SELECTED LITERARY TERMS

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Contributors: Elizabeth Boyle.

Literary Terms

Included below is a list of literary terms that can help you interpret, critique, and respond to a variety of different written works. This list is by no means comprehensive, but instead offers a primer to the language frequently used by scholars and students researching literary works. This list and the terms included in it can help you begin to identify central concerns or elements in a work that might help facilitate your interpretation, argumentation, and analysis. We encourage you to read this list alongside the other guides to literary interpretation included on the OWL Website. Please use the links on the left-hand side of this page to access other helpful resources.

The Basics

- **Characterization**: The ways individual characters are represented by the narrator or author of a text. This includes descriptions of the characters' physical appearances, personalities, actions, interactions, and dialogue.
- **Dialogue**: Spoken exchanges between characters in a dramatic or literary work, usually between two or more speakers.
- **Genre**: A kind of literature. For instance, comedy, mystery, tragedy, satire, elegy, romance, and epic are all genres. Texts frequently draw elements from multiple genres to create dynamic narratives. Alastair Fowler uses the following elements to define genres: organizational features (chapters, acts, scenes, stanzas); length; mood (the gothic novel tends to be moody and dark); style (a text can be high, low, or in-between depending on its audience); the reader's role (readers of a mystery are expected to interpret evidence); and the author's reason for writing (an epithalamion is a poem composed for marriage) (Mickics 132-3).
- **Imagery**: A term used to describe an author's use of vivid descriptions "that evoke sense-impressions by literal or figurative reference to perceptible or 'concrete' objects, scenes, actions, or states" (Baldick 121). Imagery can refer to the literal landscape or characters described in a narrative or the theoretical concepts an author employs.
- **Plot**: The sequence of events that occur through a work to produce a coherent narrative or story.
- **Point of View:** The perspective (visual, interpretive, bias, etc) a text takes when presenting its plot and narrative. For instance, an author might write a narrative from a specific character's point of view, which means that that character is our narrative and readers experience events through his or her eyes.

- **Style**: Comprised of an author's diction, syntax, tone, characters, and other narrative techniques, "style" is used to describe the way an author uses language to convey his or her ideas and purpose in writing. An author's style can also be associated to the genre or mode of writing the author adopts, such as in the case of a satire or elegy with would adopt a satirical or elegiac style of writing.
- **Symbol(ism):** An object or element incorporated into a narrative to represent another concept or concern. Broadly, representing one thing with another. Symbols typically recur throughout a narrative and offer critical, though often overlooked, information about events, characters, and the author's primary concerns in telling the story.
- **Theme**: According to Baldick, a theme may be defined as "a salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work's treatment of its subject-matter; or a topic recurring in a number or literary works" (Baldick 258). Themes in literature tend to differ depending on author, time period, genre, style, purpose, etc.
- **Tone**: A way of communicating information (in writing, images, or sound) that conveys an attitude. Authors convey tone through a combination of word-choice, imagery, perspective, style, and subject matter. By adopting a specific tone, authors can help readers accurately interpret meaning in a text.
- **Types of narrative**: The narrator is the voice telling the story or speaking to the audience. However, this voice can come from a variety of different perspectives, including:
  - o **First person**: A story told from the perspective of one or several characters, each of whom typically uses the word "I." This means that readers "see" or experience events in the story through the narrator's eyes.
  - o **Second person**: A narrative perspective that typically addresses that audience using "you." This mode can help authors address readers and invest them in the story.
  - o **Third person**: Describes a narrative told from the perspective of an outside figure who does not participate directly in the events of a story. This mode uses "he," "she," and "it" to describe events and characters.

Types of Prose Texts

- **Bildungsroman**: This is typically a type of novel that depicts an individual's coming-of-age through self-discovery and personal knowledge. Such stories often explore the protagonists' psychological and moral development. Examples include Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.
- **Epistolary**: A novel comprised primarily of letters sent and received by its principle characters. This type of novel was particularly popular during the eighteenth century.
- **Essay**: According to Baldick, "a short written composition in prose that discusses a subject or proposes an argument without claiming to be a complete or thorough exposition" (Baldick 87). A notable example of the essay form is Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," which uses satire to discuss eighteenth-century economic and social concerns in Ireland.
- **Novella**: An intermediate-length (between a novel and a short story) fictional narrative.

