

Literary/Dramatic Terms – Definitions and Examples

Instructions: For each term listed below, find an example from *Romeo and Juliet* (if possible). You are required to know how to spell all of these terms and be able to recognize the definitions on a Literary Terms Test.

Alliteration – Repetition of initial letter in two or more words.

Allusion – Casual reference to an historical or literary figure or event. (“I know not where is that *Promethean heat* that can thy light relume” – Shakespeare)

Anachronism – False assignment of an event, a person, a language etc... to a time when that event was not in existence. (chimneys in *Julius Caesar*)

Analogy – A comparison of two things by which one unfamiliar object or idea is explained by comparing it with other familiar objects or ideas. (high school is a jail with teachers as guards and students as prisoners ☺)

Antagonist – (Greek: ant=against, agonistes=actor) The character directly opposed to the protagonist; the rival or villain.

Antithesis – A literary technique in which opposite or strongly contrasting statements are balanced against each other for emphasis. There must not only be an opposition of ideas but it should be manifested through similar grammatical structure. (“Man proposes, God disposes.” – *Alexander Pope*)

Apostrophe – Words addressed to an absent person, or to a thing, or an idea. (Antony in Julius Caesar: “O Judgement! Thou are fled to brutish beasts...”)

Aside – A remark made by a character in a play which is intended to be heard by the audience but not by the majority of the other characters on the stage.

Assonance – Similarity of sound between vowels; not perfect rhymes.
(*cake* and *lake* rhyme, *fate* and *lake* are examples of assonance)

Blank verse – Unrhymed verse, usually five stress lines; more particularly, iambic pentameter – lines of two feet (iambs) of alternating unstressed/stressed syllables repeated five times (pentameter). It has become the most widely used of English verse forms and is the one closest to the rhythms of everyday English speech.

Bon mot – A witty repartee or statement; a clever saying.

Cacophony – (Greek = bad sound) Harsh or dissonant sounds deliberately used by writers, especially poets, to achieve a particular effect. The opposite of euphony.

Caesura – (Latin = cutting) A break in the metrical progress of verse. Used for emphasis or to reduce stiffness of formal patterns. Usually placed near the middle of a verse.

Colloquialism – An expression used in informal conversation but not accepted as good usage in formal speech or writing.

Comic Relief – A humorous scene introduced in the course of a serious work. Consciously introduced by the author to provide relief from emotional intensity and at the same time, by contrast, to heighten the seriousness of the story. (Mercutio's role in *Romeo and Juliet*)

Connotation – An additional, suggested, or implied meaning of words. Contrasts with *denotation*, which is the exact, literal meaning. Connotations may change with time, place, and experience. (Note the different connotations of the following: fat/curvy, skinny/slender)

Consonance – Repeated identical consonant sounds. Final consonants in the stressed syllables agree but the vowels that precede them differ. (*yellow* and *shallow*)

Contrast – A rhetorical devices by which one element is thrown into opposition to another for the sake of emphasis or clearness. The effect is to make both contrast ideas clearer than either would have been if described by itself.

Couplet – Two successive lines rhyming aa and containing with the two lines a complete, independent statement.

Denotation – The specific, exact meaning of a word, independent of its emotional colouration or associations. Dictionary definition.

Diction – The use of words in oral or written form. The accurate, careful *use* of words through apt selection of specific words for a particular meaning to be conveyed. Four levels include: formal, informal, colloquial, and slang.

Dramatic Irony – Words or acts of a character carrying meaning unknown to him/her but understood by the audience.

Dramatic Monologue – A lyric poem which reveals “a soul in action” through the conversation of one character in a dramatic situation. The character is speaking to an identifiable but silent listener in a dramatic moment in the speaker’s life. Robert Browning is often credited with its creation.

Elision – The omission of part of a word for ease of pronunciation, to enhance rhythm or sound. Elision runs two words together and should not be confused with syncope. (*th’orient* for *the orient*)

Enjambement – The device of continuing the sense and grammatical construction of a verse or couplet on into the next. One line wraps into the other.

Epithet – Adjective or phrase highlighting a characteristic of a person or thing. (Homeric epithet – “swift-footed Achilles”)

Euphony – (Greek = sweetness of sound) Pleasing, smooth sounds, usually produced by long vowels rather than consonants. The opposite of cacophony.

Foil – Literally, a thin leaf of polished metal placed under a gem to give it added brilliance. By extension, a character whose behaviour and qualities set off or enhance by contrast, those of another. When the two are juxtaposed (placed side by side) the foil is in effect. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Dr. Watson is a foil to Sherlock Holmes.

Foreshadowing – An indication or hint of events that are to come.

Genre – A term used to designate the distinct types or categories into which literary works are grouped according to form or technique. (tragedy, comedy, epic/novel, short story, essay etc...)

