

Helena High Honors English Guide: Literature and Poetry: Literary Devices

Aesthetics- "Philosophical investigation into the nature of beauty and the perception of beauty, especially in the arts; the theory of art or artistic taste."

Allegory- "A story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning. In written narrative, allegory involves a continuous parallel between two (or more) levels of meaning in a story, so that its persons and events correspond to their equivalents in a system of ideas or a chain of events external to the tale."

Allusion- "An indirect or passing reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work, the nature and relevance of which is not explained by the writer but relies on the reader's familiarity with what is thus mentioned."

Ambiguity- "A statement which can contain two or more meanings. For example, when the oracle at Delphi told Croesus that if he waged war on Cyrus he would destroy a great empire, Croesus thought the oracle meant his enemy's empire. In fact, the empire Croesus destroyed by going to war was his own."

Analogy- "A resemblance of relations; an agreement or likeness between things in some circumstances or effects, when the things are otherwise entirely different."

Anaphora- "repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. 'We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France.'"

Anecdote- "A very short tale told by a character in a literary work. In Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales,' 'The Miller's Tale' and 'The Carpenter's Tale' are examples."

Antagonist- "the character, force, or collection of forces in fiction or drama that opposes the protagonist and gives rise to the conflict of the story."

Anti-hero- "a protagonist who has the opposite of most of the traditional attributes of a hero. [A character who] may be bewildered, ineffectual, deluded, or merely pathetic."

Aphorism- "A brief statement which expresses an observation on life, usually intended as a wise observation. Benjamin Franklin's 'Poor Richard's Almanac' contains numerous examples, one of which is *Drive thy business; let it not drive thee.*"

Apostrophe- "A figure of speech wherein the speaker speaks directly to something nonhuman."

Archetype- "a term used to describe universal symbols that evoke deep and sometimes unconscious responses in a reader. In literature, characters, images, and themes that symbolically embody universal meanings and basic human experiences."

Aside- "A device in which a character in a drama makes a short speech which is heard by the audience but not by other characters in the play."

Asyndeton- "The omission of a conjunction from a list ('chips, beans, peas, vinegar, salt, pepper')."

Canon- "a Greek word that implies rule or law, and is used in literature as the source which regulates which selection of authors or works, would be considered important pieces of literature."

Catharsis- "Meaning 'purgation,' catharsis describes the release of the emotions of pity and fear by the audience at the end of a tragedy. In his Poetics, Aristotle discusses the importance of catharsis. The audience faces the misfortunes of the protagonist, which elicit pity and compassion. Simultaneously, the audience also confronts the failure of the protagonist, thus receiving a frightening reminder of human limitations and frailties."

Chiasmus- "A term from classical rhetoric that describes a situation in which you introduce subjects in the order A, B, and C,"

and then talk about them in the order C, B, and A.

Climax-The decisive moment in a drama, the climax is the turning point of the play to which the rising action leads. This is the crucial part of the drama, the part which determines the outcome of the conflict.

Colloquialism-spoken or written communication that seeks to imitate informal speech.

Comedy -A literary work which is amusing and ends happily. Modern comedies tend to be funny, while Shakespearean comedies simply end well.

Conceit-A far-fetched simile or metaphor, a literary conceit occurs when the speaker compares two highly dissimilar things.

Connotation-The emotional implications and associations that words may carry, as distinguished from their denotative meanings.

Denotation-The basic dictionary meaning of a word, as opposed to its connotative meaning.

Deus ex machina-An unrealistic or unexpected intervention to rescue the protagonists or resolve the conflict. The term means "The god out of the machine," and refers to stage machinery.

Diction-An author's choice of words. Since words have specific meanings, and since one's choice of words can affect feelings, a writer's choice of words can have great impact in a literary work.

Didactic-A work "designed to impart information, advice, or some doctrine of morality or philosophy."

Epigraph-A brief quotation which appears at the beginning of a literary work.

Epigram- A pithy, sometimes satiric couplet or quatrain which was popular in classic Latin literature and in European and English literature of the Renaissance and the neo-Classical era.

Epithet-In literature, a word or phrase preceding or following a name which serves to describe the character. For example, in the Iliad: Zeus-loved Achilles.

Exegesis- Critical interpretation of a text, especially a biblical text; from the Greek ex- + egeisthai meaning "to lead out."