Terms for Interpreting Authorial Voice

- **Apology**: Often at the beginning or conclusion of a text, the term "apology" refers to an instance in which the author or narrator justifies his or her goals in producing the text.
- **Irony**: Typically refers to saying one thing and meaning the opposite, often to shock audiences and emphasize the importance of the truth.
- **Satire**: A style of writing that mocks, ridicules, or pokes fun at a person, belief, or group of people in order to challenge them. Often, texts employing satire use sarcasm, irony, or exaggeration to assert their perspective.

- **Stream of consciousness**: A mode of writing in which the author traces his or her thoughts verbatim into the text. Typically, this style offers a representation of the author's exact thoughts throughout the writing process and can be used to convey a variety of different emotions or as a form of pre-writing.

Terms for Interpreting Characters

- **Antagonist**: A character or characters in a text with whom the protagonist opposes.
- **Anti-hero**: A protagonist of a story who embodies none of the qualities typically assigned to traditional heroes and heroines. Not to be confused with the antagonist of a story, the anti-hero is a protagonist whose failings are typically used to humanize him or her and convey a message about the reality of human existence.
- **Archetype**: "a resonant figure or mythic importance, whether a personality, place, or situation, found in diverse cultures and different historical periods" (Mickics 24). Archetypes differ from allegories because they tend to reference broader or commonplace (often termed "stock") character types, plot points, and literary conventions. Paying attention to archetypes can help readers identify what an author may posit as "universal truths" about life, society, human interaction, etc. based on what other authors or participants in a culture may have said about them.
- **Epithet**: According to Taafe, "An adjective, noun, or phase expressing some characteristic quality of a thing or person or a descriptive name applied to a person, as Richard the Lion-Hearted" (Taafe 58). An epithet usually indicates some notable quality about the individual with whom it addresses, but it can also be used ironically to emphasize qualities that individual might actually lack.
- **Personification**: The use of a person to represent a concept, quality, or object. Personification can also refer to "a person who is considered a representative type of a particular quality or concept" (Taafe 120).
- **Protagonist**: The primary character in a text, often positioned as "good" or the character with whom readers are expected to identify. Protagonists usually oppose an antagonist.

Terms for Interpreting Word Choice, Dialogue, and Speech

- **Alliteration**: According to Baldick, "The repetition of the same sounds—usually initial consonants of words or of stressed syllabus—in any sequence of neighboring words" (Baldick 6). Alliteration is typically used to convey a specific tone or message.
- **Apostrophe**: This figure of speech refers to an address to "a dead or absent person, or an abstraction or inanimate object" and is "usually employed for emotional emphasis, can become ridiculous [or humorous] when misapplied" (Baldick 17).
- **Diction**: Word choice, or the specific language an author, narrator, or speaker uses to describe events and interact with other characters.

Terms for Interpreting Plot

- **Climax**: The height of conflict and intrigue in a narrative. This is when events in the narrative and characters' destines are most unclear; the climax often appears as a decision the protagonist must make or a challenge he or she must overcome in order to for the narrative obtain resolution.
- **Denouement**: The "falling action" of a narrative, when the climax and central conflicts are resolved and a resolution is found. In a play, this is typically the last act and in a novel it might include the final chapters.

- **Deus Ex Machina**: According to Taafe, "Literally, in Latin, the 'god from the machine'; a deity in Greek and Roman drama who was brought in by stage machinery to intervene in the action; hence, any character, event, or device suddenly introduce to resolve the conflict" (43).
- **Exposition**: Usually located at the beginning of a text, this is a detailed discussion introducing characters, setting, background information, etc. readers might need to know in order to understand the text that follows. This section is particularly rich for analysis because it contains a lot of important information in a relatively small space.
- **Frame Narrative**: a story that an author encloses around the central narrative in order to provide background information and context. This is typically referred to as a "story within a story" or a "tale within a tale." Frame stories are usually located in a distinct place and time from the narratives they surround. Examples of stories with frame narratives include *Canterbury Tales, Frankenstein*, and *Wuthering Heights*.
- **In media res**: Beginning in "the middle of things," or when an author begins a text in the midst of action. This often functions as a way to both incorporate the reader directly into the narrative and secure his or her interest in the narrative that follows.

Terms for Interpreting Layers of Meaning

- **Allegory**: a literary mode that attempts to convert abstract concepts, values, beliefs, or historical events into characters or other tangible elements in a narrative. Examples include, *Gulliver's Travels, The Faerie Queene, Pilgrim's Progress,* and *Paradise Lost*.
- **Allusion**: When a text references, incorporates, or responds to an earlier piece (including literature, art, music, film, event, etc). T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) offers an extensive example of allusion in literature. According to Baldick, "The technique of allusion is an economical means of calling upon the history or the literary tradition that author and reader are assumed to share" (7).
- **Hyperbole**: exaggerated language, description, or speech that is not meant to be taken literally, but is used for emphasis. For instance, "I've been waiting here for ages" or "This bag weighs a ton."
- **Metaphor**: a figure of speech that refers to one thing by another in order to identify similarities between the two (and therefore define each in relation to one another).
- **Metonymy**: a figure of speech that substitutes one aspect or attribute for the whole itself. For instance, referring to a woman as "a skirt" or the sea as "the deep." Doing so can not only evoke a specific tone (determined by the attribute being emphasized or the thing to which it refers), but also comments on the importance of the specific element that is doing the substituting.
- **Parody**: a narrative work or writing style that mocks or mimics another genre or work. Typically, parodies exaggerate and emphasize elements from the original work in order to ridicule, comment on, or criticize their message.
- **Simile**: a figure of speech that compares two people, objects, elements, or concepts using "like" or "as."

Works Cited

For more information or to read about other literary terms, please see the following texts:

Baldick, Chris. *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Mikics, David. *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. Print.

Taafe, James G. *A Student's Guide to Literary Term*s. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1967. Print.

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Literary Analysis: Using Elements of Literature

Students are asked to write literary analysis essays because this type of assignment encourages you to think about **how and why** a poem, short story, novel, or play was written. To successfully analyze literature, you'll need to remember that authors make specific choices for particular reasons. Your essay should point out the author's choices and attempt to explain their significance.

Another way to look at a literary analysis is to consider a piece of literature from your own perspective. Rather than thinking about the author's intentions, you can develop an argument based on any single term (or combination of terms) listed below. You'll just need to use the original text to defend and explain your argument to the reader.

Allegory - narrative form in which the characters are representative of some larger humanistic trait (i.e. greed, vanity, or bravery) and attempt to convey some larger lesson or meaning to life. Although allegory was originally and traditionally character based, modern allegories tend to parallel story and theme.

- *William Faulkner's A Rose for Emily- the decline of the Old South*
- *Robert Louis Stevenson's Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde- man's struggle to contain his inner primal instincts*
- *District 9- South African Apartheid*
- *X Men- the evils of prejudice*
- *Harry Potter- the dangers of seeking "racial purity"*

Character - representation of a person, place, or thing performing traditionally human activities or functions in a work of fiction

- **Protagonist** - The character the story revolves around.
- **Antagonist** - A character or force that opposes the protagonist.
- **Minor character** - Often provides support and illuminates the protagonist.
- **Static character** - A character that remains the same.
- **Dynamic character** - A character that changes in some important way.
- **Characterization** - The choices an author makes to reveal a character's personality, such as appearance, actions, dialogue, and motivations.

Look for: Connections, links, and clues between and about characters. Ask yourself what the function and significance of each character is. Make this determination based upon the character's history, what the reader is told (and not told), and what other characters say about themselves and others.

Connotation - implied meaning of word. BEWARE! Connotations can change over time.

- *confidence/ arrogance*
- *mouse/ rat*
- *cautious/ scared*
- *curious/ nosey*
- *frugal/ cheap*

Denotation - dictionary definition of a word

Diction - word choice that both conveys and emphasizes the meaning or theme of a poem through distinctions in sound, look, rhythm, syllable, letters, and definition

Figurative language - the use of words to express meaning beyond the literal meaning of the words themselves

- *Metaphor* - contrasting to seemingly unalike things to enhance the meaning of a situation or theme without using **like** or **as**
  - *You are the sunshine of my life.*
- *Simile* - contrasting to seemingly unalike things to enhance the meaning of a situation or theme using **like** or **as**
  - *What happens to a dream deferred, does it dry up **like** a raisin in the sun*
- *Hyperbole* - exaggeration
  - *I have a million things to do today.*
- *Personification* - giving non-human objects human characteristics
  - *America has thrown her hat into the ring, and will be joining forces with the British.*

