

Literary Terms

Allegory

A symbolic narrative in which the surface details imply a secondary meaning. The story actually represents a deeper meaning.

Allusion

A reference in a literary work to a person, place, or thing in history or another work of literature or common event, holiday, or tradition. It's a reference to something the general public will understand.

Antagonist

A character or force against which the main character struggles. The antagonist tries to thwart the goals of the protagonist. Lord Voldemort is Harry's antagonist in the *Harry Potter* series.

Character

An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change).

Characterization

The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions.

Climax

The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work.

Complication

An intensification of the conflict in a story. It functions as an additional obstacle the main character must overcome.

Conflict

A struggle between opposing forces in a story, usually resolved by the end of the work. The conflict may occur within a character as well as between characters. The three main types of conflict are man vs. man, man vs. nature, and man vs. himself. Conflict keeps the story moving forward!

Convention

A customary feature of a literary work, such as the inclusion of a moral in a fable. Literary conventions are defining features of particular literary genres, such as novel or short story. Using archetypes as characters is a common convention.

Dénouement

The resolution of the plot of a literary work.

Dialogue

The conversation between characters in a literary work. In fiction, dialogue is typically enclosed within quotation marks.

Exposition

The first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot, in which necessary background information is provided.

Falling action

In the plot of a story or play, the action following the climax of the work that moves it towards its denouement or resolution.

Fiction

An imagined story, whether in prose, poetry, or drama. Characters in stories and novels are fictional, though they, too, may be based, in some way, on real people. The important thing to remember is that writers embellish and embroider and alter actual life when they use real life as the basis for their work. They fictionalize facts, and deviate from real-life situations as they "make things up."

Figurative language

A form of language use in which writers and speakers convey something other than the literal meaning of their words. Examples include hyperbole or exaggeration, litotes or understatement, simile and metaphor, which employ comparison, and synecdoche and metonymy, in which a part of a thing stands for the whole.

Flashback

An interruption of a story's chronology to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time frame of a work's action. Writers use flashbacks to complicate the sense of chronology in the plot of their works and to convey the richness of the experience of human time.

Flat Character

A reliable character who goes unchanged during the story, usually known for one or two main traits.

Foil

A character who contrasts and parallels the main character in a play or story. Draco Malfoy is one of the foils in the Harry Potter series.

Foreshadowing

Where future events in a story, or perhaps the outcome, are hinted at by the author before they happen. Foreshadowing can take many forms and be accomplished in many ways, with varying degrees of subtlety. However, if the outcome is deliberately and explicitly revealed early in a story (such as by the use of a narrator or flashback structure), such information does not constitute foreshadow.

Freytag's Pyramid

The basic five-point plot diagram that includes exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

Imagery

Visually descriptive language in a literary work, typically patterned and comparative. Imagery evokes the senses.

Irony

A contrast or discrepancy between what is said and what is meant or between what happens and what is expected to happen in life and in literature. In **verbal irony**, characters say the opposite of what they mean. In **situational irony**, the opposite of what is expected occurs. In **dramatic irony**, a character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or to the other characters.

Metaphor

A comparison between essentially unlike things without an explicitly comparative word such as like or as. An example is "My love is a red, red rose."

Mood

The atmosphere or emotional condition evoked by a work; the emotions felt by the reader. The reader's mood is created by the writer's tone.

- **Tone** is the author's overall attitude towards the subject. **Tone** is conveyed through the author's use of language and word choice in the actual text. Sometimes the tone is implied.

Motif

A recurring object, concept, or structure in a work of literature.

Narrator

The voice and implied speaker of a fictional work, to be distinguished from the actual living author. (See also **Point of view**.)

In literature and film, an **unreliable narrator** is a literary device in which the credibility of the narrator is seriously compromised. This unreliability can be due to psychological instability, a powerful bias, a lack of knowledge, or even a deliberate attempt to deceive the reader or audience. Unreliable narrators are usually first-person narrators, but third-person narrators can also be unreliable.

Personification

The endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities. An example: "The yellow leaves flaunted their color gaily in the breeze."

Point of view

The angle of vision from which a story is narrated. (See Narrator.) A work's point of view can be: first person, in which the narrator is a character or an observer, respectively; objective, in which the narrator knows or appears to know no more than the reader; omniscient, in which the narrator knows everything about the characters; and limited omniscient, which allows the narrator to know some things about the characters but not everything.

Protagonist

The main character of a literary work. He/she/it can be good or evil.

Recognition

The point at which a character understands his or her situation as it really is.

Resolution

The sorting out or unraveling of a plot at the end of a play, novel, or story.

Reversal

The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the protagonist. They learn what they did not expect to learn. Plot twist!

Rising action

A set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a story's plot leading up to the climax.

Round Character

One who is complex and perhaps even contradictory.

Setting

The time and place of a literary work that establishes its context.

Style

The way an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences or in lines of dialogue or verse, and develops ideas and actions with descriptions, imagery, and other literary techniques. See Connotation, Denotation, Diction, Figurative language, Image, Imagery, Irony, Metaphor, Narrator, Point of view, Syntax, and Tone.

Subject

What a story or play is about in reference to the plot, not to be confused with **theme**. For example, the subject of the Harry Potter series is about a boy who learns he's a wizard and ultimately has to fight dark magic. The themes are Good vs. Evil, the Meaning of Friendship, Coming of Age, and Love as Sacrifice.

Subplot

A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel plot in a play or story that coexists with the main plot.

Symbol

An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself.

Theme

The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. Not to be confused with **Subject**.

Tragic flaw

A protagonist who comes to a bad end as a result of his own behavior, usually caused by a specific personality or character flaw.