

## LITERARY TERMS

**ABSTRACT NOUN:** a noun referring to a quality or state—love, honor, courtesy

**ADAGE:** a familiar wise saying, a proverb—“early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.”

**ALLEGORY:** a literary form in which some of all of the characters are embodiments of abstract ideas. In Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, a man named Christian journeys to the Celestial City, encountering on his way Mr. Worldly Wiseman, the Giant Despair, Faithful and Hopeful.

**ALLITERATION:** repetition of initial consonant sounds—“Peter Piper picked a peck”

**ALLUSION:** a casual reference to some character, person, idea or event.

**AMBIGUITY:** a term used to signify that often, in poetry, two or more meanings of a word or phrase are relevant to the meaning of the passage.

**ANACHRONISM:** something out of its proper time. The clock that strikes in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar is an anachronism, for there were no striking clocks in Caesar’s Rome.

**ANALOGY:** a resemblance between two different things, often expressed as a simile.

**ANECDOTE:** a brief, pointed or humorous story, often included in a larger work.

**ANTAGONIST:** the major character in opposition to the hero or protagonist of a narrative or drama.

**ANTICLIMAX:** a sudden drop in the tone of a literary work, often for an intentional comic effect, as in Aldous Huxley’s conclusion to a love poem: “And there we sit in blissful calm, / Quietly sweating palm to palm.”

**ANTITHESIS:** a device in writing in which sharply opposing ideas are expressed within a balanced grammatical structure—“with mirth in funeral, and with dirth in marriage . . .”

**APHORISM:** a short pithy statement of a truth or belief—“Hope springs eternal in the human breast.”

**APOSTROPHE:** a figure of speech in which a thing is addressed directly as though it were a listening person, or absent or dead person is addressed as if living and present—“Roll on thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll.”

**ASSONANCE:** the close repetition of similar vowel sounds, usually in stressed syllables—“Like a diamond in the sky.”

**BATHOS:** similar to anticlimax in referring to a sudden and ridiculous descent from the exalted to the ordinary but where anticlimax is often deliberately used for humorous effect, bathos is always unintentional.

**BLANK VERSE:** unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter  
“To be or not to be, that is the question.”

**CACOPHONY:** discordant or harsh sounds, frequently used for poetic effect.

**CAESURA:** a break or pause in sound or thought within a line of poetry which may or may not be indicated by punctuation—“To die, to sleep;/To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub.”

**CARICATURE:** a type of verbal portrait which makes a person ridiculous by exaggerating or distorting prominent features without losing the likeness.

**CLICHÉ:** a timeworn or stale expression which has lost its vitality and to some extent its original meaning. The use of such old phrases suggests lack of imagination and imprecision on the writer’s part. Some examples are: “Blushing bride,” “busy as a bee,” “waiting with bated breath.”

**CLIMAX:** the moment in the story or play at which a crisis reaches its highest intensity and a decisive turning point.

**CONCEIT:** a complex, elaborate, fanciful or startling parallel between two apparently dissimilar things or situations.

**CONCRETE NOUN:** a noun referring to tangible things having concrete existence—tree, dog, bicycle.

**CONFIDANT:** (confidante) a character in drama or fiction, a trusted friend to whom the protagonist reveals his/her intimate feelings and intentions.

**CONNOTATION:** the emotional, imaginative, cultural or traditional associations surrounding a word, as opposed to its strict literal dictionary meaning.

**COUPLET:** a pair of rhyming lines with parallel meter—Lizzie Borden took an Axe/  
Hit her father forty whacks.

**DENOTATION:** the strict dictionary meaning of a word presented objectively, without emotional associations.

**DEUS EX MACHINA:** LATIN (the god out of the machine) A reference to the use, in Greek drama, of a god lowered by a mechanism of some sort onto the stage to rescue the hero or untangle the plot. By extension the term refers to any artificial device for the easy resolution of all difficulty.

**DICTION:** the particular choice of words a writer uses in a particular literary work.

**DIDACTIC:** term applied to any literary work whose principal aim is to instruct in moral, ethical, political or religious matter.

**DRAMATIC IRONY:** refers to the words and actions of characters who confidently expect the opposite of what fate holds in store, or who say something that suggests the outcome of the plot, but in a sense very different from the one they intended.

**DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE:** a poem in which a character-at a critical moment moment-speaks to a silent but specific audience—"My Last Duchess," Robert Browning "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" T.S. Eliot

**ELEGY:** a poem of meditation and lament, usually over a death, or on the subject of death in general.

**EPIGRAM:** a short, usually, witty, statement, graceful in style and ingenious in thought—"On a volunteer Singer  
Swans sing before they die—"twere no bad thing  
Should certain persons die before they sing!" COLERIDGE

**EPILOGUE:** an appendix added after the conclusion of a play or a story.

**EPITHET:** An adjective or term used to characterize a person or a thing, as in Jack the Ripper, lily-livered, coward, Wily Odysseus.

**ESSAY:** any short prose work that discusses a point or attempts to persuade its readers to accept an opinion, on any subject.

**EXPOSITION:** That part of the play or story in which essential background information is given to the reader or audience.

