GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

**Abstract:** Describes a word or phrase that refers to an idea rather than a concrete object or thing. Liberty, prejudice, love, and freedom are examples of abstract concepts. (See concrete for contrast)

**Accent:** The emphasis, or stress, given a syllable in pronunciation. We say “syllable” not “syllable,” “emphasis” not “emphasis.” Accents can also be used to emphasize a particular word in a sentence: Is she content with the contents of the yellow package? (See also meter)

**Act:** A major division in the action of a play. The ends of acts are typically indicated by lowering the curtain or turning up the houselights. Playwrights frequently employ acts to accommodate changes in time, setting, characters onstage, or mood. In many full-length plays, acts are further divided into scenes, which often mark a point in the action when the location changes or when a new character enters. (See also scene)

**Action:** What happens in a story; the events or conflicts. If the action is well organized, it will develop into a pattern or plot.

**Allegory:** A story in which people, things, and actions represent an idea or generalization about life; allegories often have a strong moral or lesson. For example, in Spenser’s The Faerie Queen, the Red Cross Knight is a heroic knight in the literal narrative, but also represents the ordinary human in the Christian journey.

**Alliteration:** The repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words in a line of poetry, such as in the phrase “Sally sells seashells down by the seashore,” where the “s” and “sh” sounds are repeated.

**Allusion:** A reference in literature to a familiar person, place, thing, or event. For centuries of storytelling, Greek and Roman mythology, biblical stories, and the plays of Shakespeare have provided ample material for American and European authors because of their popularity in the literary traditions of the western world.

**Ambiguity:** Allows for two or more simultaneous interpretations of a word, phrase, action, or situation, all of which can be supported by the context of a work. Deliberate ambiguity can contribute to the effectiveness and richness of a work. However, unintentional ambiguity obscures meaning and can confuse readers.

**Anachronism:** 1. A thing belonging or appropriate to a period other than that in which it exists. 2. The act of attributing a custom, event, or object to a period to which it does not belong.

**Analogy:** A comparison of two or more similar objects so as to suggest that if they are alike in certain respects, they will probably be alike in other ways as well.

**Anaphora:** The repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses.

**Anecdote:** A short summary of a funny or humorous event.

**Antagonist:** The person or thing working against the protagonist or hero of the work. When this is a person, he is usually the villain. (See protagonist for contrast)

**Anthropomorphism:** See personification.

**Antihero:** A protagonist who has the opposite of most of the traditional attributes of a hero. He or she may be bewildered, ineffectual, deluded, or merely pathetic. Often what antiheroes learn, if they learn anything at all, is that the world isolates them in an existence devoid of God and absolute values. (See also characterization.)

**Apostrophe:** An emotional address to a person or thing not literally listening.

**Archaic:** Describes words that are old-fashioned and no longer sound natural when used, such as “I believe thee not” for “I don’t believe you.” (See diction)
Aside: A line spoken by an actor to the audience but not intended for others on stage.

Assonance: Repetition of a vowel sound in a line of poetry, as in the following example from Poe’s “The Raven”: “The silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain.”

Autobiography: An author’s account or story of his/her own life.

Backdrop setting: A setting this is relatively unimportant to the plot.

Ballad: A poem that tells a story and usually rhymes every other line.

Bard: A poet, traditionally one reciting epics and associated with a particular oral tradition.

Bias: An attitude or tendency by a speaker or author to favor one thing over another.

Biography: The story of a person’s life written by another person.

Blank verse: An unrhymed form of poetry that normally consists of ten syllables in which every other syllable, beginning with the second, is stressed. Most of the characters in Shakespeare’s dramas speak in blank verse. (See IAMBIC PENTAMETER)

Burlesque: See PARODY.

Caesura: (SEH-zur-uh) A pause or sudden break in a line of poetry, usually in the middle of the line.

Canon: A list of literary works considered to be permanently established as being sacred or of the highest quality.

Canto: A division of a long poem.

Caricature: A comical or ludicrous representation of a person (e.g., Davy Crockett, Casey Jones) or type of person (e.g., lumberjack, miner, bandit). (See also TALL TALE.)

Cause and effect: Events in a story are linked; one event leads to another.

Character: See CHARACTERIZATION.

Characterization: A character is a person presented in a dramatic or narrative work, and characterization is the process by which an author reveals or describes his characters and their various personalities. This can be done through a variety of ways, such as description of appearance, dialogue, behavior, other characters’ reactions or thoughts, or first person narration. A hero or heroine, often called the PROTAGONIST, is the central character who engages the reader’s interest and empathy. The ANTAGONIST is the character, force, or collection of forces that stands directly opposed to the protagonist and gives rise to the conflict of the story. A static character does not change throughout the work, and the reader’s knowledge of that character does not grow, whereas as a dynamic character undergoes some kind of change because of the action in the plot. A flat character embodies one or two qualities, ideas, or traits that can’t be readily described in a brief summary. They are not psychologically complex characters and therefore are readily accessible to readers. Some flat characters are recognized as stock characters; they embody stereotypes, such as the “dumb blonde,” the “mean stepfather,” or the “absent-minded scientist.” They become types rather than individuals. Round characters are more complex than flat or stock characters, and often display the inconsistencies and internal conflicts found in most real people. They are more fully developed, and therefore are harder to summarize. Authors have two major methods of presenting characters: showing and telling. Showing—also called indirect characterization—allows the author to present a character talking and acting, and lets the reader infer what kind of person the character is. In telling—also referred to as direct characterization—the author intervenes to describe and sometimes evaluate the character for the reader. Characters can be convincing whether they are presented by showing or by telling as long as their actions are motivated. Motivated action by the character occurs when the reader or audience is offered reasons for how the characters behave, what they say, and
the decisions they make. **Plausible action** is action by a character in a story that seems reasonable, given the motivations presented. (See also PLOT)

**Character Foil:** Another character in the story, sometimes a sidekick, who contrasts with and so emphasizes and enhances the qualities of the protagonist. (See CHARACTERIZATION, PROTAGONIST)

**Chorus:** A group of people who serve mainly as commentators on the characters and events in Greek tragedies (especially those of Aeschylus and Sophocles). They add to the audience’s understanding of the play by expressing traditional moral, religious, and social attitudes. The role of the chorus in dramatic works evolved through the sixteenth century, and the chorus occasionally is still used by modern playwrights. (See also DRAMA)

**Cliché:** A word or phrase so overused that it is no longer effective in most writing situations, as in “I slept like a log” or “as busy as a bee.” Clichés often anesthetize readers, and are usually a sign of weak writing.

