

## Glossary of Literary Terms – English I

### ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE--THE ESSENTIAL PARTS OF A PIECE OF LITERATURE

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#### Types of Characters:

**Protagonist**--the main character involved in the central conflict.

**Antagonist**--the force or person who works against the main character's attempt to solve the problem; may be another character, society, nature, or force within the protagonist.

**Foil**--a character whose traits are in direct contrast to those of the principal character. The foil typically highlights the traits of the protagonist. The foil is usually a minor character, although if there are two protagonists, they may be foils of each other.

**Flat Character**—one who is not fully developed; we know only one side of the character.

**Round Character**—one who is fully-developed, with many traits--bad and good--shown in the story. We feel that we know the character so well that he or she has become a real person.

**Static Character**—usually a minor character who tends to remain unchanged throughout the story; things happen to these characters without things happening within.

**Dynamic Character**—one who undergoes change in response to events in the story.

**Mood**--the feeling or atmosphere a reader senses while reading a piece of literature.

**Plot**--the sequence of actions or events in a story.

**Exposition**—The major components that set up a story, including the setting, characters involved, etc. This sets up the background of a fictional story.

**Rising Action:** As the story progresses, complications (smaller problems) and major conflict(s) begin to occur, that eventually will need to be resolved.

**Climax**--the highest point of tension in the plot. This is also when the conflict begins to get resolved.

**Conflict**--a problem that confronts the characters in a piece of literature.

Internal--character struggles within himself or herself

External--character struggles against nature, another person, or society

Common conflict types: man or woman against nature--against self--against society--against man or woman--against technology

**Falling Action** (denouement)--the unraveling of the plot following the climax.

**Resolution**--the final part of the plot where you learn how everything works out.

**Point of View**--the perspective from which a writer tells a story.

**First person**--narrator or one of characters tells the story using "I."

**Third person**--a narrator or someone outside the story is telling it using " he, she, or them. "

**Omniscient narrator**—an all-knowing narrator who is not a character in the story and who can report the thoughts and feelings of the characters, as well as their words and actions.

**Setting**--The physical and social context in which the action of a story occurs. The major elements of setting are the time, the place, and the social environment that frames the characters.

**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 (in poetry the speaker is

often not meant to show how the poet feels/thinks).

**Theme**—A central meaning in the work which provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbols, and other elements of a work are organized. It is important not to mistake the theme for the actual subject of the work; the theme refers to the abstract concept that is made concrete through the images, characterization, and action of the text. It is a statement about life or human nature that the author conveys to the reader, i.e., *Be careful about what you wish for. . . .*

**Tone**--the author's attitude toward the subject in the piece (serious, sarcastic, objective, compassionate), which readers may infer from the language, imagery, and structure.

## LITERARY DEVICES--TECHNIQUES USED FOR STYLISTIC PURPOSES

*\*Note: Authors use literary devices to develop the literary elements; for example, symbolism may develop a theme or deepen the reader's understanding of setting.*

**Alliteration**--repetition of the first sound --usually a consonant sound--in several words of a sentence or a line of poetry. The line from Edgar Allen Poe's "The Bells" provides a solid example of alliteration:

Hear the loud alarum bells--

Brazen bells!

What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!

**Allusion**-- A brief reference to a person, place, thing, event, or idea in history or literature. Authors assume that careful readers will recognize allusions and relate their meaning to the new context. A common allusion found in much literature is a biblical allusion. For instance, "going the extra mile" is an allusion to Jesus' words recorded in Matthew 5:21 in the Bible.

**Apostrophe**--An address, either to someone who is absent and therefore cannot hear the speaker or to something nonhuman that cannot comprehend. Apostrophe often provides a speaker/character the opportunity to think aloud.

**Aside** -- a convention in drama whereby a character onstage addresses the audience to reveal some inner thought or feeling that is presumed inaudible to any other characters onstage who might be in earshot.

**Assonance** -- a repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds, usually those found in stressed syllables of close proximity. The slogan of the Hoover Vacuum cleaner uses assonance: "It beats . . . as it sweeps . . . as it cleans!"

**Characterization**--the method an author uses to develop characters' personalities or motives through the use of dialogue and descriptions of their thoughts, appearance, emotions, and actions.

**Colloquialism/Colloquial Language**—Informal (casual) or conversational use of language. For example, "hey, what's up dude?" This language is fine for writing dialogue in a story, but does not belong in a formal essay.

**Concession** -- a reluctant acknowledgment of yielding. This is often used to strengthen an argument to make it more persuasive, because a concession shows that you are considering the other arguments against your position, and that you still know how to handle them. Doing this shows more depth of thought and consideration which is persuasive.

**Connotation** -- what is suggested by a word, apart from what it explicitly describes, often referred to as the implied meaning of a word. For example, the words *sweet* or *gay* have undergone connotative alteration in the last couple of decades. Most colloquial language and modern vernacular have different connotations than they did in prior eras, as word meanings change over time and as a result of the culture. For example, your grandparents may look at you funny when you describe your favorite musical artist as being "dope" "sick" "tight" "cool" or "legit."

**Denotation** -- a direct and specific meaning, often referred to as the dictionary meaning of a word.

**Dialogue**—The discussion between characters in a story.

**Diction**—a speaker or author's word choice used for effect; includes connotation of words as well as denotation. (concrete vs. abstract; formal vs. informal or colloquial)

**Euphemism**-- A mild word or phrase which substitutes for another which would be undesirable because it is too direct, unpleasant, or offensive: saying "passed away" rather than "died."

