

Literary Terms Master List

Know these, even if you know nothing else...

1. Allegory – a narrative either in verse or prose, in which characters, action, and sometimes setting represent abstract concepts apart from the literal meaning of the story. (ex. *Everyman*)
2. Alliteration – the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words.
3. Allusion – a brief reference to a person, event, or place in history, or to a work of art/ literature.
4. Analogy – a comparison made between two items, situations, or ideas that are somewhat alike but unlike in most respects.
5. Anaphora – figure of repetition that occurs when the first word or set of words in one sentence, clause, or phrase is/are repeated at or very near the beginning of successive sentences, clauses, or phrases.
6. Antagonist – a character in a story or play who opposes the chief character or protagonist.
7. Apostrophe – a figure of speech in which a speaker directly addresses an absent person or a personified quality, object, or idea.
8. Archetype – a character, an action, or situation that seems to represent common patterns of human life. Often include a symbol, a theme, a setting, or a character that have a common meaning in an entire culture, or even the entire human race.
9. Aside – in drama, a few words or a short passage spoken by one character to the audience while the other actors on stage pretend their characters cannot hear the speaker’s words.
10. Assonance – the repetition of similar vowel sounds followed by different consonant sounds in stressed syllables or words.
11. Asyndeton – the omission of conjunctions from constructions in which they would normally be used.
12. Atmosphere (mood) – the mood/ feeling of the literary work created for the reader by the writer.
13. Ballad – a narrative poem that usually includes a repeated refrain.
14. Blank verse – unrhymed iambic pentameter, a line of five feet.
15. Cacophony – the use of words in poetry that combine sharp, harsh, hissing, or unmelodious sounds.
16. Caesura – a pause or break within a line of poetry.
17. Carpe diem – Latin for “seize the day,” the name applied to a theme frequently found in lyric poetry: enjoy life’s pleasures while you are able.
18. Catharsis – purification or purging of emotions (pity or fear).
19. Character – an imaginary person represented in a work of fiction (described as a round/flat, protagonist/antagonist, etc.)
20. Characterization – the method an author uses to acquaint the reader with his or her characters.
21. Chiasmus – A scheme in which the author introduces words or concepts in a particular order then later repeats those terms or similar ones in reversed or backwards order. It involves taking parallelism and deliberately turning it inside out, creating a “crisscross” pattern.
22. Cliché – an expression or phrase that is over-used as to become trite and meaningless.
23. Climax – as a term of dramatic structure, the decisive or turning point in a story or play when the action changes course and, as a result, begins to resolve itself.
24. Conceit – elaborate figure of speech combining possible metaphor, simile, hyperbole, or oxymoron.
25. Conceit – the struggle between two opposing forces (man v. man, man v. nature, man v. self, man v. society).
26. Connotation – the emotional associations surrounding a word, as opposed to its literal meaning or denotation.
27. Couplet – a pair of rhyming lines with identical meter.
28. Denotation – the strict, literal meaning of a word.
29. Denouement – the resolution of the plot.
30. Dialogue – the conversation between two or more people in a literary work.
31. Diction – the author’s choice of words or phrases in a literary work.
32. Dramatic irony – refers to a situation in which events or facts not known to a character on stage or in a fictional work are known to another character, the audience, or the reader.

33. Dramatic monologue – a lyric poem in which the speaker addresses someone whose replies are not recorded.
34. Elegy – a mourning poem of lament for an individual or tragic event.
35. Enjambment – the continuation of a complete idea from one line of poetry to another, without pause.
36. Epiphany – a revealing scene or moment in which a character experiences a deep realization about him/ himself.
37. Epistrophe – repetition of a concluding word or word endings.
38. Euphemism – using a mild or gentle phrase instead of a blunt, embarrassing, or painful one.
39. Euphony – attempting to group words together harmoniously, so that the consonants permit an easy and pleasing flow of sound when spoken.
40. Exposition – the opening section of a narrative or dramatic structure in which characters, setting, theme, and conflict can be revealed.
41. Flashback – interruption of the narrative to show an episode that happened before that particular point in the story.
42. Foot – a group of syllables in verse usually consisting of one accented syllable and the unaccented syllables associated with it.
43. Foreshadowing – a hint given to the reader of what is to come.
44. Free verse – a type of poetry that differs from conventional verse forms in being “free” from a fixed pattern of meter and rhyme.
45. Hamartia – a tragic flaw, especially a misperception, a lack of some important insight, or some blindness that ironically results from one’s own strengths and abilities.
46. Hubris – in a hero, hubris refers to arrogant, excessive self-pride or self-confidence or a lack of some important perception or insight due to pride in one’s abilities.
47. Hyperbole – a figure of speech involving great exaggeration.
48. Iambic pentameter – a line of verse having five metrical feet (Shakespeare’s most frequent writing pattern).
49. Imagery – the sensory details that provide vividness in a literary work and tend to arouse emotions or feeling in a reader which abstract language does not.
50. In medias res – Latin for “in the middle of things”; used to describe a plot that begins in the middle of events and then reveals past through flashbacks.
51. Irony – the term used to describe a contrast between what appears to be and what really is.
52. Juxtaposition – placing two ideas, words, or images side by side so that their closeness creates an original, ironic, or insightful meaning.
53. Litotes – a figure of speech in which a positive is stated by negating its opposite (ex. Not a bad idea).
54. Metaphor – a figure of speech involving an implied comparison.
55. Meter (rhythm) – the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry.
56. Metonymy – a figure of speech in which a specific term naming an object is substituted for another word with which it is closely associated.
57. Motif – a recurrent word, image, theme, object, or phrase that tends to unify a literary work or that may be elaborated into a theme.
58. Narrator (persona/ point of view) – the teller of the story.
59. Onomatopoeia – words used in such a way that the sound of the words imitates the sound of the thing being spoken of.
60. Paradox – a statement, often metaphorical, that seems to be self-contradictory but which has valid meaning.
61. Parallelism – when the writer establishes similar patterns of grammatical structure and length.
62. Parody – a kind of burlesque that is a humorous imitation of serious writing, usually for the purpose of making the style of an author appear ridiculous.
63. Persona – the speaker or narrator of a text or poem. Cannot be assumed to be the author.
64. Personification – the representation of abstractions, ideas, animals, or inanimate objects as human beings by endowing them with life-like qualities.
65. Plot – the series of happenings in a literary work.
66. Point of view – the relation between the teller of the story and the characters in it.

67. Polysyndeton – using many conjunctions to achieve an overwhelming effect in a sentence.
68. Prosody – the mechanics of verse poetry – its sounds, rhythms, scansion and meter, stanzaic form, alliteration, assonance, euphony, onomatopoeia, and rhyme.
69. Protagonist – the leading character in a literary work.
70. Pun – a play on words; a humorous use of a word that has different meanings or of two or more words with the same or nearly the same sound but different meanings.
71. Rhyme – exact repetition of sounds in at least the final accented syllables of two or more words.
72. Rhyme scheme – The pattern of rhyme. The traditional way to mark these patterns of rhyme is to assign a letter of the alphabet to each rhyming sound at the end of each line.
73. Satire – the technique that employs wit to ridicule a subject, usually some social institution or human foible, with the intention of inspiring reform.
74. Setting – the time, place, societal situation, and weather in which the action of a narrative occurs.
75. Simile – a figure of speech involving a comparison of two unlike things using 'like' or 'as'.
76. Situational irony – an occurrence that is contrary to what is expected or intended.
77. Soliloquy – a dramatic convention that allows a character alone on stage to speak his or her thoughts aloud.
78. Sonnet – a fourteen-line poem, usually in iambic pentameter, with a varied rhyme scheme.
79. Stereotype – a conventional pattern, plot, or setting that possesses little or no individuality, but that may be used for a purpose.
80. Stream of consciousness – the recording or re-creation of a character's flow of thought.
81. Style – the distinctive handling of language by an author.
82. Symbol – a person, place, or object that represents something beyond itself.
83. Synecdoche – figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole.
84. Synesthesia – the description of one sense using another sense.
85. Syntax – the arrangement of words within a sentence.
86. Theme – the main idea or underlying meaning of a literary work.
87. Tone – the author's attitude toward his or subject matter and toward the audience.
88. Understatement – figure of speech that says less than one means.
89. Verbal irony – the intended meaning of a statement or work is different from what the statement or work literally says.
90. Villanelle – poetic form of five tercets and a final quatrain (19 lines).