**Climax:** The high point or turning point in a work, usually the most emotionally intense point. (See also CONFLICT, PLOT)

**Codex:** An ancient MANUSCRIPT text in book form.

**Colloquialism:** An expression that is usually accepted in informal writing or speaking but not in a formal situation, as in “Hey, man, what’s happenin’?” (See DICTION)

**Comedy:** Literature dealing with comic or serious subject matter in life in a light, humorous, or satiric manner. In comedy, human errors or problems appear funny.

**Comic relief:** A humorous scene or incident that alleviates tension in an otherwise serious work. In many instances these moments enhance the thematic significance of the story in addition to providing laughter. When Hamlet jokes with the gravediggers we laugh, but something hauntingly serious about the humor also intensifies our more serious emotions.

**Concrete:** (adj.) Describes a word that refers to an object that can be heard, seen, felt, tasted, or smelled, also referred to as literal. Wall, desk, car, and cow are examples of concrete objects. (See ABSTRACT for contrast)

**Conflict:** The struggle between the protagonist and an opposing force; the “problem” in a story that triggers the action. Conflicts can be EXTERNAL (protagonist vs. some force other himself) or INTERNAL (self vs. self). Almost all stories will have an internal and external conflict. There are five basic types of external conflict:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man vs. Man</td>
<td>One character in a story has a problem with one or more of the other characters.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Man vs. Society</td>
<td>A character has a conflict or problem with some element of society: the school, the law, the accepted way of doing things, and so on.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Man vs. Himself</td>
<td>A character has trouble deciding what to do in a particular situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Man vs. Nature</td>
<td>A character has a problem with some natural happening: a snowstorm, an avalanche, the bitter cold, or any of the common elements of nature.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Man vs. Fate (God)</td>
<td>A character has to battle what seems to be an uncontrollable problem. Whenever the problem seems to be a strange or unbelievable coincidence, fate can be considered as the cause of the conflict.</td>
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**Connotation:** The emotions or feelings a word can arouse, such as the negative or bad feeling associated with the word pig or the positive or good feeling associated with the word love. (Contrast with DENOTATION)

**Consonance:** A common type of NEAR RHYME that consists of identical consonant sounds preceded by different vowel sounds: home, same; worth, breath. (See also RHYME)
**Context:** The environment of a word; that is, the words, sentences, and paragraphs that surround a particular word and help to determine or deepen its meaning. Context can be thought of as the physical or notional circumstances surrounding a word, phrase, or idea.

**Cosmic irony:** See IRONY.

**Crisis:** The moment when the character faces a harsh situation or when the character is faced with his/her internal conflict and realizes she/he must make a decision. (See also CLIMAX, PLOT)

**Cycle:** A series of songs, stories, plays, or poems composed around a particular theme and usually intended to be performed or read in sequence. Homer’s epic poem the *Iliad* is a product of the Trojan War cycle of ancient Greece, just as Sir Thomas Malory’s stories of the Knights of the Round Table stem from the Arthurian cycle of medieval Britain.

**Denotation:** The literal or dictionary meaning of a word. (Contrast with CONNOTATION)

**Denouement:** The literal or dictionary meaning of a word. (Contrast with CONNOTATION)

**Deus ex machina:** Latin for “god from the machine.” In ancient Greek theater sometimes gods were lowered from the roof by mechanical devices to set matters right among the mortals below. The term is now used to describe any improbable means by which an author provides a too-easy resolution for a story.

**Dialect:** A type of informational diction. Dialects are spoken by definable groups of people from a particular geographic region, economic group, or social class. Writers use dialect to bring an element of authenticity to their story and to contrast and express differences in educational, class, social, and regional backgrounds of their characters. (See also DICTION)

**Dialogue:** The conversation carried on by the characters in a literary work. (See also DICTION)

**Diction:** An author’s choice and arrangement of words based on their correctness, clearness, or effectiveness. It is comprised of VOCABULARY and SYNTAX. (See ARCHAIC, COLLOQUIALISM, DIALECT)

**Direct characterization:** When the author explicitly tells the reader about the character, such as “Helen is intelligent.” Also called telling. (See CHARACTERIZATION)

**Drama:** Derived from the Greek word *dram*, meaning “to do” or “to perform,” the term *drama* refers to a form of literature known as *plays*. Drama is designed for performance in a theater; actors take on the roles of characters, perform indicated actions, and speak the dialogue written in the SCRIPT. *Play* is a general term for a work of dramatic literature, and a *playwright* is a writer who makes plays.

**Dramatic irony:** See IRONY.

**Dramatic monologue:** A piece of spoken verse that offers great insight into the feelings of the speaker. Not to be confused with a SOLILOQUY in a play (when the character speaking speaks to himself), a dramatic monologue suggests there are listeners or even other characters in the speaker’s presence, though they remain silent.

