



Advanced Literary Terms Defined

Following is a list of terms that are commonly used when talking about, thinking about, or writing literature. If you don't find what you are looking for here, check the list of advanced literary terms, the list of literary genre, or the list of literary movements. The list of terms applies mainly to prose writing.

A

Act - plays are broken down into smaller units of action called acts. Sometimes acts are broken down into scenes. An act in a play is similar to a chapter in a book.

Antagonist - the character or force with which the protagonist conflicts.

Aside - words spoken by one character in a play, either directly to the audience or to another character, that the other characters supposedly do not hear.

Audience - the group of readers to whom a piece of literature is directed. The audience might be a specific age group or sex or might share similar interests (e.g. soccer or skateboarding).

Author's Purpose - the reason the author has written a piece of literature. The writer may try to inform, persuade, entertain, or express an opinion. The writer's primary goal influences how the writer presents the information.

C

Catharsis - a Greek term first used by Aristotle to describe the emotional cleansing or purification that results after watching a tragedy performed on stage. After experiencing a terrible ordeal, one may feel an overwhelming sense of relief. While reading about something horrifying or tragic, the reader experiences the characters' ordeal vicariously and feels the same sense of release - or catharsis.

Character - an individual in a story or play.

Characterization - the process by which the writer reveals a character's personality to the reader. This process is very similar to the process real people go through when they encounter new situations. People form an initial opinion about a situation based upon what they see and hear. A writer can reveal a character in the following ways:

1. by telling the reader directly what the character is like (not a very subtle approach and not used often by writers);
2. by describing how the character looks and dresses (What type of clothing does the character wear? How does he or she wear her hair?);
3. by letting us hear how the character speaks (Does the character speak with a dialect? Is the character loud or soft-spoken?);
4. by revealing the character's private thoughts and feelings (What does the character think about other people? about himself?);
5. by revealing the character's effect on other people (Do people want to be near the character? Do people do whatever the character asks?); and
6. by showing the character's actions (Does she treat people nicely or badly? Does he make good decisions or poor ones?).

Cliché - a phrase or expression that has been repeated so often it has lost its significance. It is best to avoid clichés in writing.

Climax (see plot)

Comic Relief - a humorous moment in a serious drama that temporarily relieves the mounting tension.

Conflict - a struggle or clash between opposing characters, forces, or emotions. Without conflict, most plots would never go anywhere. Conflicts spur the action of most fiction and nonfiction. There are two types of conflict:

1. **External Conflict** - A character struggles against some outside force. External conflicts are described in general terms such as: Person vs. Person, Person vs. Society, Person vs. Nature, Person vs. Technology (or machines).
2. **Internal Conflict** - A character struggles with himself/herself and his/her opposing needs, desires, or emotions. Internal conflicts are also described in general terms: Person vs. Himself/Herself.

Connotation - the emotion or feeling a word creates. Connotation is the reason word choice is so important; two words may mean the same thing, but they do not always generate the same emotion. If a writer must choose between two or more words with similar dictionary definitions, she should consider what feeling she wants to create in her reader.

D

Denotation - the literal meaning (or dictionary definition) of a word.

Denouement (see plot)

Dialect - the way people speak in various parts of the country or around the world. Dialect involves pronunciation, word choice, and sentence structure, and is used in literature to help develop character and setting.

Dialogue - a conversation between two or more characters in a literary work. Dialogue is set off by quotation marks, and a new paragraph begins each time a different character speaks.

Diction - a writer's choice of words and sentence structure; may be formal or informal, literal or figurative.

Dramatic Irony (see irony)

Dramatic Monologue (see soliloquy)

F

Falling Action (see plot)

Fiction - a narrative (story) generated by the writer's imagination.

Figurative Language - creative, non-literal language that creates powerful images in the reader's mind; includes the use of figures of speech like metaphor, simile, and personification.

Flashback - the action of the story is interrupted in order to return to an event or conversation which took place before the current action of the story. Although rare, some stories also make use of flashforwards.

Folklore - the traditional beliefs and customs of a group of people that have been passed down orally.

Foreshadowing - the use of clues to hint at what is going to happen later in the plot. Foreshadowing is used to arouse the reader's curiosity and to create suspense.

I

Imagery - words and phrases that vividly recreate a sound, sight, smell, touch, or taste for the reader by appealing to the senses.

