

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Glossary of Common Literary Terms

- ◆ **Allegory:** an allegory is a narrative in which the characters often stand for abstract concepts. An allegory generally teaches a lesson by means of an interesting story.
- ◆ **Alliteration:** the repetition at close intervals of consonant sounds for a purpose. For example: wailing in the winter wind.
- ◆ **Allusion:** a reference to something in literature, history, mythology, religious texts, etc., considered common knowledge.
- ◆ **Ambiguity:** Double or even multiple meaning.
- ◆ **Analogy:** a point by point comparison between two dissimilar things for the purpose of clarifying the less familiar of the two things.
- ◆ **Antagonist:** the character or force that opposes the protagonist. (It can be a character, an animal, a force, or a weakness of the character.)
- ◆ **Apostrophe:** the device, usually in poetry, of calling out to an imaginary, dead, or absent person, or to a place, thing, or personified abstraction either to begin a poem or to make a dramatic break in thought somewhere within the poem.
- ◆ **Assonance:** the repetition at close intervals of vowel sounds for a purpose. For example: mad as a hatter.
- ◆ **Ballad:** a narrative poem that was originally meant to be sung. Ballads are generally about ordinary people who have unusual adventures, with a single tragic incident as the central focus. They contain dialogue and repetition, and imply more than they actually tell.
- ◆ **Cacophony:** Harsh, clashing, or dissonant sounds, often produced by combinations of words that require a clipped, explosive delivery, or words that contain a number of plosive consonants such as b, d, g, k, p, and t; the opposite of EUPHONY.
- ◆ **Catalog:** a long list of anything; an inventory used to emphasize quantity or inclusiveness.
- ◆ **Character:** the vehicle (person, animal, creation) that moves the story forward. A character may be main or minor, depending on his or her role in the work of literature. While some characters are two-dimensional, with one or two dominant traits, a fully developed character has a unique complex of traits. A) dynamic characters often change as the plot unfolds. B) static characters remain the same.
- ◆ **Characterization:** refers to the techniques employed by writers to develop characters. 1) The writer may use physical description. 2) Dialogue spoken by the character and by other characters reveals character traits. 3) A character's action may be a means of characterization. 4) The reactions of another character may also be revealing. 5) A character's thoughts and feelings are also a means of characterization.
- ◆ **Climax:** the point at which the conflict of the story begins to reach a turning point and begins to be resolved.
- ◆ **Conceit:** an elaborate figure of speech comparing two very dissimilar things.
- ◆ **Conflict:** the struggle between two opposing forces that is the basis of the plot. 1) internal conflict character struggling with him/her self, 2) external conflicts – character struggling with forces outside of him/her self. For example. Nature, god, society, another person, technology, etc.

- ◆ **Connotation:** the associations, images, or impressions carried by a word, as opposed to the word's literal meaning.
- ◆ **Consonance:** the close repetition of identical consonant sounds before and after differing vowel sounds.
- ◆ **Convention:** In general, an accepted way of doing things.
- ◆ **Denotation:** the precise, literal meaning of a word, without emotional associations or overtones.
- ◆ **Denouement:** the final unraveling or outcome of the plot in drama or fiction during which the complications and conflicts of the plot are resolved.
- ◆ **Diction:** word choice
- ◆ **Enjambment:** the carrying of sense and grammatical structure in a poem beyond the end of one line, COUPLET, or STANZA and into the next.
- ◆ **Epigram:** any witty, pointed saying. Originally an epigram meant an inscription, or epitaph usually in verse, on a tomb. Later it came to mean a short poem that compressed meaning and expression in the manner of an inscription.
- ◆ **Epigraph:** a motto or quotation that appears at the beginning of a book, play, chapter, or poem. Occasionally, an epigraph shows the source for the title of a work. Because the epigraph usually relates to the theme of a piece of literature, it can give the reader insight into the work.
- ◆ **Epitaph:** the inscription on a tombstone or monument in memory of the person or people buried there. Epitaph also refers to a brief literary piece that sums up the life of a dead person.
- ◆ **Euphony:** A succession of sweetly melodious sounds; the opposite of CACOPHONY. The term is applied to smoothly flowing POETRY or PROSE.
- ◆ **Exposition:** background information at the beginning of the story, such as setting, characters and conflicts. In a short story the exposition appears in the opening paragraphs; in a novel the exposition is usually part of the first chapter.
- ◆ **Fable:** a brief tale told to illustrate a moral.
- ◆ **Falling Action:** events that lead to a resolution after the climax.
- ◆ **Figurative Language:** language employing figures of speech; language that cannot be taken literally or only literally.
- ◆ **Flashback:** a scene, or an incident that happened before the beginning of a story, or at an earlier point in the narrative.
- ◆ **Foil:** a character who provides a striking contrast to another character.
- ◆ **Foreshadowing:** a writer's use of hints or clues to indicate events that will occur later in the narrative.
- ◆ **Hyperbole:** an exaggeration for emphasis or humorous effect.
- ◆ **Imagery:** words and phrases that create vivid experiences or a picture for the reader.