**Dynamic character:** A character that is altered is some way by the end of the story. (See CHARACTERIZATION, as well as STATIC CHARACTER for contrast)

**Eclogue:** A short poem about country life. (See PASTORAL)

**Editorial omniscience:** See NARRATOR.

**Elegy:** A formal poem mourning the death of a certain individual.

**End rhyme:** See RHYME.
End-stopped line: A poetic line that has a pause at the end. End-stopped lines reflect normal speech patterns and are often marked by punctuation. The first line of Keats’s “Endymion” is an example of an end-stopped line; the natural pause coincides with the end of the line and is marked by a period:

A thing of beauty is a joy forever.

English sonnet: See SONNET.

Enjambment: In poetry, enjambment is the running over of a sentence or thought from one verse or line to another.

Epic: A long poem, typically one derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or the history of a nation. Some examples are the Greek poems Iliad and the Odyssey by Homer, the Anglo-Saxon tale Beowulf, and Paradise Lost by English poet John Milton.

Epigraph: A short quotation or saying at the beginning of a book or chapter, intended to suggest its theme.

Epigram: A short, witty verse or saying, often ending with a wry twist, such as this Artemus Ward epigram: “Let us all be happy and live within our means, even if we have to borrow the money to do it with.”

Epithet: An adjective or descriptive phrase expressing a quality or characteristic of the person or thing mentioned. (e.g., swift-footed Achilles; Zeus, father of gods and men)

Exact rhyme: See RHYME.

Exclamation: A sudden cry or shout that conveys extreme emotion.

Exposition: How things are before the action of a story starts. Exposition is a narrative device that provides necessary background information about the characters and their circumstances. Exposition explains what has occurred prior to the story’s beginning, the relationships between characters, the development of a theme, and the introduction of a conflict. (See also FLASHBACK)

External Conflict: A CONFLICT that exists outside the character. It involves person vs. nature, person vs. person, person vs. society, person vs. fate, person vs. monster, or sometimes a combination. (See INTERNAL CONFLICT for contrast)

Eye rhyme: See RHYME.

Fable: A brief tale in which the characters are often animals, told to point out a moral truth. (See PARABLE for contrast)

Falling action: See PLOT.

Fantasy: A work that takes place in an unreal world and that often concerns incredible characters.

First person narrator: See NARRATOR, POINT OF VIEW.

Flashback: A scene in a story that is set in a time earlier than the main story.

Flat character: See CHARACTERIZATION.

Foil: See CHARACTER FOIL.

Folklore: The customs, proverbs, legends, superstitions, songs, and tales of a people or nation. Literature often borrows elements from folklore.
Foot: Unit of meter that denotes the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables. (See LINE)

Foreshadow: A hint, clue, or warning of an event that will occur later in the story.

Frame Story: A story told within a story. This narrative structure provides a setting and exposition for the main narrative in a novel. Often, a narrator will describe where he found the manuscript of the novel (e.g., *The Scarlet Letter*) or where he heard someone tell the story he is about to relate (e.g., *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*). The frame helps control the reader’s perception of the work, and has been used in the past to help give credibility to the main section of the novel through the implication or claim that the novel represents a true account of events, written by someone other than the author.

Free Verse: Poetry that does not have a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Free verse uses elements such as speech patterns, grammar, emphasis, and breath pauses to decide line breaks, and usually does not rhyme. Also called OPEN FORM.

Genre: A category of literature characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter, such as tragedy, comedy, science fiction, epic, essay, mystery, biography, or lyric poetry.

Gothic: A genre of literature characterized by supernatural horrors and an atmosphere of unknown terror that pervades the action. The setting is often a dark, mysterious castle or mansion, where ghosts and sinister humans roam menacingly.

Haiku: A fixed poetic form from the Japanese tradition comprised of three lines and seventeen syllables: the first line has five syllables, the second has seven syllables, and the third has five syllables. Haikus typically present an intense emotion or vivid image of nature, which, traditionally, is designed to lead to a spiritual insight.

Hamartia: A fatal flaw leading to the downfall of a tragic hero or heroine. The term was originally used by Aristotle in his *Poetics* in reference to Greek tragedy. Hamartia translates from Greek to “fault,” “failure,” or “guilt.” (See TRAGIC FLAW)

Hero, heroine: See CHARACTERIZATION.

Hubris: Excessive pride or self-confidence that leads a protagonist to disregard a divine warning or to violate an important moral law. In tragedies, hubris is a very common form of hamartia. (See also HAMARTIA, TRAGEDY, TRAGIC FLAW)

Hyperbole: An exaggerated statement or claim not meant to be taken literally, such as “that man is as big as a house” or “I’ve told you a million times not to do that.” Also called OVERSTATEMENT.

Iambic pentameter: A metrical pattern in poetry that consists of five iambic feet per line. An iamb, or iambic foot, consists of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. (See also FOOT, METER.)

Imagery: Language that appeals to the five senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell).

In medias res: Literally, “in the middle of things,” *in media res* is a term used to describe the common strategy of beginning a story in the middle of the action. In this type of plot, we enter the story on the verge of some important moment, such as the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon in the beginning of Homer’s *Iliad*. (See also PLOT)

Indirect characterization: When the character is revealed through his/her actions and words. Also called showing. (See DIRECT CHARACTERIZATION for contrast)

Inference: A reasonable conclusion about the behavior of a character or the meaning of an event drawn from the limited information presented by the author.

Integral setting: Setting that is essential to the plot.
**Internal conflict:** The conflict a person has within himself or herself, which can be emotional, psychological, moral, spiritual, etc. These are the moral dilemmas, personal traumas, inner turmoil, or psychological problems that complicate a person’s ability to overcome a challenge, make a critical decision, or succeed in a journey. (See EXTERNAL CONFLICT for contrast)

**Internal rhyme:** Occurs when rhyming words appear in the same line of poetry. (See RHYME)

**Intertextuality:** Simply put, it is the relationship between texts, especially literary ones. The term was originally coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in her 1966 *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, in which she argues that meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead is mediated through, or filtered by, “codes” imparted to the writer and reader by other texts. Roland Barthes would later add to Kristeva’s definition by arguing that the meaning of a text does not reside in the text, but is produced by the reader in relation not only to the text in question, but also the complex network of texts invoked in the reading process. Intertextual figures include ALLUSION, QUOTATION, plagiarism, translation, PASTICHE, and PARODY.

