

A Glossary of Literary Devices

Allegory

A symbolic narrative in which the surface details imply a secondary meaning. Allegory often takes the form of a story in which the characters represent moral qualities. The most famous example in English is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the name of the central character, Pilgrim, epitomizes the book's allegorical nature. Kay Boyle's story "Astronomer's Wife" and Christina Rossetti's poem "Up-Hill" both contain allegorical elements.

Alliteration

The repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words. Example: "Fetched fresh, as I suppose, off some sweet wood." Hopkins, "In the Valley of the Elwy."

Antagonist

A character or force against which another character struggles. Creon is Antigone's antagonist in Sophocles' play *Antigone*; Teiresias is the antagonist of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

Assonance

The repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sentence or a line of poetry or prose, as in "I rose and told him of my woe." Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" contains assonantal "I's" in the following lines: "How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick, / Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself."

Character

An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change). In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona is a major character, but one who is static, like the minor character Bianca. Othello is a major character who is dynamic, exhibiting an ability to change.

Characterization

The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions. Readers come to understand the character Miss Emily in Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" through what she says, how she lives, and what she does.

Climax

The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work. The climax of John Updike's "A&P," for example, occurs when Sammy quits his job as a cashier.

Complication

An intensification of the conflict in a story or play. Complication builds up, accumulates, and develops the primary or central conflict in a literary work. Frank O'Connor's story "Guests of the Nation" provides a striking example, as does Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal."

Conflict

A struggle between opposing forces in a story or play, usually resolved by the end of the work. The conflict may occur within a character as well as between characters. Lady Gregory's one-act play *The Rising of the Moon* exemplifies both types of conflict as the Policeman wrestles with his conscience in an inner conflict and confronts an antagonist in the person of the ballad singer.

Connotation

The associations called up by a word that goes beyond its dictionary meaning. Poets, especially, tend to use words rich in connotation. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" includes intensely connotative language, as in these lines: "Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright / Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay, / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Convention

A customary feature of a literary work, such as the use of a chorus in Greek tragedy, the inclusion of an explicit moral in a fable, or the use of a particular rhyme scheme in a villanelle. Literary conventions are defining features of particular literary genres, such as novel, short story, ballad, sonnet, and play.

Denotation

The dictionary meaning of a word. Writers typically play off a word's denotative meaning against its connotations, or suggested and implied associational implications. In the following lines from Peter Meinke's "Advice to My Son" the references to flowers and fruit, bread and wine denote specific things, but also suggest something beyond the literal, dictionary meanings of the words:

To be specific, between the peony and rose
Plant squash and spinach, turnips and tomatoes;
Beauty is nectar and nectar, in a desert, saves--
...
and always serve bread with your wine.
But, son,
always serve wine.

Denouement

The resolution of the plot of a literary work. The denouement of *Hamlet* takes place after the catastrophe, with the stage littered with corpses. During the denouement Fortinbras makes an entrance and a speech, and Horatio speaks his sweet lines in praise of Hamlet.

Dialogue

The conversation of characters in a literary work. In fiction, dialogue is typically enclosed within quotation marks. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names.

Diction

The selection of words in a literary work. A work's diction forms one of its centrally important literary elements, as writers use words to convey action, reveal character, imply attitudes, identify themes, and suggest values. We can speak of the diction particular to a character, as in Iago's and Desdemona's very different ways of speaking in *Othello*. We can also refer to a poet's diction as represented over the body of his or her work, as in Donne's or Hughes's diction.

Exposition

The first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot, in which necessary background information is provided. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, for instance, begins with a conversation between the two central characters, a dialogue that fills the audience in on events that occurred before the action of the play begins, but which are important in the development of its plot.

Fable

A brief story with an explicit moral provided by the author. Fables typically include animals as characters. Their most famous practitioner in the west is the ancient Greek writer Aesop, whose "The Dog and the Shadow" and "The Wolf and the Mastiff" are included in this book.

Falling Action

In the plot of a story or play, the action following the climax of the work that moves it towards its denouement or resolution. The falling action of *Othello* begins after Othello realizes that Iago is responsible for plotting against him by spurring him on to murder his wife, Desdemona.