- ◆ **Irony:** a contrast between appearance and actuality:
 - ◆ **Verbal** irony: a writer says one thing, but means something entirely different.
 - ◆ **Situational** irony: occurs when something happens that is entirely different from what is expected.
 - ◆ **Dramatic** irony: occurs when the reader knows information that the characters do not.
- ◆ **Literal:** A word for word interpretation for what is written or said.
- ◆ **Metaphor:** a figure of speech in which a comparison or analogy is made between two seemingly unlike things, as in the phrase “evening of life.”
- ◆ **Metonymy:** a figure of speech that substitutes the name of a related object, person, or idea for the subject at hand.
- ◆ **Mood:** the feeling, or atmosphere, that a writer creates for the reader. Connotative words, sensory images, and figurative language contribute to the mood of a selection, as do the sound and rhythm of the language.
- ◆ **Motif:** A unifying element in an artistic work, especially any recurrent image, symbol, theme, character type, subject or narrative detail.
- ◆ **Narrator:** the person from whose point of view events are conveyed.
 - ◆ **First person:** the narrator is a character in the story, uses the pronoun “I.”
The first person narrator does not have to be the main character in the story.
 - ◆ **Third person:** is indicated by the pronouns he, she and they. The third person narrator is not a participant in the action and thus maintains a certain distance from the characters.
 - A) In **third person omniscient** point of view, the narrator is all-knowing about the thoughts and feelings of the characters.
 - B) The **third person limited** point of view deals with a writer presenting events as experienced by only one character. This type of narrator does not have full knowledge of situations, past or future events.
 - C) In **third person objective** the story conveys only the external details of the characters—never their thoughts or inner motivations.
- ◆ **Onomatopoeia.** The formation or use of words. Such as: buzz, or cuckoo, whose meaning is suggested by the sound of the word itself. (boom, click, plop)
- ◆ **Oxymoron:** a figure of speech in which two contradictory words or phrases are combined in a single expression, giving the effect of a condensed paradox: “wise fool,” “cruel kindness.”
- ◆ **Paradox:** a statement or situation containing obvious contradictions, but is nevertheless true.
- ◆ **Parallelism:** the use of similar grammatical form gives items equal weight, as in Lincoln’s line “of the people, by the people, for the people.” Attention to parallelism generally makes both spoken and written expression more concise, clear and powerful.
- ◆ **Parody:** an imitation of a serious work of literature for the purpose of criticism or humorous effect or for flattering tribute.
- ◆ **Personification:** a figure of speech in which human qualities or characteristics are given to an animal, object, or concept.
- ◆ **Plot:** the plan of action or sequence of events of the story.
- ◆ **Point of view:** the vantage point, or stance from which a story is told, the eye and mind through which the action is perceived. (See also narrator.)

- ◆ **Protagonist:** the central character in a story; the one upon whom the actions center. The protagonist faces a problem and must undergo some conflict to solve it.
- ◆ **Pun:** A form of wit, not necessarily funny, involving a play on a word with two or more meanings.
- ◆ **Resolution:** the final unwinding, or resolving of the conflicts and complications in the plot.
- ◆ **Rhyme scheme:** the pattern of end rhyme in a poem.
- ◆ **Rising Action:** That part of the plot that leads through a series of events of increasing interest and power to the climax or turning point. The rising action begins with an inciting moment, an action or event that sets a conflict of opposing forces into motion.
- ◆ **Satire:** a literary technique in which foolish ideas or customs are ridiculed for the purpose of improving society.
- ◆ **Setting:** the time and place in which the action of a story occurs.
- ◆ **Simile:** a figure of speech in which two seemingly unlike things are compared. The comparison is made explicit by the use of a word or phrase such as: like, as, than, similar to, resembles, or seems—as in: He was strong as a bull.
- ◆ **Soliloquy:** A dramatic convention in which a character in a play, alone on stage, speaks his or her thoughts aloud. The audience is provided with information about the characters' motives, plans, and state of mind.
- ◆ **Stream of Consciousness:** the technique of presenting the flow of thoughts, responses, and sensations of one or more characters is called stream of consciousness.
- ◆ **Style:** the way in which a piece of literature is written. Style refers not to what is said, but how it is said.
- ◆ **Suspense:** the tension or excitement felt by the reader as he or she becomes involved in the story.
- ◆ **Syllogism:** a logical argument based on deductive reasoning.
- ◆ **Symbol:** a person, object, idea or action that stands for something else. It is usually something literal that stands for something figurative. For example: Roads can stand for choices.
- ◆ **Synecdoche:** a figure of speech in which a part of something stands for the whole thing.
- ◆ **Syntax:** sentence structure (see handout).
- ◆ **Theme:** the central idea in a literary work. The theme is usually an idea about life or about people. Writers sometimes state the story's theme outright, but more often they simply tell the story and let the reader discover the theme. Therefore, theme is an idea revealed by the events of the story; plot is simply what happens in the story; it is not the theme.
- ◆ **Tone:** the writer's or speaker's attitude toward a subject.
- ◆ **Understatement:** a type of verbal IRONY in which something is purposely represented as being far less important than it actually is; also called **meiosis**.