

Basic Literary Terms

Allegory: Refers to a second meaning beneath the surface implications; usually an abstract idea or moral principle.

Alliteration: Repetition of the same sound beginning several words in sequence. Is used for emphasis.

*Let us go forth to lead the land we love. J. F. Kennedy, Inaugural

Allusion: A reference, obvious or implicit, to something in previous literature or history that gives the text another significance.

Antithesis: Opposition, or contrast of ideas or words in a balanced or parallel construction.

*Brutus: Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

Apostrophe: A figure of speech in which someone absent or dead or nonhuman is addressed as if it could reply.

Archetype: From the Greek arché, meaning “original” or “primitive;” a hero or plot that follows conventions of past literature.

Assonance: Repetition of the same sound in words close to each other. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.
The Bible

Blank Verse: Structure of poetry that is unrhymed iambic pentameter (5 feet per line with the unstressed syllable first).

Cacophony: Harsh, discordant sounds.

-Finger of birth-strangled babe.

Cesura: A speech pause occurring in a line, usually meant as a pause after an important line.

Characterization: The method used by a writer to develop a character including (1) showing the character's appearance, (2) displaying the character's actions, (3) revealing the character's thoughts, (4) letting the character speak, and (5) getting the reactions of others.

Climax: Arrangement of words, phrases, or clauses in order of ascending power. Often the last emphatic word in one phrase or clause is repeated as the first emphatic word of the next.

*One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. Tennyson, “Ulysses”

Conflict: A collision of actions, ideas, desires, or goals in the plot of a story or drama.

Connotation: What a word suggests beyond the basic dictionary meaning.

Continuous Form: A form of poetry in which lines follow each other without formal grouping; the breaks are made only by units of meaning.

Denotation: Dictionary meaning of a word, may not be the same as connotation.

Didactic writing: Writing that has the primary purpose of teaching a lesson or moral.

Dramatization: Presenting a character or emotion through speeches or actions rather than directly stating it, allowing the reader to infer more about the nature of the character.

End rhyme: Rhymes that occur at the end of a line of poetry.

End-stop line: A line that ends with a natural speech pause, usually marked by punctuation.

Extended metaphor: Metaphor that is sustained or developed through a considerable number of lines or throughout the whole.

Euphemism: Substitution of an agreeable or at least inoffensive expression for one whose plainer meaning might be harsh or unpleasant.

Fixed form: A form of poem in which length and pattern are determined by previous constraints, like sonnets or haikus.

Free verse: Nonmetrical poetry in which rhythmic unit is the line; organic development of pattern rather than of a poetic form.

Hyperbole: Exaggeration for emphasis or for rhetorical effect.

*My vegetable love should grow

Vaster than empires, and more slow;

An hundred years should go to praise Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"

Imagery: Representation of sensory experiences through language.

Internal rhyme: Rhyme in which one or both rhyming words occur within the line itself.

Irony: Expression of something which is contrary to the intended meaning; the words say one thing but mean another.

*Yet Brutus says he was ambitious; And Brutus is an honorable man. Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

- Dramatic Irony: A situation in which there is an incongruity between reality and appearances; or between reader expectation and the actual situation.

Metaphor: Implied comparison achieved through a figurative use of words; the word is used not in its literal sense, but in one analogous to it.

*Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage. Shakespeare, Macbeth

Meter: Regular patterns of accent that underlie metrical verse; the measurable repetition of accented and unaccented syllables.

The more popular metre is iambic pentameter: 10-syllable line of five stressed and five unstressed syllables.

Metonymy: Substitution of one word for another which it suggests.

The pen is mightier than the sword.

Moral: A rule of conduct for living expressed obviously or implied; used in satirical and didactic literature.

Motif: A motif is an idea, a theme that is repeated or carried through an individual work.

Onomatopoeia: Use of words to imitate natural sounds; accommodation of sound to sense.
Pow, Zap, Sock, Zip, Crunch, Crash, Boom

Oxymoron: Apparent paradox achieved by the juxtaposition of words which seem to contradict one another.
*I must be cruel only to be kind. Shakespeare, Hamlet

Paradox: An assertion that seemingly contradicts itself, but is still true.
*What a pity that youth must be wasted on the young. George Bernard Shaw

Personification: Attribution of personality to an impersonal thing.
*England expects every man to do his duty. Lord Nelson

Poeticizing: Writing that uses heightened or distended language to sway the reader's feelings.

Point of View: Angle of vision from which the story is told:
Omniscient: using third person, an all-knowing narrator
Third person limited: narration is limited to the knowledge of one character
First person: told in first person by a character

Rhyme: An occurrence of motion or sound; in poetry, words with similar endings or sounds that emphasize the rhymed words.

Rhyme Scheme: a fixed pattern of rhymes characterizing a whole poem or its stanzas. i.e. ABBA

Satire: Genre of literature that ridicules human folly or vice for attention to reform or keep others from repeating the folly.
- The Simpsons and Family Guy are great examples of modern day satire on the lives of everyday people.

Simile: An explicit comparison between two things using 'like' or 'as'.
*My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease, Shakespeare, "Sonnet CXLVII"

Symbol: Something that means more than what it is or seems; an object, person, or action with a literal and figurative meaning.

Synecdoche: A form of metonymy, synecdoche usually states a part for the whole, or the whole for the part.
*Give us this day our daily bread. Matthew 6

Theme: The central idea or unifying generalization implied or stated in the literary work.

Tone: The speaker/persona's attitude toward the subject, audience, or themselves; emotional coloring or meaning.