Fiction

An imagined story, whether in prose, poetry, or drama. Ibsen's Nora is fictional, a "make-believe" character in a play, as are Hamlet and Othello. Characters like Robert Browning's Duke and Duchess from his poem "My Last Duchess" are fictional as well, though they may be based on actual historical individuals. And, of course, characters in stories and novels are fictional, though they, too, may be based, in some way, on real people. The important thing to remember is that writers embellish and embroider and alter actual life when they use real life as the basis for their work. They fictionalize facts, and deviate from real-life situations as they "make things up."

Figurative Language

A form of language use in which writers and speakers convey something other than the literal meaning of their words. Examples include hyperbole or exaggeration, litotes or understatement, simile and metaphor, which employ comparison, and synecdoche and metonymy, in which a part of a thing stands for the whole.

Flashback

An interruption of a work's chronology to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time frame of a work's action. Writers use flashbacks to complicate the sense of chronology in the plot of their works and to convey the richness of the experience of human time. Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" includes flashbacks.

Foil

A character who contrasts and parallels the main character in a play or story. Laertes, in *Hamlet*, is a foil for the main character; in *Othello*, Emilia and Bianca are foils for Desdemona.

Foreshadowing

Hints of what is to come in the action of a play or a story. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* includes foreshadowing as does Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. So, too, do Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" and Chopin's "Story of an Hour."

Hyperbole

A figure of speech involving exaggeration. John Donne uses hyperbole in his poem: "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star."

Image

A concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea. Imagery refers to the pattern of related details in a work. In some works one image predominates either by recurring throughout the work or by appearing at a critical point in the plot. Often writers use multiple images throughout a work to suggest states of feeling and to convey implications of thought and action. Some modern poets, such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, write poems that lack discursive explanation entirely and include only images. Among the most famous examples is Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Imagery

The pattern of related comparative aspects of language, particularly of images, in a literary work. Imagery of light and darkness pervade James Joyce's stories "Araby," "The Boarding House," and "The Dead." So, too, does religious imagery.

Irony

A contrast or discrepancy between what is said and what is meant or between what happens and what is expected to happen in life and in literature. In verbal irony, characters say the opposite of what they mean. In irony of circumstance or situation, the opposite of what is expected occurs. In dramatic irony, a character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or to the other characters. Flannery O'Connor's short stories employ all these forms of irony, as does Poe's "Cask of Amontillado."

Literal language

A form of language in which writers and speakers mean exactly what their words denote. See Figurative language, Denotation, and Connotation.

Metaphor

A comparison between essentially unlike things without an explicitly comparative word such as *like* or *as*. An example is "My love is a red, red rose,"

From Burns's "A Red, Red Rose." Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" is built entirely of metaphors. Metaphor is one of the most important of literary uses of language. Shakespeare employs a wide range of metaphor in his sonnets and his plays, often in such density and profusion that readers are kept busy analyzing and interpreting and unraveling them. Compare Simile.

Metonymy

A figure of speech in which a closely related term is substituted for an object or idea. An example: "We have always remained loyal to the crown." See Synecdoche.

Narrator

The voice and implied speaker of a fictional work, to be distinguished from the actual living author. For example, the narrator of Joyce's "Araby" is not James Joyce himself, but a literary fictional character created expressly to tell the story. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" contains a communal narrator, identified only as "we." See Point of view.

Onomatopoeia

The use of words to imitate the sounds they describe. Words such as *buzz* and *crack* are onomatopoeic. The following line from Pope's "Sound and Sense" onomatopoeically imitates in sound what it describes:

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow.

Most often, however, onomatopoeia refers to words and groups of words, such as Tennyson's description of the "murmur of innumerable bees," which attempts to capture the sound of a swarm of bees buzzing.

Parable

A brief story that teaches a lesson often ethical or spiritual. Examples include "The Prodigal Son," from the New Testament, and the Zen parable, "Learning to Be Silent." See Fable.