**EUPHEMISM:** a mild or vague word or phrase replacing one considered harsh or offensively direct—"pass away" for die.

**EUPHONY:** A pleasant combination of sounds—"Round and round the spicy downs the yellow lotos-dust blown."

**FABLE:** a brief tale, often using animal characters, which illustrates some moral truth

**FARCE:** any comic play deriving its humor from ridiculous or improbable situation, one dimensional characters, and other low comedy devices.

**FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE:** (also called figures of speech) the use of words apart from their ordinary, literal meaning in such a way as to restore freshness, conciseness, and vitality to them. (see apostrophe, hyperbole, metaphor, personification and simile.)

**FLASHBACK:** a scene inserted into a film, novel, story or play showing events which happened at an earlier time.

**FREE VERSE:** Poetry which differs from conventional verse forms in being “free” from a fixed pattern of meter and rhyme, depending for its effects on more subtle patterns of rhythm and sound.

**FUSTIAN:** bombastic or pompously ornate language.

**FORESHADOWING:** a device in which the author drops hints or otherwise prepares the reader for an event to come later.

**GENRE:** a specific literary type or class identified by form and treatment, such as epic, tragedy, lyric, allegory.

**HISTORICAL PRESENT:** use of the present tense to describe past events.

**HOMILY:** a sermon or similar work that urges adoption of high moral standards

**HYPERBOLE:** deliberate exaggeration to achieve emphasis—“He spat out the seven seas.” Excessive rhetoric.

**IMAGERY:** the sensory details in a literary work. Whether literal or figurative, an image provides vividness and immediacy, evoking in the reader a complex of emotional suggestions. “Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.”

**INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:** a record of the thoughts and emotional experience of a character as they flow, with no apparent logic, through his or her mind; stream of consciousness.

**INVERSION:** words transposed out of their usual order—“Into the forest rode the king.”

**IRONY:** the use of words that imply the opposite of what they literally mean (verbal irony), or a state of affairs that is the opposite of what is expected (irony of situation).

**LITOTES:** a form of understatement in which an idea is expressed by the denial of its opposite, as in “He’s no fool” meaning that he is shrewd, or “We learned not a little from our work,” meaning that we learned a great deal.

**LYRIC:** a poem, often short, presented by a single speaker expressing basic feelings or thoughts.

**MELODRAMA:** a play based on a sensational, romantic plot with emphasis on sensational or violent effects.

**METAPHOR:** a figure of speech which involves an implied comparison between two relatively unlike things; it does not use the word like or as. “The Lord is my shepherd,” or “The ship of state.”

**MIXED METAPHOR:** a figure of speech in which one term is substituted for another closely associated with it, often a part or a single attribute for the whole—“The crown will find an heir.”

**MOOD:** the atmosphere or feeling developed in a literary work: light-hearted, romantic, eerie, somber, tragic.

**NARRATIVE POEM:** a poem that tells story or relates a series of events.

**OMNISCIENT:** “all-knowing” point of view in which the author shifts from the objective exterior world to the subjective interior world of the characters.

**ONOMATOPOEIA:** use of words whose sounds suggest their meaning; an effective device in appealing to the sense of sound—buzzing, whirring wings, babbling babies, hiss, murmur, plunk.

**OXYMORON:** a figure of speech consisting of two apparently contradictory terms which express a startling paradox—sad optimist, living dead.

**PARADOX:** a statement which, though it seems self-contradictory, contains a basic truth. “One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And Death shall sleep not more; Death, thou shalt die.”

**PARODY:** a satirical imitation of the style of another written work.

**PATHETIC FALLACY:** refers to the description of inanimate objects as though they had human capacities and feelings—“The one red leaf, the last of its clan, / That dances as often as dance it can.” Coleridge

**PERSONIFICATION:** the attribution of human characteristics or feelings to nonhuman organisms, inanimate objects or abstract ideas—“Time’s cruel hand.”

**PLEONASM:** unnecessary repetition or needless addition of words to convey an idea—“walking on foot” “I saw it with my own eyes.”

**QUATRAIN:** any stanza of four lines, regardless of line length, meter, or rhyme pattern.

**RHYME:** repetition of similar or identical sounds at regular intervals, usually the repetition of the final sounds of words at the ends of lines or verse. Masculine rhyme refers to rhyming accented syllables—hill, still, inspire, desire. Feminine rhyme includes unaccented syllables following the accented syllables in the rhyme ending, bending, formation, vacation.

**SATIRE:** the literary art of belittling a subject by making it seem ridiculous and evoking towards it attributes of amusement, contempt or scorn; satire frequently attempts to correct human vices and follies.

**SIMILE:** a direct comparison between two essentially different items indicated by a term such as “like” or “as” —“O my love’s like a red, red rose.”

**THEME:** the central idea or thesis or a literary work.

**TONE:** the attitude of the writer toward his subject and his audience, revealed through his diction and his choice of emphasis; the tone of a work might be formal, or intimate, solemn or playful, serious, ironic, humorous.

**TRAGIC FLAW:** the defeat in the tragic hero which leads to his downfall.

