

LITERARY GLOSSARY

Allegory

An allegory is a story within a story. It has a “surface story” and another story hidden underneath. For example, the surface story might be about two neighbors throwing rocks at each other’s homes, but the hidden story would be about war between countries.

Alliteration

In alliteration, words that begin with the same sound are placed close together. Although alliteration often involves repetition of letters, most importantly, it is a repetition of sounds.

Allusion

Allusion is basically a reference to something else. It’s when a writer mentions some other work, or refers to an earlier part of the current work. In literature, it’s frequently used to reference cultural works (e.g. by alluding to a Bible story or Greek myth).

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is an idea or situation that can be understood in more than one way. This extends from ambiguous sentences (which could mean one thing or another) up to ambiguous storylines and ambiguous arguments.

Anaphora

Anaphora is when a certain word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of clauses or sentences that follow each other. This repetition emphasizes the phrase while adding rhythm to the passage, making it more memorable and enjoyable to read.

Antithesis

Antithesis literally means “opposite” – it is usually the opposite of a statement, concept, or idea. In literary analysis, an antithesis is a pair of statements or images in which the one reverses the other. The pair is written with similar grammatical structures to show more contrast.

Archetype

An archetype (ARK-uh-type) is an idea, symbol, pattern, or character-type, in a story. It’s any story element that appears again and again in stories from cultures around the world and symbolizes something universal in the human experience.

Argument

An argument is a work of persuasion. You use it to convince others to agree with your claim or viewpoint when they have doubts or disagree.

Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of the same or similar vowel sounds within words, phrases, or sentences.

Cacophony

Cacophony is the use of a combination of words with loud, harsh sounds—in reality as well as literature. In literary studies, this combination of words with rough or unharmonious sounds are used for a noisy or jarring poetic effect. Cacophony is considered the opposite of euphony which is the use of beautiful, melodious-sounding words.

Caesura

Caesura refers to a break or pause in the middle of a line of verse. It can be marked as || in the middle of the line, although generally it is not marked at all – it’s simply part of the way the reader or singer pronounces the line.

Catharsis

Catharsis, meaning “cleansing” in Greek, refers to a literary theory first developed by the philosopher Aristotle, who believed that cleansing our emotions was the purpose of a good story, especially a tragedy. Catharsis applies to any form of art or media that makes us feel strong negative emotions, but that we are nonetheless drawn to – we may seek out art that creates these emotions because the experience purges the emotions from our system.

Character

A character is a person, animal, being, creature, or thing in a story. Writers use characters to perform the actions and speak dialogue, moving the story along a plot line. A story can have only one character (protagonist) and still be a complete story.

Chiasmus

Chiasmus comes from a Greek word meaning “crossed,” and it refers to a grammatical structure that inverts a previous phrase. That is, you say one thing, and then you say something very similar, but flipped around.

Circumlocution

Circumlocution means “talking around” or “talking in circles.” It’s when you want to discuss something, but don’t want to make any direct reference to it, so you create a way to get around the subject. The key to circumlocution is that the statement has to be unnecessarily long and complicated.

Cliché

A cliché is a saying, image, or idea which has been used so much that it sounds terribly uncreative. The word “cliche” was originally French for the sound of a printing plate, which prints the same thing over and over.

Climax

Climax is the highest point of tension or drama in a narrative’s plot. Often, climax is also when the main problem of the story is faced and solved by the main character or protagonist.

Coherence

Coherence describes the way anything, such as an argument (or part of an argument) “hangs together.” If something has coherence, its parts are well-connected and all heading in the same direction. Without coherence, a discussion may not make sense or may be difficult for the audience to follow. It’s an extremely important quality of formal writing.

Connotation

A connotation is a common feeling or association that a word has, in addition to its literal meaning (the denotation). Often, a series of words can have the same basic definitions, but completely different connotations—these are the emotions or meanings implied by a word, phrase, or thing.

Consonance

Consonance is when the same consonant sound appears repeatedly in a line or sentence, creating a rhythmic effect.

Denotation

Denotation is a word’ or thing’s “dictionary definition”, i.e. its literal meaning.