Hamartia – (Greek = error) In tragedy, a human weakness which leads to action or inaction, contributing to the downfall of the hero. Often called the "tragic flaw". From *Poetics* by Aristotle.

Hubris – Overweening pride which results in the misfortune of the protagonist of a tragedy. A form of hamartia which results from too much pride, ambition, and overconfidence. (*Macbeth*)

Hyperbole – (Greek = overcasting) Figure of speech containing an exaggeration for emphasis. ("rivers of blood" – *Macbeth*)

Imagery – Figurative language to enrich poetry or prose. It conveys images and/or appeals to the five senses. Compare the following : "What you are saying is unpleasant." and "These words are razors to my wounded heart." (from *Titus Andronicus*). The second is an example of employing a metaphor to create imagery. The most common devices effecting imagery are similes, metaphors, and personification.

Irony – Speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words that carry the opposite meaning.

Juxtaposition - The arrangement of two or more ideas, characters, actions, settings, phrases, or words side-by-side or in similar narrative moments for the purpose of comparison, contrast, rhetorical effect, suspense, or character development.

Leitmotif – (leading motive) Recurring theme.

Malapropism – An inappropriateness of speech resulting from the use of one word for another which has some similarity.

Metaphor – A figure of speech that is based on a comparison that is implied rather than directly or explicitly expressed. It does not use a connective. “He was a lion” is a metaphor. “He roared *like* a lion” is a simile.

Metonymy - (Greek = name change) A figure of speech in which the name for one thing is substituted for that of another with which is closely associated. (“crown” for monarchy, “the stage” for the theatrical profession)

Motif – A recurring image or symbol.

Nemesis – Retributive justice; a just punishment. In Greek mythology, Nemesis was the goddess of vengeance.

Onomatopoeia – The use of words in which the sense is suggested by the sound. (*hiss, buzz, drip*)

Oxymoron – (Greek = pointedly foolish) A phrase bringing two incongruous and apparently contradictory terms together. Closely related to antithesis and paradox. (*sounds of silence, jumbo shrimp, wise fool*)

Paradox – (Greek = beyond opinion) A statement that seems contradictory or absurd and yet is true. Used to attract attention and provide emphasis. (“In my beginning is my end...” from *East Coker* by T.S. Eliot)

Pathetic Fallacy – Attributing human passions to inanimate things (like weather or unnatural events). According to John Ruskin (who coined this phrase in 1856), a writer was “pathetically fallacious” when he ascribed human feelings to the inanimate. He was speaking critically, however the device is commonly used and recognized. It is a type of personification.

Pathos – (Greek = feeling, suffering) The portrayal of an incident in such a way as to arouse feelings of pity or sadness in the reader or audience.

Personification – A figure of speech that endows animals, ideas, and inanimate objects with human form, personality, or feelings. Charles Dickens describes houses “looking as if they had twisted themselves to peep down at me through...the skylight” in *Great Expectations*.

Protagonist – (Greek: protagonists; protos = first, agonists = actor) The chief character in a play or story. Usually the hero or heroine is the protagonist.

Pun – A play on words based on the similarity of sound between two words with different meanings. They are often, but not always, intended to be humorous. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio says: “Ask for me tomorrow and you will find me a grave man” as he is dying.

Simile – A figure of speech in which a comparison is explicit, recognizable by the use of *like* or *as*. A metaphor is an implicit comparison.

Soliloquy – A speech of a character in a play delivered while the speaker is alone. The purpose of a soliloquy is to make the audience aware of the character’s thoughts or to give information concerning other characters.

Syncope – A cutting short of words through the omission of a letter or syllable. (*Ev’ry* for *every* is an example of syncope). Not to be confused with elision.

Symbol – (Greek: symbolon = emblem, token, sign) An object which represents something else. A concrete object which represents an abstract idea. (dove symbolizes peace, lion symbolizes courage)

Synecdoche – (Greek = taking up together) A form of metaphor in which the part mentioned signifies the whole. (*All hands on deck* means all the crew)

Type or Stock Character – A character whose actions or qualities make him/her appear as representative of a class or type. (wicked stepmother, wise old man)

Understatement – A form of irony in which something is intentionally represented as less than it is in fact. The opposite of hyperbole. Often used in everyday speech and usually with laconic or ironic intention. When the understatement expresses an affirmative with a negative, or an opposite, it is a litote. A common example of litote understatement is *not bad* meaning *very good*. In *Romeo and Juliet*, an understatement occurs when Mercutio has just received a fatal wound yet refers to the injury as “a scratch, a scratch...”.

Verisimilitude – The appearance or semblance of truth and reality. The term is used in literary criticism to indicate the degree to which a writer faithfully presents the truth.

Most definitions are from:

Trall, William Flint and Addison Hibbard ed. *A Handbook to Literature*. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960.