

GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

absolute — a word free from limitations or qualifications (“best,” “all,” “unique,” “perfect”)

adage—a familiar proverb or wise saying

ad hominem argument—an argument attacking an individual’s character rather than his or her position on an issue

allegory— a literary work in which characters, objects, or actions represent abstractions

alliteration—the repetition of initial sounds in successive or neighboring words

allusion — a reference to something literary, mythological, or historical that the author assumes the reader will recognize

analogy—a comparison of two different things that are similar in some way

anaphora—the repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of consecutive lines or sentences

anecdote—a brief narrative that focuses on a particular incident or event antecedent—the word, phrase, or clause to which a pronoun refers antithesis—a statement in which two opposing ideas are balanced

aphorism—a concise statement that expresses succinctly a general truth or idea, often using rhyme or balance

apostrophe—a figure of speech in which one directly addresses an absent or imaginary person, or some abstraction

archetype—a detail, image, or character type that occurs frequently in literature and myth and is thought to appeal in a universal way to the unconscious and to evoke a response

argument—a statement of the meaning or main point of a literary work

asyndeton—a construction in which elements are presented in a series without conjunctions

balanced sentence—a sentence in which words, phrases, or clauses are set off against each other to emphasize a contrast

bathos—insincere or overly sentimental quality of writing/speech intended to evoke pity

chiasmus—a statement consisting of two parallel parts in which the second part is structurally reversed (“Susan walked in, and out rushed Mary”)

cliché—an expression that has been overused to the extent that its freshness has worn off

climax—the point of highest interest in a literary work

colloquialism—informal words or expressions not usually acceptable in formal writing

complex sentence—a sentence with one independent clause and at least one dependent clause

compound sentence—a sentence with two or more coordinate independent clauses, often joined by one or more conjunctions

conceit—a fanciful, particularly clever extended metaphor

concrete details—details that relate to or describe actual, specific things or events

connotation—the implied or associative meaning of a word

cumulative sentence—a sentence in which the main independent clause is elaborated by the successive addition of modifying clauses or phrases

declarative sentence—a sentence that makes a statement or declaration

deductive reasoning—reasoning in which a conclusion is reached by stating a general principle and then applying that principle to a specific case (The sun rises every morning; therefore, the sun will rise on Tuesday morning.)

denotation—the literal meaning of a word

dialect—a variety of speech characterized by its own particular grammar or pronunciation, often associated with a particular geographical region

dialogue—conversation between two or more people

diction — the word choices made by a writer

didactic—having the primary purpose of teaching or instructing

dilemma—a situation that requires a person to decide between two equally attractive or equally unattractive alternatives

dissonance—harsh, inharmonious, or discordant sounds

elegy—a formal poem presenting a meditation on death or another solemn theme

ellipsis—the omission of a word or phrase which is grammatically necessary but can be deduced from the context (“Some people prefer cats; others, dogs”).

epic—a long narrative poem written in elevated style which presents the adventures of characters of high position and episodes that are important to the history of a race or nation.

epigram—a brief, pithy, and often paradoxical saying

epigraph—a saying or statement on the title page of a work, or used as a heading for a chapter or other section of a work

epiphany—a moment of sudden revelation or insight

epitaph—an inscription on a tombstone or burial place

epithet—a term used to point out a characteristic of a person. Homeric epithets are often compound adjectives (“swift-footed Achilles”) that become an almost formulaic part of a name. Epithets can be abusive or offensive but are not so by definition. For example, athletes may be proud of their given epithets (“The Rocket”).

eulogy—a formal speech praising a person who has died

euphemism—an indirect, less offensive way of saying something that is considered unpleasant

exclamatory sentence—a sentence expressing strong feeling, usually punctuated with an exclamation mark

expletive—an interjection to lend emphasis; sometimes, a profanity

fable—a brief story that leads to a moral, often using animals as characters

fantasy—a story that concerns an unreal world or contains unreal characters; a fantasy may be merely whimsical, or it may present a serious point

figurative language—language employing one or more figures of speech (simile, metaphor, imagery, etc.)

flashback—the insertion of an earlier event into the normal chronological order of a narrative

flat character—a character who embodies a single quality and who does not develop in the course of a story

foreshadowing—the presentation of material in such a way that the reader is prepared for what is to come later in the work

frame device—a story within a story. An example is Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, in which the primary tales are told within the “frame story” of the pilgrimage to Canterbury

genre — a major category or type of literature

homily — a sermon, or a moralistic lecture

hubris—excessive pride or arrogance that results in the downfall of the protagonist of a tragedy

hyperbole— intentional exaggeration to create an effect

hypothetical question—a question that raises a hypothesis, conjecture, or supposition

idiom—an expression in a given language that cannot be understood from the literal meaning of the words in the expression; or, a regional speech or dialect

imagery—the use of figures of speech to create vivid images that appeal to one of the senses

implication—a suggestion an author or speaker makes (implies) without stating it directly.