Farce-A type of comedy based on a humorous situation such as a bank robber who mistakenly wanders into a police station to hide. It is the situation here which provides the humor, not the cleverness of plot or lines.

Formalism- strict observance of the established rules, traditions and methods employed in the arts. Formalism can also refer to the theory of art that relies heavily on the organization of forms in a work rather than on the content.

Framing device-A story in which one or more other stories are told. Examples include the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales and the play at the beginning of the Taming of the Shrew.

Genre-A literary genre is a recognizable and established category of written work employing such common conventions as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it [with] another kind.

Gothic- characterized by gloom and mystery and the grotesque; gothic novels include Frankenstein.

Homily- An inspirational saying or platitude.

Hubris- a common theme in Greek tragedies and mythology, whose stories often featured protagonists suffering from hubris and subsequently being punished by the gods for it.

Hyperbole-A figure of speech in which an overstatement or exaggeration is used for deliberate effect.

Idiom- A specialized vocabulary used by a group of people; jargon or A style or manner of expression peculiar to a given people.

Imagery- the collection of images within a literary work. Used to evoke atmosphere, mood, tension. For example, images of crowded, steaming sidewalks flanking streets choked with lines of shimmering, smoking cars suggests oppressive heat and all the psychological tensions that go with it.

In media res- in or into the middle of a sequence of events, as in a literary narrative.

Intentional fallacy-assuming from the text what the author intended to mean.

Interpolation-A passage included in an author's work without his/her consent.

Intertextuality- Intertextuality is, thus, a way of accounting for the role of literary and extra-literary materials without recourse to traditional notions of authorship. A literary work, then, is not simply the product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself.

Inversion-reversal of the normal order of words for dramatic effect.

Irony- A device that depends on the existence of at least two separate and contrasting levels of meaning embedded in one message.

- **Verbal irony** is sarcasm, when the speaker says something other than what they really mean.
- In **dramatic irony**, the audience is more aware than the characters in a work.
- **Situational irony** occurs when the opposite of what is expected happens. This type of irony often emphasizes that people are caught in forces beyond their comprehension and control.

Litotes- A figure of speech consisting of an understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by negating its opposite, as in *This is no small problem*.

Magical realism- a literary technique where the disbelief of the reader and writer produces a momentary shift in the real world wherein an element of the surreal enters and leaves with ease."

Malapropism- is an incorrect usage of a word, usually with comic effect. "He is the very pineapple of politeness."

Metaphor- a type of figurative language in which a statement is made that says that one thing is something else but, literally, it is not. In connecting one object, event, or place, to another, a metaphor can uncover new and intriguing qualities of the original thing that we may not normally notice or even consider important. Metaphoric language is used in order to realize a new and different meaning.

Metonymy-A figure of speech in which a word represents something else which it suggests. For example in a herd of fifty cows, the herd might be referred to as fifty head of cattle.

Minimalism- a style of art in which objects are stripped down to their elemental, geometric form, and presented in an impersonal manner. In literature, minimalists use short descriptions and simple sentences.

Monologue-thoughts of a single person, directed outward.

Motif-A recurrent image, word, phrase, represented object or action that tends to unify the literary work or that may be elaborated into a more general theme.

Naturalism- The term naturalism describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Unlike realism, which focuses on literary technique, naturalism implies a philosophical position.

Nemesis- a villain who has a particular interest in defeating a hero or group of heroes, and who is often of particular interest to the hero(es) in return.

Oxymoron-A combination of contradictory terms, like compassionate conservative.

Parallelism- the repetition of words, phrases, sentences that have the same grammatical structure or that restate a similar idea. **Restatement** is repetition of an entire idea in different words.

- **Structuralism Parallelism** is the repetition of a word or entire sentence pattern.
- **Antithesis** is connecting ideas that are opposite, rather than similar.
- **Parable**- a brief and often simple narrative that illustrates a moral or religious lesson. Some of the best-known

parables are in the Bible, where Jesus uses them to teach his disciples.

Parody- a literary form in which the style of an author or particular work is mocked in its style for the sake of comic effect.

Pathetic fallacy- The attribution of human emotions or characteristics to inanimate objects or to nature; for example, angry clouds; a cruel wind.