Irony - the difference between what is expected and what actually happens. There are three different types of irony:

- 1. Situational Irony - the difference between what the character or the reader expects and what actually happens.**
- 2. Verbal Irony - the difference between what a character says and what he means.**
- 3. Dramatic Irony - the difference between what a character expects and what the reader knows will happen.**

L

Legend - a story passed down over generations that is believed to be based on real events and real people (even though magic and supernatural events are often incorporated into the story).

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M

Metaphor - a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two things.

Monologue (see soliloquy)

Mood - the feeling or atmosphere that a writer creates for the reader. The mood is an emotional response created in the reader. (Mood is not to be confused with tone.)

Motif - a recurring pattern found in a work or works of literature; the pattern is usually representative of something else.

Myth - a story passed down over the generations that was once believed to be true. These stories usually involve superhuman characters and actions (gods, goddesses) and often explain the unexplainable. The most well known mythology originated with the Greeks and Romans. There are many allusions to Greek and Roman mythology in Western literature.

N

Narrator - the person who "tells" the story. The narrator is often very subtle and remains in the background of a story, but sometimes, a narrator actually becomes a part of the story (especially in a first person account). Do not assume that the narrator and the author are one in the same.

Narrative - any type of writing, either fiction or nonfiction, that is primarily concerned with relating an event or a series of events.

Nonfiction - is prose writing about real people, places, and events.

O

Oral Tradition - before the advent of education for the masses, most people did not learn how to read or write. In order to preserve their traditions, people passed their traditions (usually in the form of songs or stories) by word of mouth from generation to generation.

P

Parable - a short story that teaches a moral or a religious lesson.

Personification - a figure of speech in which an inanimate object, animal, or idea is given human qualities or characteristics.

Plot – the series of events that make up a story or drama. It is the form or structure of a story. The events of a plot usually progress because of some conflict. Most plots contain the following stages:

- 1. Exposition - The characters and setting are introduced and the plot begins to unfold. The exposition generally occurs at the beginning of a story.**
- 2. Rising Action - As the conflict or conflicts develop and the characters attempt to resolve those conflicts, suspense builds.**
- 3. Climax - This is the point when the action reaches a turning point and interest and intensity reach their peak. The story's climax usually involves an important decision, discovery, or event which influences the final outcome of the story.**
- 4. Falling Action - The point after the climax where the action begins to drop off and the events of the plot become clear or are explained in some way, leading toward the resolution.**
- 5. Resolution (also called denouement) - the loose ends are tied up. A resolution does not necessarily indicate a "happy ending." (Some text books combine falling action and resolution into one stage.)**

Point of View - the vantage point from which the writer tells the story. There are three different points of view:

- 1. 1st Person - the narrator is a character in the story and tells the reader his/her story using the pronoun "I." The narrator can comment only on what he/she sees and hears, and cannot comment on other characters' thoughts and feelings.**
- 2. 3rd Person Limited - the narrator is outside of the story and tells the story from the perspective of only one character. As a result, the narrator can report only what that one character sees and hears.**
- 3. 3rd Person Omniscient - the narrator is outside of the story and is all-knowing or Godlike because he/she knows everything that occurs and everything that each character thinks and feels. This does not mean that the narrator shares everything with the reader.**

Protagonist - the main character in fiction or drama whose conflict starts the plot in motion. Most protagonists change in some important way by the end of the story. Readers usually identify in some way with the protagonist.

R

Rising Action (see plot)

S

Setting - the time and place of a story or play. The setting is very important in establishing the mood of a story. For example, a romantic story is not likely to take place in a haunted house. The setting can even provide part of the conflict.

Simile - a figure of speech in which two things are compared using "like" or "as."

Situational Irony (see irony)

Soliloquy - a speech delivered while only one character is on stage; a soliloquy reveals a character's innermost thoughts and feelings.

Speaker (see narrator)

Stereotype - specific characteristics are applied to an entire group of people and are used to "classify" those people as part of a "group."

Structure - the organizational form of a literary work.

Style - refers to how a piece of literature is written rather than to what is actually said; style involves the use of literary techniques, word choice, and sentence structure, and sets one writer apart from another.

Suspense - a tension created as the reader becomes involved in a story and when the author leaves the reader in doubt about what is coming next.

Symbol - a person, place, thing or event that has meaning in itself and also stands for something more than itself.

Symbolism - the use of symbols in literature to convey meaning.

T

Theme - the central idea or insight of a work of literature. The theme is the idea the writer wishes to convey about the subject. Most themes are implied rather than stated directly.

Tone - the writer's attitude toward his/her subject. Tone reflects the feelings of the writer. (Do not confuse tone with mood.)

V

Verbal Irony (see irony)

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