NOTE: the author/sender implies the reader/audience infers.

inductive reasoning—deriving general principles from particular facts or instances (“Every cat I have ever seen has four legs; cats are four-legged animals”).

inference—a conclusion one draws (infers) based on premises or evidence

invective—an intensely vehement, highly emotional verbal attack

irony—the use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning; or, incongruity between what is expected and what actually occurs

jargon—the specialized language or vocabulary of a particular group or profession juxtaposition — placing two elements side by side to present a comparison or contrast

legend—a narrative handed down from the past, containing historical elements and usually supernatural elements

limerick—light verse consisting of five lines of regular rhythm in which the first, second, and fifth lines (each consisting of three feet) rhyme, and the second and third lines (each consisting of two feet) rhyme

limited narrator — a narrator who presents the story as it is seen and understood by a single character and restricts information to what is seen, heard, thought, or felt by that one character

literary license—deviating from normal rules or methods in order to achieve a certain effect (intentional sentence fragments, for example).

litotes — a type of understatement in which an idea is expressed by negating its opposite (describing a particularly horrific scene by saying, “It was not a pretty picture.”)

malapropism—the mistaken substitution of one word for another word that sounds similar (“The doctor wrote a subscription”).

maxim—a concise statement, often offering advice; an adage

metaphor — a direct comparison of two different things

metonymy— substituting the name of one object for another object closely associated with it (“The pen [writing] is mightier than the sword [war/fighting]”)

mood—the emotional atmosphere of a work

motif—a standard theme, element, or dramatic situation that recurs in various works

motivation—a character’s incentive or reason for behaving in a certain manner; that which impels a character to act

myth—a traditional story presenting supernatural characters and episodes that help explain natural events

narrative—a story or narrated account

narrator—the one who tells the story; may be first- or third-person, limited or omniscient

non sequitur— an inference that does not follow logically from the premises (literally, “does not follow”).

omniscient narrator—a narrator who is able to know, see, and tell all, including the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters

onomatopoeia—a word formed from the imitation of natural sounds

oxymoron—an expression in which two words that contradict each other are joined parable— a simple story that illustrates a moral or religious lesson

paradox—an apparently contradictory statement that actually contains some truth parallelism — the use of corresponding grammatical or syntactical forms

paraphrase — a restatement of a text in a different form or in different words, often for the purpose of clarity

parody — a humorous imitation of a serious work

parenthetical—a comment that interrupts the immediate subject, often to qualify or explain

pathos—the quality in a work that prompts the reader to feel pity

pedantic—characterized by an excessive display of learning or scholarship

personification—endowing non-human objects or creatures with human qualities or characteristics

philippic—a strong verbal denunciation. The term comes from the orations of Demosthenes against Philip of Macedonia in the fourth century.

plot— the action of a narrative or drama

point of view—the vantage point from which a story is told

polysyndeton—the use, for rhetorical effect, of more conjunctions than is necessary or natural

pun—a play on words, often achieved through the use of words with similar sounds but different meanings

resolution—the falling action of a narrative; the events following the climax

rhetoric—the art of presenting ideas in a clear, effective, and persuasive manner

rhetorical question—a question asked merely for rhetorical effect and not requiring an answer

rhetorical devices — literary techniques used to heighten the effectiveness of expression

riddle—a question requiring thought to answer or understand; a puzzle or conundrum

romantic — a term describing a character or literary work that reflects the characteristics of **Romanticism**, the literary movement beginning in the late century that stressed emotion, imagination, and individualism.

round character—a character who demonstrates some complexity and who develops or changes in the course of a work

sarcasm—harsh, cutting language or tone intended to ridicule

satire—the use of humor to emphasize human weaknesses or imperfections in social institutions

scapegoat—a person or group that bears the blame for another scene — a real or fictional episode; a division of an act in a play setting —the time, place, and environment in which action takes place

simile—a comparison of two things using “like,” “as,” or other specifically comparative words.

simple sentence—a sentence consisting of one independent clause and no dependent clause

solecism—nonstandard grammatical usage; a violation of grammatical rules structure—the arrangement or framework of a sentence, paragraph, or entire work

style—the choices a writer makes; the combination of distinctive features of a literary work

surrealism— an artistic movement emphasizing the imagination and characterized by incongruous juxtapositions and lack of conscious control

syllipsis—a construction in which one word is used in two different senses (“After he threw the ball, he threw a fit.”)

syllogism—a three-part deductive argument in which a conclusion is based on a major premise and a minor premise (“All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal”).

symbol—an object that is used to represent something else

synecdoche—using one part of an object to represent the entire object (for example, referring to a car simply as “wheels”)

synesthesia (or synaesthesia) — describing one kind of sensation in terms of another (“a loud color,” “a sweet sound”)

syntax—the manner in which words are arranged into sentences

tautology—needless repetition which adds no meaning or understanding (“widow woman,” “free gift”)

theme—a central idea of a work

thesis—the primary position taken by a writer or speaker

tone—the attitude of a writer, usually implied, toward the subject or audience topic—the subject treated in a paragraph or work

tragedy—a work in which the protagonist, a person of high degree, is engaged in a significant struggle and which ends in ruin or destruction.

trilogy — a work in three parts, each of which is a complete work in itself

trite—overused and hackneyed

turning point—the point in a work in which a very significant change occurs

understatement—the deliberate representation of something as lesser in magnitude than it actually is; a deliberate under-emphasis.

usage—the customary way language or its elements are used

vernacular—the everyday speech of a particular country or region, often involving nonstandard usage