considered archetypal, for it is found in all cultures and in all times.

Character: Person, animal or object in a literary work. It is a person's attributes, traits or abilities that distinguishes him from another.

Characterization: The way an author presents characters.

Direct Characterization Method of presenting a character in which the writer tells what a character is like by means of direct comment.

Indirect Characterization Method of presenting a character in which the writer shows what a character is like through what a character says, does (actions), thinks, feels, looks (physically), what other characters say or think about a person, what the author directly says about the character, and how the reader differs the feelings and thoughts of all characters from factual description of their words and behavior

Character's Motivation The cause or reason that compels a character to act as he does. For motivation as in life itself is what makes us aware of the desires and the purposes of people; and when we understand these, we can explain the meaning of their actions. There are 3 kinds of motivation: the purpose of the characters; impulses of the characters; desires of the characters.

Character Types:

- **Protagonist:** the main character, who is not necessarily a hero or a heroine.
- **Antagonist:** the main person or force working against the protagonist the opponent; helps the protagonist change; the antagonist may be society, nature, a person, or an aspect of the protagonist.
- **Dynamic Character:** A character who undergoes an important change.
- **Antihero:** Lacks or seems to lack heroic traits; usually a protagonist.
- **Round:** three-dimensional, fully developed character.
- **Flat:** having only a few traits or only enough traits to fulfill their function in the work.
- **Foil:** a secondary character who calls attention to the major character's traits; *Romeo & Juliet*—Mercutio is Romeo's foil as the Nurse is Juliet's foil
- **Static Character:** A character that does not change in any significant way.
- **Stock character:** A character that conforms to a familiar and predictable formula, also known as a stereotype, e.g., the confidant, the hardboiled detective, the tightlipped sheriff, the girl next door, the evil hunters in a Tarzan movie, ethnic or racial stereotypes, the cruel stepmother and Prince Charming in fairy tales.
- **Tragic Hero:** A dignified or noble central character with a tragic flaw that brings about or contributes to his or her downfall. The flaw may be poor judgment, pride, or some sort of weakness or it may be an excess of an admirable quality.

Character Actions: Changes resulting from movement of things or people in a time duration or period.

- **Reversal of the Situation**—change by which the action veers round to its opposite
- **Recognition**—change from ignorance to knowledge

Climax: Turning point; the outcome of the main conflict is evident; the point at which the action stops rising and begins falling or reversing.

Conflict: A problem or struggle of some kind

- **External conflicts** involve Human vs. Human, Human vs. Nature, Human vs. Animal or Human vs. Technology.
- **Internal Conflicts** involve Human vs. Himself/herself.

Connotation: Suggested or implied meaning associated with a word beyond its dictionary definition such as the emotions, values, or images associated with a word. Words connected with religion, politics, and sex tend to have the strongest feelings and images associated with them. For most people, the word *mother* calls up very strong positive feelings and associations--loving, self-sacrificing, always there, understanding; the denotative meaning, on the other hand, is simply "a female who has borne one or more children."

Denotation: The literal meaning of a word; dictionary definition; there are no emotions, values, or images associated with denotative meaning.

Dialect: A variety of a language that is spoken by a group in a particular geographical area or of a social group or class. It can have a different accent and pronunciation, vocabulary and use different grammatical structures.

Diction: Word choice

Flashback: An interruption in a narrative to relate an action that has already occurred.

Foreshadowing: The dropping of important hints by the author to prepare the reader for what is to come and to help him/her to anticipate the outcome. It can take the form of an action, a description, and/or a comment

Genre: Types or categories into which literary works are divided. Autobiography, biography, novel, short story, narrative, drama, epic, lyric, fiction, essays. Genre can also refer to more specific types of literature such as comedy, tragedy, epic poetry, or science fiction.

Imagery: The representation through language of sensory experience. A word, phrase, or figure of speech (especially a simile or a metaphor) that addresses the senses, suggesting mental pictures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, or actions. Images offer sensory impressions to the reader and also convey emotions and moods through their verbal pictures.

Irony: A difference or contrast between appearance and reality. The discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, what is said and what is done, what is expected or intended and what happens, what is meant or said and what others understand.

- **Situational irony:** There is a contrast between what is expected and what actually happens. Expectations aroused by a situation are reversed.
- **Dramatic irony:** The reader knows something that a character in the story does not know, so that words and action have additional meaning for the reader
- **Verbal irony:** A writer or character says one thing and means something entirely different.

Language Types:

Abstract language: things that are intangible, that is, which are perceived not through the senses but by the mind, such as truth, God, education, vice, transportation, poetry, war, love.

Concrete language: identifies things perceived through the senses (touch, smell, sight, hearing, and taste), such as soft, stench, red, loud, or bitter.

Literal language: means exactly what it says; a rose is the physical flower.

Figurative language: changes the literal meaning, to make a meaning fresh or clearer, to express complexity, to capture a physical or sensory effect, or to extend meaning.