Foot - grouping of stressed and unstressed syllables used in line or poem

- *Iamb* - unstressed syllable followed by stressed
  - *Made famous by the Shakespearian sonnet, closest to the natural rhythm of human speech*
    - How ***do*** I ***love*** thee? ***Let*** me ***count*** the ***ways***
- *Spondee* - stressed stressed
  - *Used to add emphasis and break up monotonous rhythm*
    - ***Blood boil, mind-meld, well- loved***
- *Trochee* - stressed unstressed
  - *Often used in children's rhymes and to help with memorization, gives poem a hurried feeling*
    - ***While*** I ***nod***ded, ***near***ly ***nap***ping, ***sud***den***ly*** there ***came*** a ***tap***ping,
- *Anapest* - unstressed unstressed stressed
  - *Often used in longer poems or "rhymed stories"*
    - Twas the ***night*** before ***Christ***mas and ***all*** through the ***house***
- *Dactyls* - stressed unstressed unstressed

- o *Often used in classical Greek or Latin text, later revived by the Romantics, then again by the Beatles, often thought to create a heartbeat or pulse in a poem*
  - ▪ ***Pic**ture your**self** in a **boat** on a **ri**ver,*
    *With **tan**gerine **trees** and mar**ma**lade skies.*

The iamb stumbles through my books; trochees rush and tumble; while anapest runs like a hurrying brook; dactyls are stately and classical.

Imagery - the author's attempt to create a mental picture (or reference point) in the mind of the reader. Remember, though the most immediate forms of imagery are visual, strong and effective imagery can be used to invoke an emotional, sensational (taste, touch, smell etc) or even physical response.

Meter - measure or structuring of rhythm in a poem

Plot - the arrangement of ideas and/or incidents that make up a story

- *Foreshadowing* - When the writer clues the reader in to something that will eventually occur in the story; it may be explicit (obvious) or implied (disguised).
- *Suspense* - The tension that the author uses to create a feeling of discomfort about the unknown
- *Conflict* - Struggle between opposing forces.
- *Exposition* - Background information regarding the setting, characters, plot.
- *Rising Action* - The process the story follows as it builds to its main conflict
- *Crisis* - A significant turning point in the story that determines how it must end
- *Resolution/Denouement* - The way the story turns out.

Point of View - pertains to who tells the story and how it is told. The point of view of a story can sometimes indirectly establish the author's intentions.

- *Narrator* - The person telling the story who may or may not be a character in the story.
- *First-person* - Narrator participates in action but sometimes has limited knowledge/vision.
- *Second person* - Narrator addresses the reader directly as though she is part of the story. (i.e. "You walk into your bedroom. You see clutter everywhere and…")
- *Third Person (Objective)* - Narrator is unnamed/unidentified (a detached observer). Does not assume character's perspective and is not a character in the story. The narrator reports on events and lets the reader supply the meaning.
- *Omniscient* - All-knowing narrator (multiple perspectives). The narrator knows what each character is thinking and feeling, not just what they are doing throughout the story. This type of narrator usually jumps around within the text, following one character for a few pages or chapters, and then switching to another character for a few pages, chapters, etc. Omniscient narrators also sometimes step out of a particular character's mind to evaluate him or her in some meaningful way.

Rhythm - often thought of as a poem's timing. Rhythm is the juxtaposition of stressed and unstressed beats in a poem, and is often used to give the reader a lens through which to move through the work. (See meter and foot)

Setting - the place or location of the action. The setting provides the historical and cultural context for characters. It often can symbolize the emotional state of characters. Example – In Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the crumbling old mansion reflects the decaying state of both the family and the narrator's mind. We also see this type of emphasis on setting in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

Speaker - the person delivering the poem. Remember, a poem does not have to have a speaker, and the speaker and the poet are not necessarily one in the same.

Structure (fiction) - The way that the writer arranges the plot of a story.

Look for: Repeated elements in action, gesture, dialogue, description, as well as shifts in direction, focus, time, place, etc.

Structure (poetry) - The pattern of organization of a poem. For example, a Shakespearean sonnet is a 14-line poem written in iambic pentameter. Because the sonnet is strictly constrained, it is considered a closed or fixed form. An open or free form poem has looser form, or perhaps one of the author's invention, but it is important to remember that these poems are not necessarily formless.

Symbolism - when an object is meant to be representative of something or an idea greater than the object itself.

- *Cross - representative of Christ or Christianity*
- *Bald Eagle - America or Patriotism*
- *Owl - wisdom or knowledge*
- *Yellow - implies cowardice or rot*

Tone - the implied attitude towards the subject of the poem. Is it hopeful, pessimistic, dreary, worried? A poet conveys tone by combining all of the elements listed above to create a precise impression on the reader.