**Figurative language**--language used to express ideas through figures of speech; descriptions that aren't meant to be taken literally; types of figurative language include simile, metaphor, hyperbole,

and personification.

**Flashback**--a break in a story's action that returns the reader to a previous event.

**Foreshadowing**--the use of clues giving the reader hints of events to come.

**Hyperbole**—obvious exaggeration used for serious, comic, or ironic effect. When it is crowded someone might say, “There are millions of people in Ms. Butterfield’s classroom.” I like to call students “hyperbolistic” if you come in being overly dramatic about a particular situation.

**Idiom**—an expression whose meaning can't be understood literally, such as “*It's raining cats and dogs.*” Or, “*That car costs an arm and a leg.*”

**Imagery**—the words and phrases used in writing that appeal to the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Be descriptive with each of your senses!!

**Irony**—an effect created by a contrast between what is expected and what is real (three major types: situational, verbal, and dramatic). Example: An Olympic swimmer drowns in a bathtub.

**Jargon** – specialized or technical language of a trade, profession, or similar group. The computer industry has created a lot of jargon that they use to mean something entirely different than before. ex – crash, interface, tweet, post...

**Juxtaposition** – the location of one thing as being adjacent with another in order to compare or contrast items. This placement of two items side by side creates a certain effect or reveals an attitude. For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, the author has a married couple get into a major argument at a hotel where wedding music is heard from below in the ballroom. This is done to show one marriage beginning and one seemingly approaching the end for comparative purposes.

**Metaphor**—a direct comparison where one thing is said to *be* another thing: *The stars were diamonds.*

**Extended Metaphor** – a detailed and complex metaphor that extends over a long section of a work.

**Motif** – a unifying element in an artistic work, especially any recurrent image, symbol, theme, character, subject, or narrative detail. A given motif may be unique to a work or it may appear in numerous works.

**Onomatopoeia**—the technique of using words that sound like what they mean: *buzz, ouch, splash.*

**Organization** – The structure and/or layout of a literary work that affects its overall purpose and/or effect. Look for differences in organization among various works’ beginnings, middles, and ends.

**Oxymoron**—a condensed form of paradox in which two seemingly contradictory terms are joined together: jumbo shrimp, wise fool, bittersweet.

**Paradox**—A statement that initially appears to be contradictory but then, on closer inspection, turns out to make sense. For example, “Fight for peace.” Another is this quote from Pablo Picasso, “Art is a form of lying in order to tell the truth.”

**Parody** – a work that imitates another work for comic effect by exaggerating the style and changing the content of the original. Ex. – *The Scary Movie* series are parodies of scary movies in general. Also, Weird Al takes common pop songs and writes parodies of them to spoof a person or concept. For example, his song “I Found it on eBay” is a parody of the Backstreet Boys song “I Want it that Way.”

**Personification**—figurative language in which an animal, object, or idea is given human characteristics: *The trees screamed with terror during the storm.*

**Repetition**—the technique of repeating a word, phrase, or idea for emphasis and effect.

**Rhetoric** – the study of effective persuasive language use. To write rhetorically is to write in a persuasive manner where you are aware of your audience and their needs/desires, along with being aware of the conventions of the genre you are writing in. For example, business writing is usually short and to-the-point (such as a resume or letter), but scientific writing (such as a lab report or research study) is very detailed and formatted in a consistent manner. Thinking and

writing rhetorically is very important for college, where students are asked to form opinions and communicate them strongly in a way that goes beyond a basic summary, and has original commentary.

**Rhetorical Question** – a question that is asked simply for stylistic effect and is not expected to be answered. This is very effective when used to persuade. For instance, in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, a Jewish merchant, attempts to persuade his self-worth by use of a series of rhetorical questions:

"Hath not a Jew eyes?

Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?

If you prick us, do we not bleed, if you tickle us, do we not laugh?

If you poison us, do we not die?

(Shylock in William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*)

**Sarcasm** – a form of verbal irony in which apparent praise is actually harshly or bitterly critical. For example, if a teacher says to a student who sneaks into class an hour late, “So nice of you to join us,” the teacher is being sarcastic. Ms. Butterfield likes to use a much more positive form of sarcasm, which is actually “dry wit.” It is somewhat different than the negative version of sarcasm, but still implies she says something but really means something else to test people’s gullibility.

**Satire** – a literary work that ridicules human folly. The television show “The Simpsons” often uses satire to allude to folly in common society. For instance, the mini episode “It’s a Gym” pokes fun at Arnold Schwarzenegger.

**Simile**—figurative language in which one thing is said to *be like* or *as* another thing: *The stars were like diamonds.*

**Symbolism**—the technique of using an image, person, place or thing to express the idea beyond the thing itself: roses as symbols of love; light as a symbol of knowledge or goodness. (abstract ideas, or things you cannot touch, representing concrete things, or things you can touch)

**Syntax**—the arrangement, ordering, grouping, and placement of words within a sentence and the arrangement of sentences within a piece.

**Tragic Flaw** – a character trait in a tragic hero or heroine that brings about his or her downfall. Traits like selfishness, fear, perfectionism, shortsightedness, moral weakness, and arrogance or hubris are common tragic flaws, but a protagonist’s tragic flaw is not necessarily a “bad” character trait. One of the most common, found especially in plays, is “hubris” or being overly prideful.

**Understatement**—The opposite of hyperbole; a figure of speech statement, which lessens or minimizes the importance of what is meant: such as if one were in a desert where the temperature was 125 degrees, and said "It's a little warm today."

References: Mr. Smith, English Teacher, Summerville High School, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* by Ross Murfin and Supryia Ray and *Essential Literary Terms* by Sharon Hamilton.