**Irony:** The contrast between what is expected and what actually happens; the difference between appearance and reality. For example, it would be ironic for a firehouse to burn down, or for a police station to be burglarized. **Verbal irony** is a figure of speech that occurs when a person says one thing but means the opposite. **Sarcasm** is a strong form of verbal irony that is calculated to hurt someone through, for example, false praise. **Dramatic irony** occurs when a reader of a novel or an audience of a play knows something that characters in the story do not, such as when one character is lying to another or if there is a monster hiding under a bed that a child entering its room does not know is there. **Situational irony** exists when there is an incongruity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens due to forces beyond human comprehension or control. **Tragic irony** is a form of dramatic irony found in tragedies, such as *Oedipus the King*, in which Oedipus searches for the person responsible for the plague that ravishes his city and ironically ends up hunting himself. **Cosmic irony** occurs when a writer uses God, destiny, or fate to dash the hopes and expectations of a character or of humankind in general. In cosmic irony, a discrepancy exists between what a character aspires to and what universal forces provide.

**Italian sonnet:** See SONNET.

**Juxtaposition:** Placing ideas, characters, settings, or objects side by side to emphasize the difference between them.

**Kenning:** A compound expression in Old English and Old Norse poetry with metaphorical meaning. For example, the kenning *oar-steed* may be used to represent a boat, or the kenning *whale-road* may be used to represent the ocean. (See METAPHOR)

**Limited omniscience:** See NARRATOR.

**Line:** A sequence of words printed as a separate entity on the page. In poetry, lines are usually measured by the number of feet they contain. The names for various line lengths are as follows:

- monometer: 1 foot
- dimeter: 2 feet
- trimeter: 3 feet
- tetrameter: 4 feet
- pentameter: 5 feet
- hexameter: 6 feet
- heptameter: 7 feet
- octameter: 8 feet
- nonameter: 9 feet

The number of feet in a line, coupled with the name of the foot, describes the metrical qualities of that line. (See also END-STOPPED LINE, ENJAMBMENT, FOOT, METER, VERSE)

**Lyric:** A short verse that is intended to express the emotions of the author; quite often these lyrics are set to music.

**Manuscript:** Literally meaning “written by hand,” a manuscript is a book, document, or piece of music written by hand rather than typed or printed. In modern times, a manuscript has also come to describe an author’s text that has not yet been published.
Melodrama: A term applied to any literary work that relies on implausible events and sensational action for its effect. The conflicts in melodramas typically arise out of plot rather than characterization; often a virtuous individual must somehow confront and overcome a wicked oppressor. Usually, a melodramatic story ends happily, with the protagonist defeating the antagonist at the last possible moment. Thus, melodramas entertain the reader or audience with exciting action while still conforming to a traditional sense of justice.

Metafiction: The literary term used to describe a work that explores the nature, structure, logic, status, and function of storytelling.

Metaphor: A comparison of two unlike objects to show a likeness between them, without using the words like or as. Metaphors assert the identity of dissimilar things, as when Shakespeare’s Macbeth asserts that life is a “brief candle.” The subject of a metaphor is called the tenor and the figurative language that replaces the tenor is called the vehicle. For example, in the novel All Quiet on the Western Front, the narrator says that the battlefront is a whirlpool. In this metaphor, “battlefront” is the tenor and “whirlpool” is the vehicle. Metaphors can be subtle or powerful, and can transform people, places, objects, and ideas into whatever the writer imagines them to be. An implied metaphor is a more subtle comparison; the terms being compared are not so specifically explained. For example, to describe a stubborn man unwilling to leave, one could say that he was “a mule standing his ground.” This is a fairly explicit metaphor; the man is being compared to a mule. But to say that the man “brayed his refusal to leave” is to create an implied metaphor, because the subject (the man) is never overtly identified as a mule. Braying is associated with the mule, a notoriously stubborn creature, and so the comparison between the stubborn man and the mule is sustained. Implied metaphors can slip by inattentive readers who are not sensitive to such carefully chosen, highly concentrated language. An extended metaphor is a sustained comparison in which part or all of a poem consists of a series of related metaphors. Robert Frost’s poem “Catch” relies on an extended metaphor that compares poetry to playing catch. A controlling metaphor runs through an entire work and determines the form or nature of that work. The controlling metaphor in Anne Bradstreet’s poem “The Author to Her Book” likens her book to a child. Synecdoche (pronounced sih-NECK-doe-kee) is a kind of metaphor in which a part of something is used to signify the whole, as when ten ships are called “ten sails,” or when a whole is used to signify one of its parts, such as in the phrase “Boston won the baseball game,” where the whole of the city of Boston is being used to signify the individuals who played on the baseball team and won the game. Metonymy is a type of metaphor in which something closely associated with a subject is substituted for it, such as using the “White House” to stand for the activities of the president. (See also FIGURES OF SPEECH, KENNING, PERSONIFICATION, SIMILE)

Meter: The repetition of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry. (See LINE). Below is a list of the most common meters in English poetry:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METER</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iambic</td>
<td>A foot consisting of an unaccented and accented syllable. English seems to fall naturally into iambic patterns, so it is the most common meter in English.</td>
<td>“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” —Sonnet 18, Shakespeare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trochaic</td>
<td>A foot consisting of an accented and unaccented syllable. This meter often creates a singsong effect.</td>
<td>“By the shores of Gitche Gamee By the shining Big-Sea-water.” —“Hiawatha,” Longfellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anapestic</td>
<td>A foot consisting of two unaccented syllables and an accented syllable.</td>
<td>“Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb I arise and unbuild it again.” —“Cloud,” Shelley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dactylic</td>
<td>A foot consisting of an accented syllable and two unaccented syllables.</td>
<td>swimmingly, manikin, openly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spondee</td>
<td>A foot consisting of two accented syllables. In English, this foot is used occasionally, for variety or emphasis.</td>
<td>heartbreak; dead meat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Metonymy: See METAPHOR.
Mood: The overall feeling or emotional atmosphere of a story. A story or scene can feel creepy, suspenseful, cheerful, sad, etc.