- **Simile:** a comparison of two dissimilar things using "like" or "as" or "than"
"my love is like a red, red rose" (Robert Burns)
- **Metaphor:** a comparison of two unlike things which does not use "like" or "as," or "than"
"my love is a red, red rose"
- **Extended Metaphor:** a detailed and complex metaphor that extends over a long section of a work; can be direct or implied
- **Personification:** treating abstractions or inanimate objects as human, that is, giving them human attributes, powers, or feelings, e.g., "nature wept" or "the wind whispered many truths to me."
- **Hyperbole:** exaggeration, often extravagant; it may be used for serious or for comic effect
- **Onomatopoeia:** a word whose sounds seem to duplicate the sounds they describe--hiss, buzz, bang, murmur, meow, growl
- **Oxymoron:** a statement with two parts which seem contradictory; examples: sad joy, a wise fool,

the sound of silence, or Hamlet's saying, "I must be cruel only to be kind"

Local Color: Concrete details of dress, speech, locale, customs and traditions which give an impression of the local "atmosphere" of a particular place

Mood: The atmosphere or emotional condition created by the piece, within the setting.

Moral: A lesson intended to teach some rule of conduct about life.

Motif: A theme, character type, image, metaphor, or other verbal element that recurs throughout a single work of literature or occurs in a number of different works over a period of time.

Narrator: The person who tells the story.

Paradox: A statement whose two parts seem contradictory yet make sense with more thought or that reveals an underlying truth. "The child is the father of man." (Faulkner)

Pathetic Fallacy: Attaching human feeling and traits to nature. "Pathetic" pertains to feelings, and "fallacy" pertains to a false notion. An example is the storm that occurs in *Julius Caesar* before that assassination in Act III.

Pathos: The quality in writing that prompts the reader's feelings to compassion, pity or sorrow for a character in a work. The term is from the Greek *pathein*, "to suffer." It is applied mainly to pathetic situations, where a character suffers excessively or needlessly and through no real fault of his own.

Plot: The pattern of events; interaction between conflict and action. One major incident that makes one major effect on the reader.

Plot Peak/Structure

- **Exposition**—Information essential to understanding the background of a story. Sometimes delayed until after the conflict develops.
- **Inciting Moment/Initial Incident**—The event that triggers the conflict
- **Rising Action**—Complications continue; suspense builds
- **Climax**—The decisive point that makes the action turn; where character changes & conflict ends. Crisis refers to the structure; climax to the emotional response.
- **Falling Action**—The incidents and episodes that happen after the climax that leads to the resolution.
- **Resolution/Dénouement**—The final part of a story that makes clear the outcome of the conflict.

Point of view: The perspective from which the story is told.

- **First Person:** narration of story by the main character or "I."
- **First Person Observer:** "I" observes but does not take part in the action
- **Third Person Omniscient:** narrator is an all-knowing observer that expresses what more than one character could know, see, hear or experience knows everything, may reveal the motivations, thoughts and feelings of the characters, and gives the reader information.
- **Third Person Limited:** the material is presented from the point of view of one character
- **Unreliable Narrator:** narrator is a storyteller who "misses the point" of the events or things he describes in a story, who plainly misinterprets the motives or actions of characters, or who fails to see the connections between events in the story. The author, of course, must plainly understand the connections, because he/she presents the material to the readers in such a way that readers can see what the narrator overlooks.

- Sarcasm:** Praise which is really an insult; sarcasm generally involves malice, the desire to put someone down, e.g., "This is my brilliant son, who failed out of college."
- Satire:** the use of ridicule, sarcasm, wit or irony in order to expose, set right or destroy a vice, breach of good taste or social evil. Satire may range from gentle ridicule to bitter attack.
- Setting:** The time and place in which the events in a narrative take place. It includes description of time (temporal reality of life), place (spatial reality of life), weather, or furnishings. It may have important effects upon actions of character.
- Stereotype:** Something or someone that is familiar, typical or predictable.
- Style:** Manner of expression; how a speaker or writer says what he says.
- Suspense:** The element that keeps readers guessing about the outcome of events.
- Symbol:** A person, object, image, word, or event that evokes a range of additional meaning beyond and usually more abstract than its literal significance. Obvious examples are flags, which symbolize a nation; the cross is a symbol for Christianity; Uncle Sam a symbol for the United States; a bird could mean freedom. In literature, a symbol is expected to have significance.
- Syntax:** Word order and structural patterns
- Tone:** The writer's attitude toward the material and/or readers. Tone may be playful, formal, intimate, angry, serious, ironic, outraged, baffled, tender, serene, depressed, etc.
- Theme:** The major idea of a work of literature. It is the central idea or underlying meaning about human nature that is developed in a story. It is an abstract concept and not what merely happens in a story. All parts of the story should contribute to, develop, or relate to the theme in some way. The theme is often not directly stated, and reducing the theme to a single statement often oversimplifies the meaning.

Examples of theme in *Romeo and Juliet*:

- Through the characters Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare illustrates that young love is an ecstatic, overpowering force that supersedes all other values, loyalties, and emotions.
- *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare, implies that when human hatred spawns violence, it often destroys innocent lives as well as the lives of those who harbor hatred or instigate violence.

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