Deus ex machina

Deus ex machina is Latin for “a god from the machine.” It’s when some new character, force, or event suddenly shows up to solve a seemingly hopeless situation. The effect is usually much too abrupt, and it’s often disappointing for audiences.

Enjambment or Run-on-line

Enjambment is continuing a line after the line breaks. Whereas many poems end lines with the natural pause at the end of a phrase or with punctuation as end-stopped lines, enjambment ends a line in the middle of a phrase, allowing it to continue onto the next line as an enjambed line.

Epigram

An epigram is a short but insightful statement, often in verse form, which communicates a thought in a witty, paradoxical, or funny way.

Epiphany

An epiphany is an “Aha!” moment. As a literary device, epiphany is the moment when a character is suddenly struck with a life-changing, enlightening revelation or realization which changes his or her perspective for the rest of the story.

Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a word or phrase using figurative language—language that has other meaning than its normal definition. In other words, figures of speeches rely on implied or suggested meaning, rather than a dictionary definition.

Flashback

Flashback is a device that moves an audience from the present moment in a chronological narrative to a scene in the past.

Folklore

Folklore refers to the tales people tell – folk stories, fairy tales, “tall tales,” and even urban legends. Folklore is typically passed down by word of mouth, rather than being written in books. The key here is that folklore has no author – it just emerges from the culture and is carried forward by constant retelling.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing gives the audience hints or signs about the future. It suggests what is to come through imagery, language, and/or symbolism.

Hyperbaton or Deviation

Hyperbaton is a figure of speech in which the typical, natural order of words is changed as certain words are moved out of order.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a figure of speech in which an author or speaker purposely and obviously exaggerates to an extreme. It is used for emphasis or as a way of making a description more creative and humorous.

Imagery

Imagery is language used to create images in the mind of the reader. Imagery includes figurative and metaphorical language to improve the reader’s experience through their senses.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a fact about literary texts – the fact that they are all intimately interconnected. Every text is affected by all the texts that came before it, since those texts influenced the author’s thinking and aesthetic choices.

Irony

Irony is when there are two contradicting meanings of the same situation, event, image, sentence, phrase, or story. In many cases, this refers to the difference between expectations and reality.

Jargon

Jargon is the specific type of language used by a particular group or profession.

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is the placement of two or more things side by side, often in order to bring out their differences.

Literary Device

In literature, any technique used to help the author achieve his or her purpose is called a literary device.

Litotes

Litotes is an understatement in which a positive statement is expressed by negating its opposite. The classic example of litotes is the phrase “not bad.” By negating the word “bad,” you’re saying that something is good, or at least OK.

Metaphor

A metaphor is a common figure of speech that makes a comparison by directly relating one thing to another unrelated thing (though these things may share some similarities).

Unlike similes, metaphors do not use words such as “like” or “as” to make comparisons.

Metonymy

Metonymy is a figure of speech that replaces words with related or associated words. A metonym is typically a part of a larger whole, for example, when we say “wheels,” we are figuratively referring to a “car” and not literally only the wheels.

Monologue

A monologue is a speech given by a single character in a story.

Ode

In the strict definition, an ode is a classical poem that has a specific structure and is aimed at an object or person. In the loose definition, an ode is any work of art or literature that expresses high praise.

Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia refers to words whose pronunciations imitate the sounds they describe. A dog’s bark sounds like “woof,” so “woof” is an example of onomatopoeia.

Oxymoron

An oxymoron is a figure of speech that puts together opposite elements. The combination of these contradicting elements serves to reveal a paradox, confuse, or give the reader a laugh.

Motif

A motif is a symbolic image or idea that appears frequently in a story. Motifs can be symbols, sounds, actions, ideas, or words.

Paradox

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Parallelism

Parallelism, also known as parallel structure, is when phrases in a sentence have similar or the same grammatical structure.

Paraphrase

A paraphrase is a restatement or rewording of text in order to borrow, clarify, or expand on information without plagiarizing.

Parody

A parody is a work that's created by imitating an existing original work in order to make fun of or comment on an aspect of the original.

Pastiche

Pastiche is a creative work that imitates another author or genre. It's a way of paying homage, or honor, to great works of the past.

Pathetic Fallacy

The pathetic fallacy is a figure of speech in which the natural world (or some part of it) is treated as though it had human emotions.