Motif: Any reoccurring character, incident, idea, or structure in literature, such as a hero saving a damsel in distress, society vs. nature, or the loss of innocence. The attention paid to eyes in The Great Gatsby, the transference of Kemmerich’s boots from one soldier to the next in All Quiet on the Western Front, the differences between life on the Mississippi River and life in the various towns on shore in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and the literal and figurative uses of night in Wiesel’s Night are all examples of motifs. As a literary device, motifs are used to communicate themes.

Motivated action: See CHARACTERIZATION.

Myth: Any story that attempts to explain how the world was created or why the world is the way that it is. Myths are stories that are passed on from generation to generation and normally involve religion and should therefore be thought of as “stories that matter.” Most myths were first spread by oral tradition and then were written down in some literary form. Many ancient literary works are in fact myths, since myths appear in every ancient culture of the planet. A good example of a myth is the Book of Genesis from the Bible, which recounts tales of the creation of the universe, the Earth, and mankind. Though audiences may disagree as to whether these Judeo-Christian-Islamic creation stories provide a real or fictional account of the origin of the world and its inhabitants, Genesis is still an important and influential story in the western tradition.

Naïve narrator: See NARRATOR.

Narrator: The voice of the person telling the story, not to be confused with the author’s voice. With a first person narrator, the I in the story presents the point of view of only one character. The reader is restricted to the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of that single character. An unreliable narrator is a first person narrator who reveals an interpretation of events that is somehow different from the author’s own interpretation of those events (i.e., persona vs. author). Often, the unreliable narrator’s perception of plot, characters, and setting becomes the actual subject of the story, such as Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye. Narrators can be unreliable for a number of reasons: they might lack self-knowledge, they might be inexperienced, or they might be insane. A naïve narrator is a type of unreliable narrator usually characterized by youthful innocence whose inexperience and ingenuousness exposes the faults or sad truths of a particular social environment, such as Mark Twain’s Huck Finn. A third person narrator is a narrator who is not a character in the story. An omniscient narrator is an all-knowing third person narrator who is not a character in the story and who can move from place to place and pass back and forth through time, slipping into and out of characters as no human possibly could in real life. An omniscient narrator can reveal the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in a story. Editorial omniscience refers to an intrusion by the narrator in order to evaluate a character for a reader, as when the narrator of The Scarlet Letter describes Hester Prynne’s relationship to the Puritan community. Neutral omniscience—also known as third person objective—is when the author states only what can be seen or heard, not what’s in characters’ minds, letting the characters’ actions and words speak for themselves. Many modern writers prefer neutral omniscient narrators so that readers can reach their own conclusions about plot events and their outcomes. Limited omniscience—also referred to as third person limited—occurs when an author restricts a narrator to the single perspective of either a major or minor character. The way people, places, and events appear to that character is the way they appear to the reader. Sometimes a limited omniscient narrator can see into more than one character, particularly in a work that focuses on two characters alternately from one chapter to the next. Short stories, however, are frequently limited to a single character’s point of view. (See also PERSONA, POINT OF VIEW, STREAM-OF-CONSCIOUSNESS TECHNIQUE)

Naturalism: A subgenre of REALISM, naturalism is writing that depicts events as rigidly determined by the forces of heredity and environment (social and natural). Naturalist authors believe the world can be understood by examining cause-and-effect relationships and that all events are determined by antecedent causes.

Near rhyme: See RHYME.

Neutral omniscience: See NARRATOR.
**Octave**: A poetic stanza of eight lines, usually forming one part of a sonnet. (See SONNET, STANZA)

**Ode**: A relatively lengthy lyric poem that often expresses lofty emotions in a dignified style. Odes are characterized by a serious topic, such as truth, justice, freedom, or the meaning of life, and are formal and elevated in tone. (See LYRIC, TONE)

**Off rhyme**: See RHYME.

**Omniscient narrator**: See NARRATOR.

**Onomatopoeia**: The use of a word whose sound suggests its meaning, as in clang, buzz, and twang.

**Open form**: See FREE VERSE.

**Overstatement**: See HYPERBOLE.

**Oxymoron**: A condensed form of a paradox in which two contradictory words are used together, as in “sweet sorrow,” “original copy,” or “silent scream.” (See PARADOX)

**Parable**: A brief fictional work that concretely illustrates an abstract idea or teaches some lesson or truth. It differs from a FABLE in that its characters are generally people rather than animals; it differs from an ALLEGORY in that its characters do not necessarily represent abstract qualities.

**Paradox**: A statement that at first seems contradictory but turns out to have a profound meaning, such as this line from Robert Frost: “Nature’s first green is gold.”

**Parallelism**: Repeating of phrases or sentences that are similar, parallel in meaning and structure, as with “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

**Parody**: A humorous imitation of a particular literary work or its style. A burlesque, or comic effect, is created. Parody may be used as a form of literary criticism to expose the defects in a work. But sometimes parody becomes an affectionate acknowledgment that a well-known work has become both institutionalized in our culture and fair game for some fun.