Paradox

An apparent contradiction which is - nonetheless true. A statement that unties seemingly contradictory ideas but which upon closer examination proves to have an unexpected meaning and truth. An example: "The longest way round is the shortest way home". It is one of the techniques of haiku. Related to oxymoron.

Parody

A humorous, mocking imitation of a literary work, sometimes sarcastic, but often playful and even respectful in its playful imitation. Examples include Bob McKenty's parody of Frost's "Dust of Snow" and Kenneth Koch's parody of Williams's "This is Just to Say."

Personification

The endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities. An example: "The yellow leaves flaunted their color gaily in the breeze." Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" includes personification.

Plot

The unified structure of incidents in a literary work. See Conflict, Climax, Denouement, and Flashback.

Point of View

The angle of vision from which a story is narrated. See Narrator. A work's point of view can be: first person, in which the narrator is a character or an observer, respectively; objective, in which the narrator knows or appears to know no more than the reader; omniscient, in which the narrator knows everything about the characters; and limited omniscient, which allows the narrator to know some things about the characters but not everything.

Protagonist

The main character of a literary work--Hamlet and Othello in the plays named after them, Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Paul in Lawrence's "Rocking-Horse Winner."

Recognition

The point at which a character understands his or her situation as it really is. Sophocles' Oedipus comes to this point near the end of *Oedipus the King*; Othello comes to a similar understanding of his situation in Act V of *Othello*.

Resolution

The sorting out or unraveling of a plot at the end of a play, novel, or story. See *Plot*.

Reversal

The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the protagonist. Oedipus's and Othello's recognitions are also reversals. They learn what they did not expect to learn. See *Recognition* and also *Irony*.

Rising Action

A set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a play's or story's plot leading up to the climax. See *Climax*, *Denouement*, and *Plot*.

Satire

A literary work that criticizes human misconduct and ridicules vices, stupidities, and follies. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a famous example. Chekhov's *Marriage Proposal* and O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," have strong satirical elements.

Setting

The time and place of a literary work that establish its context. The stories of Sandra Cisneros are set in the American southwest in the mid to late 20th century, those of James Joyce in Dublin, Ireland in the early 20th century.

Simile

A figure of speech involving a comparison between unlike things using *like*, *as*, or *as though*. An example: "My love is like a red, red rose."

Style

The way an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences or in lines of dialogue or verse, and develops ideas and actions with description, imagery, and other literary techniques. See *Connotation*, *Denotation*, *Diction*, *Figurative language*, *Image*, *Imagery*, *Irony*, *Metaphor*, *Narrator*, *Point of view*, *Syntax*, and *Tone*.

Subject

What a story or play is about; to be distinguished from plot and theme. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is about the decline of a particular way of life endemic to the American south before the civil war. Its plot concerns how Faulkner describes and organizes the actions of the story's characters. Its theme is the overall meaning Faulkner conveys.

Subplot

A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel plot in a play or story that coexists with the main plot. The story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forms a subplot with the overall plot of *Hamlet*.

Symbol

An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself.

The glass unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie*,

the rocking horse in "The Rocking-Horse Winner,"

the road in Frost's "The Road Not Taken"--all are symbols in this sense.

Synecdoche

A figure of speech in which a part is substituted for the whole. An example: "Lend me a hand." See Metonymy.

Syntax

The grammatical order of words in a sentence or line of verse or dialogue. The organization of words and phrases and clauses in sentences of prose, verse, and dialogue. In the following example, normal syntax (subject, verb, object order) is inverted:

"Whose woods these are I think I know."

Tale

A story that narrates strange happenings in a direct manner, without detailed descriptions of character. Petronius' "The Widow of Ephesus" is an example.

Theme

The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. See discussion of Dickinson's "Crumbling is not an instant's Act."

Tone

The implied attitude of a writer toward the subject and characters of a work, as, for example, Flannery O'Connor's ironic tone in her "Good Country People." See Irony.

Understatement

A figure of speech in which a writer or speaker says less than what he or she means; the opposite of exaggeration. The last line of Frost's "Birches" illustrates this literary device: "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches."