Literary Terms

**allegory**
a work in which concrete elements (for instance, a pilgrim, a road, a splendid city) stand for abstractions (humanity, life, salvation), usually in an unambiguous, one-to-one relationship. The literal items (the pilgrim, and so on) thus convey a meaning, which is usually moral, religious, or political.

**alliteration**
repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginnings of words (free, form, phantom)

**antagonist**
a character or force that opposes (literally, “wrestles”) the protagonist (the main character). In *Hamlet*, the antagonist is King Claudius, the protagonist is Hamlet; in *Antigone*, the antagonist is Creon, the protagonist Antigone.

**apostrophe**
address to an absent figure or to a thing as if it were present and could listen. Example: “O rose, thou art sick!”

**archetype**
a theme, image, motive, or pattern that occurs so often in literary works it seems to be universal. Examples: a dark forest (for mental confusion), the sun (for illumination)

**assonance**
repetition of similar vowel sounds in stressed syllables. Example: *light/bride*

**character**
(1) a person in a literary work (Romeo); (2) the personality of such a figure (sentimental lover). Characters (in the first sense) are sometimes classified as either “flat” (one-dimensional) or “round” (fully realized, complex).
characterization
the presentation of a character, whether by direct description, by showing the character in action, or by the presentation of other characters who help to define each other

comedy
a literary work, especially a play, characterized by humor and by a happy ending

consonance
repetition of consonant sounds, especially in stressed syllables. Also called half-rhyme or slant rhyme. Example: arouse/doze

denouement
the resolution or the outcome (literally, the “unknotting”) of a plot

diction
the choice of vocabulary and of sentence structure. There is a difference in diction between “One never knows” and “You never can tell.”

explication
a line-by-line unfolding of the meaning of a text

exposition
a setting forth of information. In fiction and drama, introductory material introducing characters and the situation; in an essay, the presentation of information, as opposed to the telling of a story or the setting forth of an argument

flat character
a one-dimensional character (for instance, the figure who is only and always the jealous husband or the flirtatious wife) as opposed to a round or many-sided character
Literary Terms (cont.)

foil
a character who makes a contrast with another, especially a minor character who helps to set off a major character

foreshadowing
suggestions of what is to come

hyperbole
figurative language using overstatement, as in “He died a thousand deaths”

imagery
use of language that appeals to any of our sensations, including sensations of pressure and heat as of sight (“deep blue sea”), smell (“perfumes of Arabia”), taste, touch, and sound (“tinkling bells”)

irony
when the opposite of what is said or intended turns out to be the real meaning or situation. Verbal irony is used in speech when the meaning is the opposite of what is stated. Verbal irony can also be achieved through overstatement or understatement in which something is intentionally represented as more or as less than it really is. Situational irony occurs when a good end is intended and an evil one results, or vice versa. Dramatic irony occurs when the audience or the reader knows more about a situation than the characters in the work.

metaphor
a kind of figurative language equating one thing with another: “This novel is garbage” (a book is equated with discarded and probably inedible food), “a piercing cry” (a cry is equated with a spear or other sharp instrument)

persona
literally, a mask; the “I” or speaker of a work, sometimes identified with the author but usually better regarded as the voice or mouthpiece created by the author
Literary Terms (cont.)

personification
a kind of figurative language in which an inanimate object, animal, or other nonhuman is given human traits. Examples: the creeping tide (the tide is imagined as having feet), the cruel sea (the sea is imagined as having moral qualities)

plot
the episodes in a narrative or dramatic work—that is, what happens. (But even a lyric poem can be said to have a plot; for instance, the speaker’s mood changes from anger to resignation.) Sometimes plot is defined as the author’s particular arrangement (sequence) of these episodes, and story is the episodes in their chronological sequence. Until recently it was widely believed that a good plot had a logical structure: A caused B (B did not simply happen to follow A), but in the last few decades some critics have argued that such a concept merely represents the white male’s view of experience, causality, and relationship.

point of view
the perspective from which a story is told. First person point of view is narration of events by one of the characters in the story. Third person point of view is narration of events by a non-participant who will use third person pronouns to refer to all of the characters in the story. There are four kinds of third person point of view: From an objective point of view the narrator describes only the words and actions of the characters. From an omniscient point of view, the narrator describes the thoughts, words, and actions of all or most of the characters. From the limited omniscient point of view, the narrator enters the mind of only one major character who becomes the “center of consciousness” in the story. In stream of consciousness, the narrator describes the mental and the real world of the character(s) in an unpunctuated stream of thought.

rhyme
similarity or identity of accented sounds in corresponding positions, as, for example, at the ends of lines: love/dove; go/sew; tender/slender
Literary Terms (cont.)

**rhythm**
in poetry, a pattern of stressed and unstressed sounds; in prose, some sort of recurrence (for example, of a motif) at approximately identical intervals

**round character**
a many-sided character, one who does not always act predictably, as opposed to a “flat” or one-dimensional, unchanging character

**satire**
literature that entertainingly attacks folly or vice; amusing abusive writing

**setting**
the time and place that an author chooses for his work. Setting increases probability of certain events occurring in a work, produces an appropriate atmosphere or mood for the action of the plot, reveals a character’s personality and values, and helps communicate the theme or message of the work.

**simile**
a kind of figurative language explicitly making a comparison—for example, by using *as, like*, or a verb such as *seems*

**style**
the manner of expression, evident not only in the choice of certain words (for instance, colloquial language) but in the choice of certain kinds of sentence structure, characters, settings, and themes

**symbolism**
use of a person, object, action, or situation that, charged with meaning, suggests another thing (for example, a dark forest may suggest confusion, or perhaps evil), though usually with less specificity and more ambiguity than an allegory. A symbol usually differs from a metaphor in that a symbol is expanded or repeated and works by accumulating associations.
thesis
the point or argument that a writer announces and develops. A thesis differs from a topic by making an assertion.

thesis sentence
a sentence summarizing, as specifically as possible, the writer’s chief point (argument and perhaps purpose)

tone
the prevailing attitude (for instance, ironic, genial, objective) as perceived by the reader. Notice that the reader may feel that the tone of the persona of the work is genial while the tone of the author of the same work is ironic.

tragedy
a serious play showing the protagonist moving from good fortune to bad and ending in death or a deathlike state

tragic flaw
a supposed weakness (for example, arrogance) in the tragic protagonist. If tragedy results from an intellectual error rather than from a moral weakness, it is better to speak of “a tragic error.”

Definitions of these terms are from the following texts:


McKeague, Pat. Step by Step: Writing about Literature. 5th ed. Dubu