**Pastiche**: A work of visual art, literature, or music that imitates the style or character of the work of one or more other artists. Unlike PARODY, pastiche celebrates, rather than mocks, the work it imitates.

**Pastoral**: A poem or literary work portraying or evoking country life, usually in a romanticized or idealized form.

**Pathos**: A Greek root meaning “suffering” or “passion.” It is usually applied to the part in the play or story intended to bring out pity or sorrow from the audience or reader.

**Persona**: Literally, persona is a mask. In literature, the persona is the narrator, or the storyteller, of a literary work created by the author. The persona is not the author, but the author’s creation—the voice “through which the author speaks.” It could be a character in the work, or a fabricated onlooker, relaying the sequence of events in a narrative. A persona is a separate self, created by and distinct from the author, through which he or she speaks. For example, Mark Twain uses the persona of Huck Finn to narrate *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

**Personification**: Giving human attributes to a non-human creature or thing. Also called ANTHROPOMORPHISM.

**Petrarchan sonnet**: See SONNET.

**Plausible action**: See CHARACTERIZATION.

**Play**: See DRAMA.
**Playwright**: See DRAMA.

**Plot**: Simply put, **plot** is the action in a story. It is an author’s selection and arrangement of incidents in a story to shape the action and give the story a particular focus. Discussions of plot include not just what happens, but also how and why things happen the way they do. Stories that are written in a **pyramidal pattern** divide the plot into three essential parts. The first part is the **rising action**, in which complication creates some sort of conflict for the protagonist. The second part is the **climax**, the moment of greatest emotional tension in a narrative, usually marking a turning point in the plot, which the rising action reverses to become the falling action. The third part, the **falling action** (or **resolution**) is characterized by diminishing tensions and the resolution of the plot’s conflicts and complications. **In media res** (“into the middle of things”) is a term used to describe the common strategy of beginning a story in the middle of the action. In this type of plot, we enter the story on the verge of some important moment. (See also **characterization**, **crisis**, **resolution**, **subplot**)

**Plotline**: The five basic parts or elements in a plot: **exposition**, **rising action**, **climax**, **falling action**, and **resolution**. (See plot)

**Poetry**: Language that reflects imagination, emotion, and thinking in verse form; a concentrated and heightened form of language, produced through rhythm and sound.

**Point of View**: A way the events of a story are conveyed to the reader, it is the “vantage point” from which the narrative is passed from author to the reader. The point of view can vary from work to work. For example, in the Book of Genesis the **third person objective** point of view is presented, where a “nonparticipant” serves as the narrator and has no insight into the characters’ minds. The narrator presents the events using the pronouns **he**, **it**, **they**, and reveals no inner thoughts of the characters. In Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Cask of Amontillado,” the **first person point** of view is exhibited. In this instance the main character conveys the incidents he encounters, as well as giving the reader insight into himself as he reveals his thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Many other points of view exist, such as omniscient (or “all-knowing”) in which the narrator moves from one character to another as necessary to provide those character’s respective motivations and emotions. Understanding the point of view used in a work is critical to understanding literature; it serves as the instrument to relay the events of a story, and in some instances the feelings and motives of the character(s). (See narrator)

**Prologue**: The opening speech or dialogue of a play, especially a classic Greek play, that usually gives the exposition necessary to follow the action that will follow. Today the term also refers to the introduction to any literary work. (See also DRAMA, EXPOSITION)

**Protagonist**: The main character or lead figure in a novel, play, story, or poem. It may also be referred to as the **hero** of a work. Over a period of time the meaning of the term protagonist has changed. The word protagonist originated in ancient Greek drama and referred to the leader of a chorus. Soon the definition was changed to represent the first actor onstage. In some literature today it may be difficult to decide who is playing the role of the protagonist. For instance, in Othello, we could say that Iago is the protagonist because he was at the center of all of the play's controversy. But even if he was a main character, was he the lead character? This ambiguity can lead to multiple interpretations of the same work and different ways of appreciating a single piece of literature.

**Pun**: A joke exploiting the different possible meanings of a word or the fact that there are words that sound alike but have different meanings. (e.g., “The pigs were a squeal—if you’ll forgive the pun.”)

**Quatrain**: A four-line stanza. Quatrains are the most common stanzaic form in the English language; they can have various meters and rhyme schemes. (See meter, rhyme, stanza)

**Quotation**: The repetition of one expression as part of another one, particularly when the quoted expression is well-known or explicitly attributed by citation to its original source, and it is punctuated with quotation marks.

**Realism**: A way of representing life as it seems to the common reader. The material selected tends to represent, with almost photographic precision and detail, ordinary people in everyday experiences and settings. (See **Romanticism** for contrast)
**Refrain:** The repetition of one or more lines in each stanza of a poem.

**Repetition:** Repeating of a word or idea for emphasis.

**Resolution:** The way a story ends and all the loose ends are tied up. Also called *denouement*.

**Rising action:** See *Plot*.

**Rhetoric:** The art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing.

**Rhetorical Question:** A question that has no expectation of a reply or answer, used as a persuasive technique.

**Rhyme:** The repetition of identical or similar concluding syllables in different words, most often at the ends of lines. Rhyme is predominantly a function of sound rather than spelling; thus, words that end with the same vowel sounds rhyme—for instance, *day*, *prey*, *bouquet*, *weigh*—and words with the same consonant ending rhyme—for instance *vain*, *feign*, *rein*, *lane*. Words do not have to be spelled the same way or look alike to rhyme. In facts, words may look alike but not rhyme at all. This is called *eye rhyme*, as with *bough* and *cough*, or *brow* and *blow*. *End rhyme* is the most common form of rhyme in poetry; the rhyme comes at the end of the lines:

> It runs through the reeds,
>     And away it proceeds,
> Through meadow and glade,
>     In sun and in shade.

