Common Literary Terms

Character: A representation of an individual in a literary work. The main character is referred to as the protagonist. The character against whom the protagonist struggles is referred to as the antagonist.

Characterization: An author’s use of dialogue and description—physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual—to portray characters. Round characters have depth and complexity, are fully developed, and undergo change or growth. Flat characters have few traits described. They are minor characters and serve a supportive role in the text.

Climax: The point of greatest emotional intensity, interest, or suspense in the plot; the point at which the fate of the protagonist is most at stake.

Conflict: A struggle between two opposing forces or characters in a narrative. Characters can face conflicts within themselves or conflicts with nature, society, supernatural forces, or other characters.

Connotation: The thoughts, feelings, attitudes, judgments, and images associated with a word; society’s notions about a word not related to its dictionary definition. Connotation is used to evoke emotion in a reader.

Dialogue: The lines spoken by characters or the conversations between characters.

Diction: The choice and arrangement of specific words as opposed to others that convey tone and evoke emotion in the reader. Diction can be formal, conversational or slang. It can be literal or figurative.

Figurative Language: Language that departs from the everyday literal use of words; using figures of speech such as metaphors and symbols to describe something or convey meaning.

Flashback: A type of narration in which the present action is temporarily interrupted with a scene of a past event in order to provide information to the reader about a place or character.

Foreshadowing: The use of hints or clues in the narrative to suggest what action is to come.

Hyperbole: Exaggerated statement used for emphasis or effect; an overstatement not intended to be taken literally.

Imagery: Vivid descriptions that evoke mental pictures and appeal to the senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch); literal or figurative sensory pictures that evoke feelings and sensations.

Literal Language: Language that means exactly what it says; words that follow their defined meaning as used in every day life. For example, “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse” would not be taken literally.

Metaphor: A comparison stating that one thing is something else, although literally it is not, to suggest a resemblance.

Example: Her life is a tempestuous and raging storm.

Personification: Giving human traits or qualities to non-human things; representing animals or inanimate objects as having human abilities.
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Plot: The arrangement of ideas and incidents; the series of events that form the action in a story.

Point of View: The perspective from which a narrative is told. In first person point of view, the narrator tells the story as a character who takes part in the plot or observes it directly. This narrator usually knows only what has been explicitly revealed or what he/she is able to deduce. In third person point of view, the narrator is not directly involved in the story but tells it as an outside observer. Third person narrators may be omniscient (knowing all the characters’ actions and motivation), limited (knowing what only one or a few characters know and feel), or objective (objectively reporting events without knowledge or opinions about character motivation). Second person point of view is much less common in literature. In this perspective, the narrator tells the story to a character addressed as “you” which causes readers to feel that they are the character in the story rather than witnessing the action in the story.

Resolution or Denouement: The outcome or result of the conflict which usually occurs at the end of the plot. Complications are resolved in some way and clarifications are made.

Setting: The time and place of a story; its location and physical surroundings as well as its era or time period.

Simile: A figurative comparison between two unlike objects which nonetheless have similarities. Comparison is made by using an adverb such as “like” or “as.”

Example: Her life is like a tempestuous and raging storm.

Style: The author’s characteristic way of using language to achieve certain effects; the author’s individual word choice and syntax.

Symbol: A word, object, place, character, or action that means something beyond what it means on a literal level and represents a more abstract idea or meaning.

Example: The American flag is not just a piece of red, white and blue cloth. It represents democratic values and ideals.

Theme: The major idea of a literary work; the message or central unifying point.

Tone: An author’s attitude toward the topic or the readers. The mood conveyed in the work such as hopeful, critical, or playful. Tone can be created through diction and connotation.