Pastoral- Of, relating to, or being a literary or other artistic work that portrays or evokes rural life, usually in an idealized way.

Persona- In literature, the persona is the narrator, or the storyteller, of a literary work created by the author. As Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama puts it, the persona is not the author, but the author's creation--the voice "through which the author speaks."

Personification- A figure of speech where animals, ideas or inorganic objects are given human characteristics. one example of this is James Stephens's poem "The Wind" in which wind performs several actions. In the poem Stephens writes, "The wind stood up and gave a shout. He whistled on his two fingers."

Point of view- a way the events of a story are conveyed to the reader, it is the "vantage point" from which the narrative is passed from author to the reader. In the **omniscient** point of view, the person telling the story, or narrator, knows everything that's going on in the story. In the **first-person** point of view, the narrator is a character in the story. Using the pronoun "I" the narrator tells us his or her own experiences but cannot reveal with certainty any other character's private thoughts. In the **limited third-person** point of view, the narrator is outside the story- like an omniscient narrator- but tells the story from the vantage point of one character.

Polemic- A controversial argument, especially one refuting or attacking a specific opinion or doctrine.

Protagonist-the central character of a literary work.

Realism- Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality" or "verisimilitude," realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing. Although strictly speaking, realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life.

Rhetoric- The art of persuasive argument through writing or speech--the art of eloquence and charismatic language.

Roman a clef- a novel in which actual persons and events are disguised as fictional characters.

Romance- The mythos of literature concerned primarily with an idealized world. A form of prose fiction practised by Scott, Hawthorne, William Morris, etc., distinguishable from the novel.

Romanticism- Romanticism, which was a reaction to the classicism of the early 18th century, favored feeling over reason and placed great emphasis on the subjective, or personal, experience of the individual. Nature was also a major theme.

Satire- A literary work which exposes and ridicules human vices or folly. Historically perceived as tending toward didacticism, it is usually intended as a moral criticism directed against the injustice of social wrongs.

Scansion- The analysis of a poem's meter. This is usually done by marking the stressed and unstressed syllables in each line and then, based on the pattern of the stresses, dividing the line into feet.

Semantics-the study of the meaning of language, as opposed to its form.

Semiotics- theories regarding symbolism and how people glean meaning from words, sounds, and pictures.

Stock character- a fictional character that relies heavily on cultural types or stereotypes for its personality, manner of speech, and other characteristics. Stock characters are instantly recognizable to members of a given culture.

Stream of consciousness- technique that records the multifarious thoughts and feelings of a character without regard to logical argument or narrative sequence. The writer attempts by the stream of consciousness to reflect all the forces, external and internal, influencing the psychology of a character at a single moment.

Subtext-the hidden meaning lying behind the overt.

Synecdoche- A figure of speech in which a part of something stands for the whole or the whole for a part, as wheels for automobile or society for high society.

Syntax- The way in which linguistic elements (words and phrases) are arranged to form grammatical structure.

Soliloquy- A dramatic or literary form of discourse in which a character talks to himself or herself or reveals his or her thoughts without addressing a listener.

Tone- the writer's attitude toward the material and/or readers. Tone may be playful, formal, intimate, angry, serious, ironic, outraged, baffled, tender, serene, depressed or combinations.

Theme- (1) the abstract concept explored in a literary work; (2) frequently recurring ideas, such as enjoy-life while-you-can; (3) repetition of a meaningful element in a work, such as references to sight, vision, and blindness in Oedipus Rex.

Tragedy- A serious play in which the chief figures, by some peculiarity of character, pass through a series of misfortunes leading to a final, devastating catastrophe.

Tragic flaw (hamartia)-the character flaw or error of a tragic hero that leads to his downfall).

Trope- The intentional use of a word or expression figuratively, i.e., used in a different sense from its original significance in order to give vividness or emphasis to an idea. Some important types of trope are: antonomasia, irony, metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche.

Utopia/Dystopia-a utopia is an imaginary and indefinitely remote place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions. A **dystopia** is an imaginary place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives; an imaginary place or state where everything is as bad as it possibly can be: or a description of such a place.

Vernacular- the everyday speech of the people (as distinguished from literary language).

Vignette- a small illustrative sketch.

Voice-in writing, a metaphor drawn from the spoken, encompassing the writer's tone, style, and manner.

Sources

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Additional Resources

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