

# A GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

## LITERARY DEVICES

**Alliteration:** The repetition of initial consonant sounds used especially in poetry to emphasize and link words as well as to create pleasing, musical sounds. Example—the fair breeze blew, the white foam flew.

**Allusion:** A reference to a well-known person, place, event, literary work, or work of art to enrich the reading experience by adding meaning.

**Characterization:** Techniques a writer uses to create and develop a character by what:

- he/she does or says,
- other characters say about him/her, or how they react to him/her
- the author reveals directly or through a narrator.

**Dialect:** Speech that reflects pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar typical of a geographical region.

**Flashback:** Interruption of the chronological (time) order to present something that occurred before the beginning of the story.

**Figurative Language:** Language that has meaning beyond the literal meaning; also known as “figures of speech.”

- Simile: comparison of two things using the words “like” or “as,” e.g. “Her smile was as cold as ice.”
- Metaphor comparison of two things essentially different but with some commonalities; does not use “like” or “as,” e.g. “Her smile was ice.”
- Hyperbole: a purposeful exaggeration for emphasis or humor.
- Personification: human qualities attributed to an animal, object, or idea, e.g. “The wind exhaled.”

**Free Verse:** Poetry that does not conform to a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Poets who write in free verse try to reproduce the natural rhythms of spoken language.

**Foreshadowing:** Important hints that an author drops to prepare the reader for what is to come, and help the reader anticipate the outcome.

**Imagery:** Words or phrases that appeal to the reader’s senses.

**Humor:** The quality of a literary or informative work that makes the character and/or situations seem funny, amusing, or ludicrous.

**Irony:** A technique that involves surprising, interesting, or amusing contradictions or contrasts. Verbal irony occurs when words are used to suggest the opposite of their usual meaning. An irony of situation is when an event occurs that directly contradicts expectations.

**Onomatopoeia:** The use of words that imitate sounds. Examples would be *hiss*, *buzz*, *swish*, and *crunch*.

**Point of View:** Perspective from which the story is told

- First-person: narrator is a character in the story; uses “I,” “we,” etc.
- Third-person: narrator outside the story; uses “he,” “she,” “they”
- Third-person limited: narrator tells only what one character perceives
- Third-person omniscient: narrator can see into the minds of all characters.

**Satire:** Writing that comments humorously on human flaws, ideas, social customs, or institutions in order to change them.

**Style:** The distinctive way that a writer uses language including such factors as word choice, sentence length, arrangement, and complexity, and the use of figurative language and imagery.

**Suspense:** A feeling of excitement, curiosity, or expectation about what will happen.

**Symbol:** Person, place, or thing that represents something beyond itself, most often something concrete or tangible that represents an abstract idea.

## LITERARY FORMS

**Autobiography:** A writer's story of his or her own life.

**Biography:** A writer's account of some other person's life.

**Comedy:** Writing that deals with life in a humorous way, often poking fun at people's mistakes.

**Drama:** Also called a play, this writing form uses dialogue to share its message and is meant to be performed in front of an audience.

**Essay:** A short piece of nonfiction that expresses the writer's opinion or shares information about a subject.

**Fable:** A short story that often uses talking animals as the main characters and teaches an explicit moral or lesson.

**Fantasy:** A story set in an imaginary world in which the characters usually have supernatural powers or abilities.

**Folktale:** A story originally passed from one generation to another by word of mouth only. The characters are usually all good or all bad and in the end are rewarded or punished as they deserve.

**Historical Fiction:** A made-up story that is based on a real time and place in history, so fact is mixed with fiction.

**Myth:** A traditional story intended to explain some mystery of nature, religious doctrine, or cultural belief. The gods and goddesses of mythology have supernatural powers, but the human characters usually do not.

**Novel:** A book-length, fictional prose story. Because of its length, a novel's characters and plot are usually more developed than those of a short story.

**Poetry:** A literary work that uses concise, colorful, often rhythmic language to express ideas or emotions. Examples: ballad, blank verse, free verse, elegy, limerick, sonnet.

**Prose:** A literary work that uses the familiar spoken form of language, sentence after sentence.

**Realistic Fiction:** Writing that attempts to show life as it really is.

**Science Fiction:** Writing based on real or imaginary scientific developments and often set in the future.

**Short Story:** Shorter than a novel, this piece of literature can usually be read in one sitting. Because of its length, it has only a few characters and focuses on one problem or conflict.

**Tall Tale:** A humorous, exaggerated story often based on the life of a real person. The exaggerations build until the character can accomplish impossible things.

## LITERARY ELEMENTS

**Action:** Everything that happens in a story.

**Antagonist:** The person or force that works against the hero of the story. (See protagonist)

**Character:** One of the people (or animals) in a story.

**Climax:** The high point in the action of a story.

**Conflict:** A problem or struggle between two opposing forces in a story. There are four basic conflicts:

- Person Against Person: A problem between characters.
- Person Against Self: A problem within a character's own mind.
- Person Against Society: A problem between a character and society, school, the law, or some tradition.
- Person Against Nature: A problem between a character and some element of nature—a blizzard, a hurricane, a mountain climb, etc.

**Dialogue:** The conversations that characters have with one another.

**Exposition:** The part of the story, usually near the beginning, in which the characters are introduced, the background is explained, and the setting is described.

**Falling Action:** The action and dialogue following the climax that lead the reader into the story's end.

**Mood:** The feeling a piece of literature is intended to create in a reader.

**Moral:** The lesson a story teaches.

**Narrator:** The person or character who actually tells the story, filling in the background information and bridging the gaps between dialogue. (See Point of View.)

**Plot:** The action that makes up the story, following a plan called the plot line.

**Plot line:** The planned action or series of events in a story. There are five parts: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

**Protagonist:** The main character in a story, often a good or heroic type.

**Resolution:** The part of the story in which the problems are solved and the action comes to a satisfying end.

**Rising Action:** The central part of the story during which various problems arise after a conflict is introduced.

**Setting:** The place and the time frame in which a story takes place.

**Style:** The distinctive way that a writer uses language including such factors as word choice, sentence length, arrangement, and complexity, and the use of figurative language and imagery.

**Theme:** The message about life or human nature that is “the focus” in the story that the writer tells.

## ADDITIONAL VOCABULARY

**Article:** A complete piece of writing, as a report or essay, that is part of a newspaper, magazine, or book.

**Atlas:** A book of maps.

**Encyclopedia:** A book that contains information on many subjects; or comprehensive information in a particular field of knowledge; usually arranged alphabetically.

**Fiction:** A literary work whose content is based on the imagination and not on fact.

**Glossary:** An alphabetical listing of difficult, technical, or foreign terms with definitions or translation; usually found at the end of a book.

**Index:** An alphabetical listing that gives page numbers or books where information can be found.

**Mystery:** A novel, story, or play involving a crime or secret activity and its gradual solution.

**Nonfiction:** True writing, based on factual information.

**Periodical:** Another word for magazine.

**Reference:** A type of book that provides information arranged for easy access.

**Series:** Several books related in subject, or dealing with the same characters.

**Table of Contents:** The part of a book which lists the chapters or contents within the book.