The *rhyme scheme* of a poem describes the pattern of end rhymes. Rhyme schemes are mapped out by noting patterns of rhyme with small letters: the first rhyme sound is designated *a*, the second becomes *b*, the third *c*, and so on. Thus, the rhyme scheme of the stanza above is *aabb*. *Internal rhyme* places at least one of the rhymed words within the line, as in “Dividing and gliding and sliding” or “In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud.” *Masculine rhyme* describes the rhyming of single-syllable words, such as *grade* or *shade*. Masculine rhyme also occurs when rhyming words of more than one syllable, when the same sound occurs in a final stressed syllable, as in *defend* and *contend*, *betray* and *away*. *Feminine rhyme* consists of a rhymed stressed syllable followed by one or more identical unstressed syllables, as in *butter*, *clutter*, *gratitude*, *attitude*; *quivering*, *shivering*. All the examples so far illustrated have been *exact rhymes* because they share the same stressed vowel sounds as well as sharing sounds that follow the vowel. In *near rhyme* (also called *off rhyme*, *slant rhyme*, and *approximate rhyme*), the sounds are almost but not exactly alike. A common form of near rhyme is *consonance*, which consists of identical consonant sounds preceded by different vowel sounds: *home*, *same*; *worth*, *breath*.

**Rhyme scheme:** See *Rhyme*.

**Rising Action:** The sequence of conflicts and crises that lead to a climax. (See *Plot*).

**Romance:** An extended fictional prose narrative about improbable events involving characters that are quite different from ordinary people. Knights on a quest for a magic sword and aided by characters like fairies and trolls would be examples of things found in romance fiction.

**Romanticism:** A genre of writing that tends to portray the uncommon. The material selected tends to deal with extraordinary people in unusual experiences. In romantic literature there is often a stress on the past (particularly the ancient Greek or Latin literature, art, or culture) and an emphasis on nature. (See *Realism* for contrast)

**Round Character:** A character that is fully developed.

**Sarcasm:** See *Irony*.

**Satire:** A literary mode based on criticism of people and society through ridicule. The satirist aims to reduce the practices attacked by laughing scornfully at them—and being witty enough to allow the reader to laugh, also. Ridicule, irony, exaggeration, and several other techniques are almost always present. The satirist may insert serious statements of value or desired behavior, but most often he relies on an implicit moral code, understood by his
audience and paid lip service by them. The satirist’s goal is to point out the hypocrisy of his target in the hope that either the target or the audience will return to a real following of the code. Thus, satire is inescapably moral even when no explicit values are promoted in the work, for the satirist works within the framework of a widely spread value system. Many of the techniques of satire are devices of comparison, to show the similarity or contrast between two things. A list of incongruous items, an oxymoron, metaphors, and so forth are examples.

**Scansion:** The process of measuring the stresses in a line of verse in order to determine the metrical pattern of the line. (See also LINE, METER)

**Scene:** In drama, a scene is a subdivision of an ACT. In modern plays, scenes usually consist of units of action in which there are no changes in the setting or breaks in the continuity of time. According to traditional conventions, a scene changes when the location of the action shifts or when a new character enters. (See also DRAMA)

**Science Fiction:** A novel in which futuristic technology or otherwise altered scientific principles contribute in a significant way to the adventures. Often the novel assumes a set of rules or principles or facts and then traces their logical consequences in some form. For example, given that a man discovers how to make himself invisible, what might happen? Examples: H. G. Wells, *The Invisible Man*; Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*; Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey*; Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles*.

**Script:** The written text of a play, which includes the dialogue between characters, stage directions, and often other expository information. (See also DRAMA, EXPOSITION, PROLOGUE, STAGE DIRECTION)

**Setting:** The total environment for the action of a fictional work. Setting includes time period (e.g., the 1890’s), the place (e.g., downtown Warsaw), and the social environment (e.g., the Crimean War). Setting can be used to evoke a mood or atmosphere that will prepare the reader for what is to come. Sometimes writers choose a particular setting because of traditional associations with that setting that are closely related to the action of the story. For example, stories filled with adventure or romance often take place in exotic locales. If there is no thematic significance to the author’s choice of setting then it is referred to as **backdrop setting**.

**Shakespearean sonnet:** See SONNET.

**Showing:** See CHARACTERIZATION, INDIRECT CHARACTERIZATION.

**Simile:** A figure of speech that makes an explicit comparison of two unlike objects usually using the words *like* or *as*, but may also use *than*, *appears*, and *seems*. An example of a simile would be “A sip of Mrs. Cook’s coffee is like a punch in the stomach.” (See also FIGURES OF SPEECH, METAPHOR)

**Situational irony:** See IRONY.

**Soliloquy:** A (usually long) dramatic speech whereby a character relates his/her thoughts and feelings without addressing any of the other characters, giving the illusion of an unspoken reflection. Soliloquies will often occur with no other characters on the stage, though it is not unusual for other actors to be present; regardless, the idea is that the audience is getting a peek into the inner thoughts of the speaking character. A soliloquy is not the same as a **monologue** or an **aside**.

