

A Glossary of Literary Terms

action: what takes place during the course of a short story.

falling action: the unraveling of the plot, following the climax, in which the writer explains how and why everything turned out as it did. Also known as *denouement* or *resolution*.

rising action: the series of incidents that grow out of a problem to be solved and that build up to a climax.

allegory: a narrative in which objects, persons, or events are equated with meanings outside the narrative itself.

alliteration: the same initial consonant used in two or more words that occur close together. For example: They had *bound* a musket *beside* her, with the *barrel* beneath her *breast*.

allusion: a reference to a person, place, or event with literary, historical, or geographical significance.

antagonist: the force (usually a person) that opposes the main character in his attempt to solve a problem and thus to resolve the conflict in which he is involved.

anticlimax: an outcome of a situation or series of events that, by contrast to what is expected, is ridiculous or disappointing. The anticlimax can often create a humorous effect.

assonance: a partial rhyme that results from the repetition of the same vowel sounds in words whose consonants differ. For example: *fate* and *sake*.

atmosphere: the general over-all feeling of a story conveyed in large part by the setting and the mood.

blank verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter verse.

character: a person in a work of fiction; sometimes an animal or object.

dynamic character: a character who changes or develops during the course of a work of fiction.

static character: a character who does *not* change or develop during the course of a work of fiction.

characterization: the portrayal in a story of an imaginary person by what he says or does, by what others say about him or how they react to him, and by what the author reveals directly or through a narrator.

climax: the point of highest interest or dramatic intensity. Usually it marks a turning point in the action, since the reader is no longer in doubt about the outcome.

conflict: the struggle between two opposing forces, ideas, or beliefs which form the basis of the plot. The conflict is resolved when one force – usually the protagonist – succeeds or fails in overcoming the opposing force or gives up trying.

external conflict: a struggle between the protagonist and some outside force.

internal conflict: a struggle between conflicting forces within the heart and mind of the protagonist.

connotation: the feelings or ideas that are suggested by or associated with a word or expression. For example: to most people the word *circus* connotes a feeling of excitement, color, movement and gaiety.

contrast: the bringing together of ideas, images, or characters to show how they differ.

couplet: two successive lines of verse that rhyme and are usually equal in length.

didactic: morally instructive or intended to be so.

epiphany: a moment of enlightenment in which the underlying truth or meaning of something is suddenly made clear.

flashback: a device by which a writer interrupts the main action of a story to recreate a situation or incident of an earlier time as though it were occurring in the present.

foot: a specific number of syllables in a definite pattern that forms a unit or rhythm in a line of verse. For example: an *iambic foot* consists of one unaccented syllable and one accented syllable.

foreshadowing: the dropping of important hints by the author to prepare the reader for what is to come or to help him to anticipate the outcome.

free verse: poetry that consists of unrhymed lines with irregular rhythmic patterns.

hyperbole: a figure of speech employing obvious exaggeration. For example, "He died a thousand deaths."

in medias res: Latin for "in the middle of things."

irony: a mode of expression in which the author (or character) says one thing and means the opposite. The term also applies to a situation, or to the outcome of an event (or series of events), that is the opposite of what might be expected or considered appropriate.

lyric: a poem that has the form and musical quality of a song, in which the poet expresses an intense personal feeling.

metaphor: a figure of speech in which two things are compared without the use of *like* or *as*. For example, "The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor."

meter: the rhythm of a line of poetry created by the regular repetition of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry.

mood: the frame of mind created by a piece of writing.

moral: the lesson taught by a literary work.

narration: an account or story of an event, or series of events, whether true or imaginary.

onomatopoeia: a word or phrase that imitates the sound of the thing it describes. For example: *buzz, sizzle, hiss*.

pathos: that quality in prose that provokes in the reader a feeling of pity and compassion.

personification: a figure of speech in which human form or characteristics are given to animals, objects, or ideas.

plot: the series of events or episodes that make up the action in a work.

point of view: the method used by the author to tell his story;

first person point of view: the narration of a story by the main character or, possibly, by a minor character. As the narrator, he uses the pronoun *I* in referring to himself.

omniscient point of view: the narration of the story through an all-knowing observer, who can be in several places at the same time and can see into the hearts and minds of all characters.

omniscient third person point of view: the narration of a story by an all-knowing observer but limited primarily to what one of the characters (usually the main character) can see, know, hear, or experience.

protagonist: Usually the main character, who faces a problem and, in his attempt to solve it, becomes involved in a conflict with an opposing force.

resolution: the events following the climax in a work of fiction; sometimes called the *falling action*.

satire: a piece of writing that criticizes manners, individuals, or political and social institutions by holding them up to ridicule.

setting: the time and place in which the events in a work of fiction occur.

simile: a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two objects which are essentially unlike but which resemble each other in one or more respects. This comparison is always introduced by *like* or *as*. For example, "My love is like a red, red rose."

soliloquy: a speech in prose or poetry made by a character when he is alone. The purpose of a soliloquy is to reveal to the reader (or audience) the feelings and thoughts of the character.

sonnet: a fourteen line poem that deals with a single idea or emotion. The *Italian* or *Petrarchan sonnet* is divided into two parts. The first eight lines, or *octave*, has the rhyme scheme *abbaabba*. The last six lines or *sestet*, has the rhyme scheme *cdcdcd*.

The *English* or *Shakespearian sonnet* is divided into three *quatrains* (a four line stanza) and a final rhymed *couplet*. It has the rhyme scheme *abab cdcd efef gg*.

stanza: a group of lines of verse, usually four or more, arranged according to a fixed pattern.

stereotype: a character in a story who is presented according to certain widely accepted ideas of how such a person should look, think, or act. For example, an "intelligent" student wears glasses.

stream of consciousness: the recreation of a character's flow of thought.

style: the distinctive manner in which the writer uses language; his choice and arrangement of words.

symbol: an object that stands for, or represents, an idea, a belief, superstition, social or political institution, etc.; For example a pair of scales is often used as a symbol for justice.

theme: the idea, general truth, or commentary on life or people brought out through a story.