



## WRITING FOR ENGLISH COURSES

### Glossary of Literary Terms

**ACTION:** The events in a literary work. Action should not be confused with the more comprehensive term, plot. The action in *Hamlet*, for example, simply begins with the guards' visitation by the Ghost and ends with the carrying out of the dead Hamlet.

**ALLEGORY:** A literary work where the setting, characters, or action make sense on a literal level, but also convey an abstract level of meaning, which is usually religious or political in nature. Unlike metaphors and symbols, an allegorical setting, character or action is one-dimensional: it stands for only one thing. Parables, fables, and satires are all forms of allegory. For example, the character Christian in John Bunyan's allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* stands for the human soul; the animals in Aesop's fables stand for moral virtues and vices such as persistence and greed; and the animals in George Orwell's satiric novel *Animal Farm* stand for political ideologies.

**ALLUSION:** A brief reference in a literary work to a person, place, thing or passage in another literary work, usually for the purpose of associating the tone or theme of the one work with the other. The many allusions in T. S. Eliot's poem "The Wasteland," for example, refer to the *Bible* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

**CHARACTER, CHARACTERIZATION:** A character is a person—or, in the case of such works as Aesop's fables, a non-human with a human personality—in a literary work. Character can also refer to the particular, unique traits of a person in a literary work. Characterization is the way in which an author presents and defines characters. A "flat character" is one who is minimally described, stereotypical or who has only one purpose (e.g., your basic blood-sucking Count Dracula), while a "round character" is one who is presented in greater depth and detail (e.g., the troubled, sympathetic Brad Pitt vampire in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*); a character who does not undergo any change is called a "static character" (e.g., Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol"), while a character who undergoes some sort of transformation is called a "dynamic character" (e.g., Scrooge in the same work).

**CONFLICT:** The struggle between opposing forces—for example, characters, nations, or ideas—that provides the central action and interest in any literary plot. The struggle between the Capulet and Montague families in *Romeo and Juliet* is a classic example of conflict.

**CONTEXT:** Anything beyond the specific words of a literary work that may be relevant to understanding the meaning. Contexts may be economic, social, cultural, historical, literary, biographical, etc. The political context of the rule of Elizabeth and James, the religious context of Calvinism, the social context of homosexual relations and cross-dressing and the literary context of Renaissance literature, for example, all have significant implications for understanding the words of Shakespeare.

**FORM:** The external appearance or structure of a literary work. An example of a literary work in short story form is Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"; ballads, sonnets, sestinas, and haikus are examples of poetic forms.

**IMAGERY:** The use of pictures, description, or figures of speech such as metaphors and similes to visualize a mood, idea, or character. Imagery may involve all the senses, but usually involves the sense of sight. The imagery of William Carlos Williams' poetry, for example, tends to involve the appearances of everyday, ordinary objects like a "red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water . . . ."

**INTERPRETATION:** The general explanation of the meaning of a literary work. Interpretation may take into account any of the other terms in this glossary, especially theme. When applied to poetry, interpretation may also be called "explication." The most familiar example of interpretation is literary criticism.

**IRONY:** An intentional contradiction between what something appears to mean and what it really means. Irony is normally conveyed through contradictions between either what is said and what is meant or between appearance and reality. There are many forms of irony; verbal irony, the most familiar form, involves speaking words which say something quite unlike what is meant (e.g., I just "love" to write papers).

**METAPHOR:** A comparison of two different things which states that the two are actually the same thing, often through a form of the verb "to be." The metaphor "Black Poets / . . . / Are / The Trumpets of Black Warriors," for example, is used by Etheridge Knight in his poem "For Black Poets Who Think of Suicide."

**MOOD:** The atmosphere that pervades a literary work with the intention of evoking a certain emotion or feeling from the audience. In drama, mood may be created by sets and music as well as words; in poetry and prose, mood may be created by a combination of such elements as setting, voice, tone, and theme. The moods evoked by the more popular short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, for example, tend to be gloomy, horrific, and desperate.

**NARRATOR and PERSONA:** The narrator is the speaker in a work of prose. The persona is the speaker in a work of poetry; never to be confused with or assumed to be the poet, the persona may be an animal, an inanimate object, or any conceivable entity. The narrator of Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, is Huckleberry Finn; the persona of a poem by African American poet Thylia Moss, for example, is the innocent white son of a Ku Klux Klan member.

**PLOT:** A plot is an account of the action and all of the motivations lying behind the action in a literary work. A plot may include such elements as the "exposition," where the setting is established, the characters are introduced, and background information is provided; the "conflict"; the "climax," where the action comes to its moment of greatest tension; and the "denouement," where the action finally resolves.

**POINT OF VIEW:** The intellectual or emotional perspective held by a narrator or persona. A narrator or persona's point of view may be classified according to whether it is in the "first-person," where the speaker uses the pronoun "I"; the "second-person," where the speaker uses the pronoun "you"; or the "third-person," where the speaker uses the pronouns "he," "she," "it" or "they." The third-person point of view may be further classified according to whether it is all-knowing, or "omniscient"; or limited in its knowledge, or "limited omniscient." A poem which is famous for its first-person point of view as expressed by the PERSONA of the poem--the inimitable Duke of Ferrara--is Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess."

**PROTAGONIST and ANTAGONIST:** A protagonist is the central character in a literary work. An antagonist is a character who is opposite to or challenges the protagonist. The protagonist of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, is the good Christian slave Uncle Tom; the antagonist to Uncle Tom is his evil owner Simon Legree.

**SETTING:** The locale, time, and context in which the action of a literary work takes place. "It was a dark and stormy night . . ." is a clichéd example of setting.

**SIMILE:** A comparison of two different things, usually using the words "like," "as" or "as if." The simile "Oh, my love is like a red, red rose," for example, serves as the title and first line to a poem by Robert Burns.

**SYMBOL and SYMBOLISM:** A symbol is something that stands for something else. Unlike allegory, symbolism is multi-dimensional—it may convey a number of meanings. The symbol of the great white whale in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, for example, may stand for the devil, nature, or the forces of the universe.

**THEME:** The general idea or meaning of a literary work. A theme may not always be explicit or easy to state, and a work of literature may contain more than one theme. Theme is generally the most important part of any literary interpretation. The theme of Ernest Hemingway's short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," for example, has been stated by X. J. Kenney as: "Solitary people need a place of refuge from their terrible awareness that their lives are essentially meaningless."

**TONE:** The attitude of an author, as opposed to a narrator or persona, toward her subject matter and/or audience. Tone is closely linked to mood, but tends to be associated more with voice. The tone of Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz"—about a boy and his drunk father—for example, is sad, sentimental, and ironic.

**VOICE:** Distinct from the terms persona, narrator, and tone, voice is associated with the basic vision of a writer, her general attitude toward the world. The poet Sylvia Plath's voice, for example, might be called that of a victimized daughter, wife, and mother.