

Literary Terms

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

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.

Climax--the highest point of tension in the plot.

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

Exposition--occurs at the beginning of a work of fiction; established background information or lays out the scene.

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. (See also limited omniscience and neutral omniscience.)

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.

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 (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.

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.

Detail – A specific piece of a literary work that makes up or adds to a larger picture or story.

Dialect--A social or regional variety of a particular language.

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)

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.

Idiom--an expression whose meaning can't be understood literally: *It's raining cats and dogs.*

Imagery--the words and phrases used in writing that appeal to the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. (Don't just say "these images paint a picture in my mind. . . ."—far too generic!)

Irony--an effect created by a contrast between what is expected and what is real (three major types: situational, verbal, and dramatic; also note—hyperbole, understatement, paradox are all forms of irony).

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

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, "Death, thou shalt die."

Personification--figurative language in which an animal, object, or ideas is given human characteristics: *The wind whispered through the night.*

Repetition--the technique of repeating a word, phrase, or idea for emphasis and effect

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 of something else: roses as symbols of love. (abstract ideas representing concrete things)

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