Personification

Personification is a kind of metaphor in which you describe an inanimate object, abstract thing, or non-human animal in human terms.

Plot

In a narrative or creative writing, a plot is the sequence of events that make up a story, whether it's told, written, filmed, or sung. The plot is the story, and more specifically, how the story develops, unfolds, and moves in time.

Poetry

Poetry is a type of literature based on the interplay of words and rhythm. It often employs rhyme and meter (a set of rules governing the number and arrangement of syllables in each line). In poetry, words are strung together to form sounds, images, and ideas that might be too complex or abstract to describe directly.

Pun

A pun is a joke based on the interplay of homophones — words with the same pronunciation but different meanings.

Quest

A quest is a journey that someone takes in order to achieve a goal or complete an important task. Accordingly, the term comes from the Medieval Latin *questa*, meaning "search" or "inquiry."

Resolution

The resolution, also known as the denouement, is the conclusion of the story's plot structure where any unanswered questions are answered, or "loose ends are tied."

Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the ancient art of persuasion, in the broadest sense. It is the way you present and make your views convincing or attractive to your audience.

Rhetorical Device

A rhetorical device is any way of using language that helps an author or speaker achieve a particular purpose. Usually, the purpose is persuasion, since rhetoric is typically defined as the art of persuasion.

Rhetorical Question

A rhetorical question is a question that is not asked in order to receive an answer, but rather just to make a point.

Romance

In the strictest academic terms, a romance is a narrative genre in literature that involves a mysterious, adventurous, or spiritual a story line where the focus is on a quest that involves bravery and strong values, not a love interest. However, modern definitions of romance also include stories that have a relationship issue as the main focus.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony that mocks, ridicules, or expresses contempt. You're saying the opposite of what you mean (verbal irony) and doing it in a particularly hostile tone.

Satire

The formal definition of satire is "the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices." It's an extremely broad category.

Setting

Setting is the time and place (or when and where) of the story. It may also include the environment of the story, which can be made up of the physical location, climate, weather, or social and cultural surroundings.

Simile

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Soliloquy

A soliloquy is a kind of monologue, or an extended speech by one character. In a soliloquy, though, the speech is not given to another character, and there is no one around to hear it.

Sonnet

A sonnet is a fourteen line poem with a fixed rhyme scheme. Often, sonnets use iambic pentameter: five sets of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables for a ten-syllable line.

Stanza

In poetry, a stanza is a dividing and organizing technique which places a group of lines in a poem together, separated from other groups of lines by line spacing or indentation. There are many important pieces that together make up a writer's style; like tone, word choice, grammar, language, descriptive technique, and so on.

Style

Style is the way in which an author writes and/or tells a story. It's what sets one author apart from another and creates the "voice" that audiences hear when they read.

Subtext

The subtext is the unspoken or less obvious meaning or message in a literary composition, drama, speech, or conversation.

Symbol

A symbol is any image or thing that stands for something else. It could be as simple as a letter, which is a symbol for a given sound (or set of sounds).

Synecdoche

A synecdoche is figure of speech which allows a part of something to stand for a whole, or the whole to stand for a part.

Synonym

A synonym is a word that has nearly the same meaning as another word. When words or phrases have the same meaning, we say that they are synonymous of each other.

Synopsis

A synopsis is a brief summary that gives audiences an idea of what a composition is about. It provides an overview of the storyline or main points and other defining factors of the work, which may include style, genre, persons or characters of note, setting, and so on.

Theme

Theme is the central idea, topic, or point of a story, essay, or narrative.

Thesis

A thesis is the main argument or point of view of an essay, nonfiction piece or narrative—not just the topic of the writing, but the main claim that the author is making about that topic.

Tone

Tone refers to the “feel” of a piece of writing. It’s any or all of the stylistic qualities of the writing, such as formality, dialect, and atmosphere.

Villain

A villain is the bad guy, the one who comes up with diabolical plots to somehow cause harm or ruin. It is one of the archetype characters in many stories.

Trope

The word trope can refer to any type of figure of speech, theme, image, character, or plot element that is used many times. Any kind of literary device or any specific example can be a trope.