**Sonnet:** A fourteen-line poem, usually in iambic pentameter, with a varied rhyme scheme. The two main types of sonnet are the Petrarchan (or Italian) and the Shakespearean (or English). The **Petrarchan** sonnet—so named after the Tuscan poet Petrarch—is divided into two main sections, the octave (first eight lines) and the sestet (last six lines). The octave presents a problem or situation that is then resolved or commented on in the sestet. The most common rhyme scheme is *abbaabacddecde*, though there is flexibility in the sestet, such as *cdcedc*. The **Shakespearean** sonnet (perfected though not invented by Shakespeare) contains three quatrains and a couplet. The most common rhyme scheme is *ababcddefgfg*. In Shakespeare’s sonnets, the couplet often undercuts the thought created in the rest of the poem. (See also COUPLET, LINE, OCTAVE, QUATRAIN, SESTET)

**Speaker:** The voice used by an author to tell a story or speak a poem. The speaker is often a created identity, and should not automatically be equated with the author’s self. (See also NARRATOR, PERSONA, POINT OF VIEW)
**Stage directions:** A playwright’s written instructions about how the actors are to move and behave in a play. They explain in which direction characters should move, what facial expressions they should assume, and so on. (See also DRAMA, SCRIPT)

**Stanza:** In poetry, stanza refers to a grouping of lines, set off by a space, that usually has a set pattern of meter and rhyme. (See also LINE, METER, RHYME)

**Static Character:** A character that doesn’t change over the course of a story. Also called a FLAT CHARACTER. (See DYNAMIC CHARACTER for contrast)

**Stock character:** See CHARACTER.

**Stream-of-consciousness technique:** A literary style in which a character’s thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or conventional dialogue. Simply put, it is a narrative technique that expresses a character’s thoughts as they occur rather than a structured way. The effect is often kaleidoscopic, detailing a continuously changing sequence of experiences, visions, or elements.

**Stress:** See ACCENT.

**Style:** An author’s distinctive voice; the manner of expression of a particular writer, produced by choice of words, grammatical structures, use of literary devices, and all the possible parts of language use. Some general styles might include scientific, ornate, plain, emotive. Most writers have their own particular styles. (See also DICTION, IRONY, TONE)

**Subplot:** A subordinate or minor collection of events in a novel or drama. Most subplots have some connection with the main plot, acting as foils to, commentary on, complications of, or support to the theme of the main plot. Sometimes two opening subplots merge into a main plot.

**Symbol:** In general terms, a symbol is anything that stands for something else. It is something that on the surface is its literal self but also has another meaning or even several meanings. For example, a sword may be a sword and also symbolize justice. A symbol may be said to embody an idea. There are two general types of symbols: universal symbols that embody universally recognizable meanings wherever used, such as light to symbolize knowledge or a skull to symbolize death, and constructed symbols that are given symbolic meaning by the way an author uses them in a literary work, as the white whale becomes a symbol of evil in Moby-Dick.

**Synecdoche:** See METAPHOR.

**Syntax:** The ordering of words into meaningful verbal patterns, such as phrases, clauses, and sentences. Poets often manipulate syntax, changing conventional word order, to place certain emphasis on particular words. Emily Dickinson, for instance, writes about being surprised by a snake in her poem “A narrow Field in the Grass,” and includes this line: “His notice sudden is.” In addition to the alliterative hissing s-sounds here, Dickinson also effectively manipulates the line’s syntax so that the verb is appears unexpectedly at the end, making the snake’s hissing presence all the more “sudden.”

**Tall tale:** A work of fiction that stretches the truth, which originated as a story type in the untamed American frontier in the 19th century, when “yarn-spinners” passed on the legendary feats of such folk heroes as Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, Davy Crockett, and Pecos Bill. Since the purpose of a tall tale was purely for entertainment, the storyteller tended to “stretch” (or embellish) the truth in order to captivate his audience and outdo fellow narrators. There are four elements to a tall tale: 1) a blending of realism and romanticism, 2) caricature, 3) hyperbole, and 4) use of vernacular. (See CARICATURE, HYPERBOLE, and VERNACULAR)

**Telling:** See DIRECT CHARACTERIZATION.

**Tercet:** A three-line stanza. (See also STANZA)
**Theme**: The message or central idea of a literary work; the universal truth of a story. A theme is a thought or idea the author presents to the reader that may be deep, difficult to understand, or even moralistic. Generally, a theme has to be extracted as the reader explores the passages of a work. The author utilizes the characters, plot, and other literary devices to assist the reader in this endeavor.

**Third person limited**: See NARRATOR, POINT OF VIEW.

**Third person objective**: See NARRATOR, POINT OF VIEW.

**Third person omniscient**: See NARRATOR, POINT OF VIEW.

**Tome**: A large, heavy, scholarly book.

**Tone**: Simply put, *tone* is a speaker's attitude toward his audience and/or his subject as revealed by **SYNTAX** and **DICTION**. A writer can be formal, informal, playful, ironic, and, especially, optimistic or pessimistic.

**Tragedy**: Broadly defined, a literary and particularly a dramatic presentation of serious actions in which the chief character has a disastrous fate. There are many different kinds and theories of tragedy, starting with the Greeks and Aristotle's definition in *The Poetics*, "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself...with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions." In the Middle Ages, tragedy merely depicted a decline from happiness to misery because of some flaw or error of judgment.

**Tragic flaw**: An error, defect, or flaw leading to the downfall of a tragic hero or heroine, such as pride, greed, ambition, poor judgment, misunderstanding, or madness. (See HAMARTIA)

**Tragic irony**: See IRONY.

**Travesty**: A work that treats a serious subject frivolously—ridiculing the dignified. Often the tone is mock serious and heavy handed.

**Unreliable narrator**: See NARRATOR, POINT OF VIEW.

**Verbal irony**: See IRONY.

**Verisimilitude**: How fully the characters and actions in a work of fiction conform to our sense of reality. To say that a work has a high degree of verisimilitude means that the work is very realistic and believable—it is "true to life."

**Vernacular**: Narration and dialogue true to an authentic, natural pattern of speech.

**Verse**: Writing arranged with a metrical rhythm. A verse can also refer to a group of lines that form a unit in a poem. Identification of verse structure includes the name of the metrical type and the name designating number of feet. (See LINE for examples for verse types)

**Vignette**: A brief narrative or description written with precision and grace, and intended to give a vivid impression of a personality or scene.

**Vocabulary**: The body of words used in a particular language.